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Improving Reading TOEFL Score through Note Taking Strategy

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Abstract: There are still a number of less skilled readers in higher degree education where academic texts are staple needs (Hellekjaer, 2009). This study investigated a technique to help students increase their reading ability in TOEFL reading section. A technique named Notetaking technique was implemented during two cycles of classroom action research. There were 3 meetings for each cycle. The participants were 17 Economics students who are taking TOEFL Preparation course at Universitas Syiah Kuala, Aceh, Indonesia. The result from cycle one showed no increase since the average only incline to 38.58. Then in cycle 2, there was a significant increase reaching 45.11 (which is the minimum TOEFL standard for the university). It can be deduced that this technique might not be appropriate for large classes as it demands individual assistance. Besides, a good skill of organizing information is fundamental in this strategy to maximize the students' effort in answering the TOEFL questions during the test.

Keywords: TOEFL reading; note-taking strategy; reading skills; ELT; standardized tests.

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INTRODUCTION

Indonesian students are known to have below average ability in mastering literacy. This fact is shown in the result of PISA in 2012 and 2015. In PISA's result 2012, Indonesia got 396 for reading while the average score for reading was 497; while in 2015, Indonesia reached 397 while the average score was 493. The result of the huge observation shows that from year to year, Indonesia is still struggling with the issues of literacy. To be more specific, similar conditions also happen to a university class where the authors teach. The class was a TOEFL preparation class in Economics faculty, Universitas Syiah Kuala, Indonesia. The students' reading score in reading section

was poor. From the pre-test, it was obtained that the reading average score of the students was 36.17.

As a matter of fact, reading is seen as an important part of language skills. Students can develop other language skills such as speaking and writing through reading (Hatch, 2001). There are five aspects comprising reading, they are main idea, detail information, reference, vocabulary and inference (Mickulecky & Jeffries, 2007). Likewise, TOEFL also tests these subskills of reading. The main problem in reading comprehension for these mentioned students is comprehension, where their concentration can easily collapse during the reading time. Besides, there are also vast thoughts come to

their mind at the moment they read. Simply, they cannot resist the temptation to stay grounded on their concentration. Besides, Putra et al., (2017) found that for Acehese university students, reading—especially vocabulary—is a part of TOEFL that students need to focus more.

A worth-to-try strategy called note-taking technique was examined whether it met the students' need in handling comprehension problems (Fata, et.al, 2020). Note taking is an elaborate process demanding comprehension in selecting the most important information (Piolat, et al., 2005). Piolat, et.al (2005) further clarify that note taking activity involves working memory procedures and timing in order to get a task done. Multitasking activities such as reading, comprehending, regulating knowledge to select vital information, and jot it down are involved in this strategy.

Previous studies on the note-taking technique are described in the following. First, it is a study by Teng (2011) which sought the note-taking strategies used in listening. There were 80 university students involved as the participants in Taiwan. He used questionnaires in collecting the data. The result suggested that the strategy mostly used during note-taking by the students was trying to absorb what is being taught in class as much as possible. Next, it is a study by Rahmani & Sadeghi (2011). This study examined the effects of note taking strategy training on students' comprehension and retention. There were 108 respondents who were Iranian EFL learners which were divided into experimental and control group. The experimental group was assigned with note taking strategy while the control group was not. The result unveiled that the experimental group performed better at both comprehension and retention test. Finally, the last one mentioned in this study is a study by Carrel (2007). A group of TOEFL examinees who were taking computer-based listening comprehension were involved as the participants. The instrument used during the data collection was a set of questionnaires. Besides, this study also investigated the relationship between the note taking strategies

and the test performance. It was found that there is a significant relationship between notetaking strategies and the students' test performance, especially concerning to the number of words in the note.

Reading is a complex activity involving perception and thoughts. Besides, it also involves two stages which are word decoding and text comprehending (Pang, et.al, 2011). Reading is message transactions between writers and readers through visualization where readers need to convert all kinds of messages such as emotion, culture, information, and experience during their reading (Kader, 2008). It is important since it does not only give readers understanding and clarification, but it also exposes readers to gaining new experience—even though the ones that the readers have never undergone before. This mostly happen in literary reading (Lems, 2010). Meanwhile in academic reading, readers are exposed to the concepts and understandings of theories intertwined to a certain field of discipline. Similarly, in Reading Section of the TOEFL test, reading comprehension also refers to academic reading types with various topics.

The interest in reading is one important factor that can lead an EFL student to become a successful reader. However, most students are not fond of reading, especially academic reading, which most likely brings about the problems around TOEFL reading. When the term 'comprehension' is a demand, it means that the students are obliged to identify five reading subskills, namely: main ideas, inferences, references, details, and vocabulary (Brown, 2001). *Main idea* is the writer's idea and the readers are supposed to catch it in order to convey the messages in the passages (Mikulecky and Jeffries, 2007). Then *inference* means that readers should be able to predict the preceding and following issue(s) before or after the passage; it is crucial because inferring is employing the sense of comprehension (Duffy, 2009). *Reference* word is one of the cohesive devices of reading that helps tie sentences together to create a cohesive text. There are anaphoric and cataphoric reference, anaphoric is the backward pointing while cataphoric forward

pointing (Erwin, 2004). Mikulecky and Jeffries (2007) further state that *details* are important part in a reading passage since readers can obtain specific and clear information that clarify the main idea. Finally, *vocabulary* is an essential part in reading. Readers should grab the meaning of vocabulary first in order to figure out the next level in reading comprehension (Lehr, 2009).

To juxtapose the propositions above, instructors should be able to provide additional materials in reinforcing students' needs in class, especially in reading comprehension. This is worth to be in consideration since Ness (2009) has found that, on the contrary, most instructors do not understand the responsibility to do so. Further, Pang et.al (2011) place twelve key issues in enhancing reading comprehension, they are oral language (as it influences early reading ability), phonological and phonemic awareness, fluency in reading, vocabulary, prior knowledge, comprehension, motivation and purpose, the integration of reading and writing, text choice, assessments and feedback, cultural factors, and practice. In addition, integrating writing into reading is a good suggestion as Khaki (2014) revealed that asking students to do summary in readings and generate questions could improve their ability in reading comprehension.

Interpolating notetaking strategy, research has shown its usefulness in learning. Taking note is a process that involved information comprehension, selection, and organization (Piolat, et al., 2005). This strategy is beneficial for students whether in in-class learning process or in figuring out the information from aural and visual sources. Mostly, note taking does not have to be exactly linear with the original text, but what comes to be the most important is the quality of the information selection. The memory would easily be recalled; hence, more organized review can be gained when the information is about to be performed.

Piolat, et.al (2005) further clarify that noticing involves a highly cognitive consuming ability. While taking notes, the

students also have to follow the speed of their eyes during reading; and at the same time, they have to select and write down the points that they deliberate to be essential. The cognitive effort involved during several reading activities can be seen in the following chart.

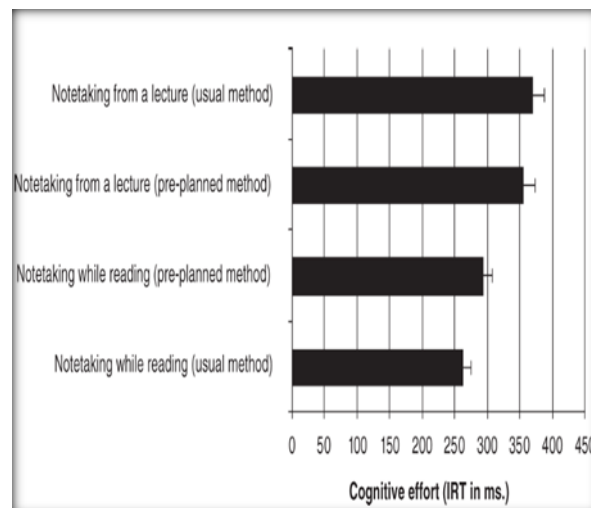


Figure 1. Mean of Cognitive Effort

In the figure above, it can be seen that the highest cognitive effort happens during taking notes in lecturers using usual method, followed by the similar notetaking activity by pre-planned method. Meanwhile, taking notes during reading leads to almost 300 efforts per milli-second. This is considered as a high cognitive activity.

There are several essential keywords in notetaking as suggested by Jones & Mort (1994). A note-taker should: 1). be selective and systematic, 2). comprehend the passage purpose, 3). understand the information organization, and 4). include his/her own insights for justification. They further propose several models that can be used during notetaking such as using symbols, abbreviate and drawing maps and charts.

METHOD

This study was conducted using classroom action research (CAR) design. CAR is strategy used by a teacher or an instructor to solve the actual problems faced in class; CAR is also seen as a tool to develop teaching techniques (Ferrance, 2000). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2014),

there are four steps in a CAR design, they are planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, and this cycle may repeat as necessary. The class used was a TOEFL preparation class consisted of 17 first year Economics students majoring in Management at the Universitas of Syiah Kuala.

In addition, the first author was the teacher and the second author was the collaborator in this study. The collaborator is also an experienced-English instructor who has taught TOEFL preparation class. The research procedure conducted was as follows. Initially, a pretest was administered to the class. Later, the note-taking technique was implemented for three meetings. Then, the students had the initial post-test to see how far the technique had helped them. Since there

were still some shortcomings in the teaching process—as well as informed by the collaborator, the second cycle was repeated for three more meetings before the students had their final post-test. The success indicator was at least 60% (10 out of 17) of the students get 6 points increase. Concerning to the research instrument, the diagnostic test and post-test developed by Philips (2001) were used.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Below is provided the result of TOEFL reading section of the pretest, cycle one test, and cycle two test.

Table 1. Reading Score in Pretest, Cycle 1 Test, and Cycle 2 Test

Student	Pretest	Mid-test (Cycle 1)	Increase in Cycle 1	Post-test (Cycle 2)	Increase in Cycle 2
1	39	39	0	47	8
2	39	38	-1	48	9
3	44	43	-1	49	5
4	37	43	6	50	13
5	40	40	0	47	7
6	33	37	4	43	10
7	39	35	-4	47	8
8	35	44	9	49	14
9	31	34	3	40	9
10	35	40	5	50	15
11	38	43	5	48	7
12	31	34	3	46	15
13	34	38	4	38	4
14	35	39	4	45	7
15	30	32	2	34	4
16	40	38	-2	44	4
17	35	40	5	42	7
Average	36.17	38.58	2.47	45.11	8.58

The table above shows that the average score of the TOEFL reading section in pretest was 36.17, from which there were supposed to be only 16 correct answers out of 50 question Gear & Gear (2006). The average score that Syiah Kuala university demands for non-English major is 450 which Reading section should reach at least score 45 for non-English major. Hence, 36.17 is still below the university average score.

Cycle 1

When *planning* the action for cycle 1, the researcher prepared a topic about sports for the students. She prepared four TEOFL reading texts for the process. The *acting* phase was carried out on March 10, March 17, and March 24, 2017. In the first meeting, she explained to the students how to do notetaking while doing reading and later, the students were given chances to practice notetaking using the passages from their learning module. In the second and the third meeting, the students had to do notetaking by themselves and at the end of the class, the researcher—together with the class—checked the students' work. The researcher also gave some revisions and suggestions when checking the students' work. In the phase of *observing*, the collaborator observed both the students' participation and teacher's ability in applying the technique during the teaching and learning process. And the results from the collaborator were later being discussed with the researcher after the cycle ended.

Finally, in *reflecting* phase, there are two ideas being reflected. The first one—also answering the first research question—is the students' participation and the second one is the researcher's ability in using notetaking technique in teaching TOEFL reading, which is implied in students' score stated in the second research question. From the initial idea, it was suggested by the observer that the researcher taught so fast that most students could not keep up the pace, so there were several students who were left behind and did not understand the idea of notetaking; however, there were some students who could stay focus and followed the researcher's explanation and found no obstacles on it.

In addition, the researcher did not observe the class herself. After she explained and exemplified the strategy of notetaking, she asked the students to do notetaking on their own. She only provided a little help and she did not assist every single student. The collaborator advised to give individual assistance to every student since their limited ability in reading. The next idea being reflected is the researcher's ability. It it reflected in students' score in cycle 1. Table 1 above shows that the average score is 38.58 which is still below average score that the university demands. It can be seen there are score increase from 11 students but only two students reached 6 point-increase; meanwhile, it was set up in the success indicator that there, at least, 10 students who can reach 6 point-increase. It was concluded that this cycle did not yet succeed and needed to continue. Besides, the table shows there are 2 students who barely got any increase, and 4 students even degrade score. So, it was essential that the researcher refine her teaching ability using the notetaking technique in teaching TOEFL reading. Below is an example of a student's note from Cycle 1.

No.	Date
1.	The debt of lawn tennis to its french origins is illustrated the usual scoring system.
2.	Deuce, when both players have reached 40 in game, is a corruption of the french a deux, meaning "both".
3.	The word "ace" which means kill, may well come from the French word l'oeuf, meaning egg.

Figure 2. Student's note after Cycle 1

From the figure above, it can be seen that the student wrote down every first line in each paragraph. It is more like text-copying instead of notetaking. Indeed, there was an outline that is understandable after reading this note; however, it is needlessly to use complete sentences when notetaking. As in notetaking strategy, there are only

paraphrasing, outlining, using abbreviations, and understanding the gists (Hughes & Suritsky, 1993)—there is no word-copying.

Cycle 2

In the phase of *planning* for cycle 2, the researcher prepared six TOEFL reading passages for the next three meetings. The topic was randomly assigned since it is important to familiarize students with topic shifts as it happens regularly in TOEFL reading section. In the *acting* process, the three meetings were carried out on April 4, April 11, and April 18, 2017. Like the previous cycle, in the first meeting, the researcher explained again the strategy used in notetaking. Of course, this time she explained more slowly and made sure that all students were engaged with her explanation. When the students looked confused, she immediately questioned them for clarification. More individual assistances were enhanced in this cycle. From the *observing* phase done by the collaborator, it was concluded that the process was mostly feasible. One point that can be noted is that, students who were already good at notetaking—only one or two students—felt bored as they could finish fast so that they might chat about something else during the process. However, this was not any meaningful trouble.

In the last phase of the cycle, which is *reflecting* cycle, there were still two key points being reflected: students' participation and the researcher's ability in applying notetaking strategy in teaching TOEFL reading. The initial one is intended to fetch answer for the first research question and the latest is to answer the second research question. Firstly, the students' participation was considered excellent during this second cycle. All students were fully engaged and the researcher paid attention and provided help to every student. So that, as soon as they got a problem, the researcher was around them to be asked about it. The researcher found that frequent problems that were asked by the students were vocabulary and making decision on which cues are more important. It seemed that they still have problems in

recognizing parts of the outlining—which ideas belonged to which. The researcher did not enhance this issue since the focus of this study was only implementing the notetaking strategy to help them handle potential problems in TOEFL reading. Hopefully future research might want to probe this condition.

The other key point being considered in the *reflecting* phase is the researcher's ability in implementing the technique, which is portrayed in the students' score of cycle 2. From the table above, it can be seen that the mean score after cycle 2 is 45.11 and there is definitely an increase. This score is the minimum standard for the non-English department students at the university. The table shows that there are 4 students who did not reach the six-point increase; while there are 13 students who reached above six points increase. This indicates that the cycle is successful since the success indicator has stipulated that there has to be, at least, 60% (10 out of 17) of the students get 6 points increase. Besides, there is no downgrading score after cycle 2. Regarding the students who did not reach the six-point increase, they informed the researcher that it was hard for them to grab, organize, and rewrite information they got from the passage(s) at once. It was a burdening activity for them. Hence, they could not carry on those activities together without getting confused. Below is the note from the same student whose note is also presented earlier in cycle 1. What differentiates is that the following note is made after cycle 2.

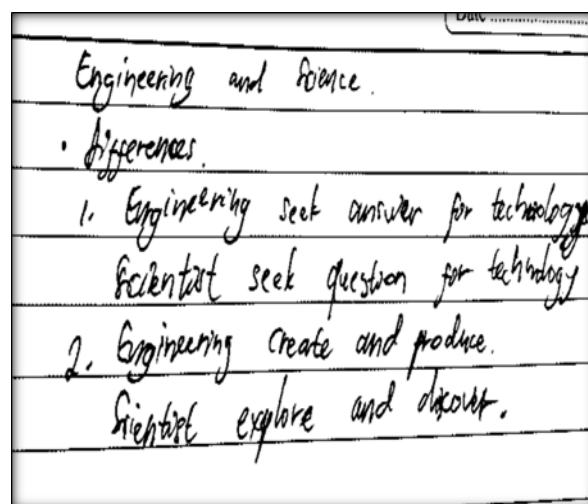


Figure 3. Student's note after Cycle 2

The figure above shows that the student did not copy anymore. Now she tried to understand the cues instead of copying. It is depicted in her note that the passage narrates about the differences between *Engineering* and *Science*. And in the pointers, she listed some differences between the work of engineers and that of scientist.

Based on the findings elaborated above, there are some points of discussion that can be raised. Fundamentally, from both cycles, it is understood that the students needed extra attention during the learning process as supported by Hughes & Suritsky (1993). They suggest that students with low ability in learning should be facilitated even for providing notebooks. Besides, they have to be clearly taught the step-by-step process, including in this technique. In notetaking technique, they proposed four types, which are paraphrasing, outlining, using abbreviations, and understanding the cues. In the first cycle, the researcher only introduced the technique using *outlining* strategy since the students only read printed reading, not listening to lectures. The students had to make outline of the reading passage(s) provided by the researcher. Apparently, most of them copied the passages and lost the main ideas of the passage(s). As Goodman (2010) points out that reading is not an exact process. Readers can still miss cues and details; it depends on the readers' condition at the time of reading. In addition, he asserts that reading is not a single-factor-interfered activity. The graphic, phonic and morphemic knowledge, as well as syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic knowledge also play important roles while reading.

Basically, during the process of writing, there is a process that emphasizes more on recalling information and making decision on what to write (Ismail, 2016). Similar activity also occurs in notetaking, the students have to recall information from the passage they just read a few seconds ago and organize the information. Although it does sound simpler than writing, it takes students to manage and familiarize with recognizing and organizing information. As suggested by

Woolley (2011), picture provisions might help students who considered as less-skilled readers as numerous research has proven that visual pictures can help readers to understand text-based cues.

From other notetaking formats the researcher urged the outline format to be taught to the students as it is more precise and helpful during reviewing. Bahrami & Nohratzadeh (2017) found that students who took notes tend to remember the reason of why they learned and they also remembered the information during the learning process. Besides, it also increased their attention, comprehension, and memorization which would certainly enhance their study to be better. Accordingly, the researcher adopted the outline format of notetaking to be implemented. In addition, the implementation of metacognitive strategies is also important in taking notes during reading as indicated by Fata & Ismail (2017) and Karbalei (2010) that strategic readers generally employ knowledge regulation more often compared to their knowledge alone and they have higher awareness of the strategies they encounter while reading. This means that while notetaking, the students need to regulate the information they obtain as well as arrange them into the form of notes while reading.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

There are three premises that can be taken as the conclusions of this study after implementing notetaking strategy in teaching TOEFL reading through a classroom action research for less-skilled readers. Firstly, this strategy indeed worked if the students are given individual assistance—merely for less strategic readers. Second, if individual assistance is consistently needed, then large classes are not recommended to use this technique unless the students are autonomous reader-writer themselves. Lastly, even for skilled-readers, organizing skill is a crucial component in notetaking.

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