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Researching EAP Practice

Evaluating EAP notetaking textbooks: Eight key questions

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A B S T R A C T

The importance and presence of notetaking in L2 educational contexts has gradually increased to a point where many now recognize notetaking as an essential academic skill for EAP preparatory and EMI courses worldwide. In order to meet the increasing demand for notetaking, materials writers and commercial publishers have designed and produced a number of notetaking textbooks. Despite their availability on the market and frequent use in EAP and other L2 courses, the ability of the average teacher to discern the quality of materials for notetaking may be underdeveloped. This article presents a series of eight questions that can be used as a basis for evaluating and comparing the quality and content of notetaking textbooks with a view to better preparing teachers to understand what notetaking is, how it can be taught, and what materials can and do offer.

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1. Introduction

Teachers have long been evaluating textbooks and other teaching and learning materials available on the commercial market. To assist teachers in doing so, principles and key evaluation questions have been offered in the literature (e.g., Sheldon, 1988; Tomlinson, 2010). By considering such evaluative points, teachers and course planners are able to apply objective criteria and make measured judgments when comparing commercial textbooks to each other in order to make logical and justifiable materials choices. This type of objective approach to the evaluation of L2 notetaking textbooks has seldom been undertaken, with one exception being Hamp-Lyons, 1983 article, published more than 30 years ago.

With the rapid rise of EAP courses and EMI around the world, the skill of notetaking has become more prominent in the TESOL field. In response to a growing need for materials, publishers have created and distributed several notetaking series; for example, *Listening & Notetaking* and *Lecture Ready*. While evaluation checklists and principles of materials development and evaluation available in earlier literature may be helpful in comparing more traditional ESL/EFL materials, the same criteria may be insufficient to determine the quality and suitability of notetaking textbooks.

Based on my experiences in teaching and teacher education for EAP classes, and on presentations, seminars, and workshops on the topic I have led or attended in international forums, as well as my own research projects on academic listening and notetaking, reasons for this inadequacy relate to one or more of the following issues. First, many teachers overlook the complexity of notetaking and simply assume that telling students to "take notes" is sufficient (Siegel, 2019). Secondly, teacher education may not have prepared educators to understand the myriad crucial factors and stages that comprise notetaking. In addition, teachers may think that listening in ESL/EFL and notetaking in ESL/EFL are essentially the same thing (they are not), and therefore any material judged as "good for teaching listening" can also serve as appropriate for notetaking.

Given that notetaking is now widely recognized as a crucial academic skill, particularly for higher education, coupled with the rapid rise of EAP and EMI courses worldwide, a set of principles for notetaking materials evaluation is needed in order for teachers to compare commercial options and make informed decisions. The purpose of this paper is to present a set of eight prompts that can be used specifically for the evaluation of commercial notetaking materials. Rather than focus on the listening elements of these works, such as audio or video lectures, this list of prompts incorporates theoretical and practical aspects of *notetaking* (i.e., not *listening*).

The criteria focus on, among other aspects, the ways notetaking is introduced, scaffolded, and practiced. The set of criteria includes a range of questions, some of which take a broad view of the textbook in question while others focus more specifically at the level of individual units, chapters or pages of the textbook. By considering these points in relation to the numerous textbooks currently on the market, it is hoped that teachers will better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the selected textbook and its potential to support the learning and development of L2 notetaking. Space limitations do not allow for an in-depth analysis using these principles. The purpose here is rather to introduce the principles and invite teachers to apply them when evaluating notetaking materials.

2. Background

When students and teachers are set to begin a course such as "Academic notetaking" or "Lecture listening", the notetaking element may be explicitly stated or implicitly alluded to, but the link between academic listening and notetaking is likely to be recognized in either case. Thus, one would expect objectives distinctly aimed at notetaking development while listening to academic content. If notetaking is a stated or understood goal, then the materials selected for the course should to a large extent acknowledge the importance of notetaking. In a reading class, for instance, one would expect to do large amounts of reading, often in different ways and through various activities and texts. Notetaking materials, however, have not received the same type of nuanced attention. Instead, notetaking textbooks are viewed often in terms of listening materials evaluation and listening comprehension activities. Since notetaking is a distinct skill from listening, the former deserves to be recognized for the important and unique role it plays in academic learning and development in its own right.

Among the principles of language teaching introduced by Tomlinson (2010) are elements of alignment, development and transferability. Regarding alignment, the author describes how the content of a language course should be aligned with the methods and objectives. For the purposes of notetaking, if a textbook is selected, then its content needs to: improve on the learners' current L2 notetaking ability, raise awareness of potential (though not required) options, and develop flexibility for how notetaking can be done. In terms of development, the textbook must provide something new and novel to the student, not simply practice opportunities for notetaking. Because notetaking can be utilized in both L1 and L2 courses, the transferability of organizational strategies, encoding techniques and review exercises can easily cross over to other academic subjects, EMI or otherwise.

The only review article that I have found in my years of research on notetaking has been Hamp-Lyons (1983) survey of eight textbooks for notetaking, many of which were published in the late 1970's and early 1980's. In that review article, Hamp-Lyons (1983) provides a list of issues and areas teachers should examine when comparing and selecting notetaking textbooks. Parts of that list are rather general and apply to any language teaching materials choice, among them: cost, pedagogic accuracy, presence of an answer key, and transcripts for listening texts. In other words, they lack particular emphasis on notetaking.

Other parts of the list, however, focus exclusively on notetaking. Examples include the "course should teach, not only practice, skills", "teach note-taking techniques", "completeness (i.e. takes the student from no note-taking ability re. lectures, to performative competence in one course)", and "model notes (pref. several alternatives)" (Hamp-Lyons, 1983, p. 109−10). This selection of criteria focuses admirably at the core notetaking objective; unfortunately, the author does not elaborate on the points in terms of specific elements would contribute to quality in relation to these points. As such, teachers may not be prepared to determine the extent to which a particular textbook "teaches note-taking techniques" in sufficient amounts or depth, or the relationship between notetaking instruction and practice, an issue that has been raised in the EAP field more recently (e.g., Siegel, 2018).

To summarize her findings, Hamp-Lyons (1983) reported several weaknesses among the textbooks she reviewed. First, each book focused solely on a single method or format of notetaking (e.g., the outline format or the T-formation chart) rather than offering a variety of organizational options. Some of the textbooks lacked any activities for notetaking development and instead focused only on multiple-choice questions that students answered with the assistance of their notes. Such exercises are more appropriate for assessment rather than the teaching and development of notetaking skills. Some textbooks included teaching points that appear in many of today's notetaking materials, including abbreviations and skeleton notes. As Hamp-Lyons, 1983 points out, the emphasis on notetaking techniques like abbreviations can sometimes be over-accentuated, and she would prefer that priority be placed on student ability to first identify and then record main points in a lecture.

Hamp-Lyons (1983) also comments on level of difficult of the listening texts with a view to ensuring that the gap between sheltered EAP notetaking courses and the real-world EMI lecture hall is not shocking to students. That is, she argues the notetaking texts and materials should not be watered down too much and that features of naturally spoken lectures should be maintained. While the topic of listening texts is certainly important and affects how teachers and students approach notetaking in the EAP classroom, the present paper bypasses the listening texts, which can be examined in their own right, in order to bring the notetaking content into focus.

3. Eight criteria for notetaking textbook evaluation

The set of criteria proposed in this paper is first listed below and later explained in more detail. The list begins with more general questions to consider regarding textbook content and organization. More specific prompts that can be applied to individual units, pages and activities come later in the list. However, there is no intended prioritization of the criteria and their relevance may vary depending on student and teacher factors and preferences.

1. To what extent can the textbook be used in a start-to-finish manner? Or does it warrant a "pick and choose" approach?
2. To what extent are goals in the Table of Contents specific to notetaking?
3. To what extent are a range of notetaking systems and techniques acknowledged consistently throughout the book?
4. To what extent are both the encoding and storage functions of notetaking acknowledged?
5. To what extent does the textbook target specific stages of notetaking (e.g. organization, encoding in various ways, reviewing notes)?
6. To what extent does the textbook include activities for both generative and non-generative notetaking?
7. To what extent do specific activities allow for individual flexibility?
8. To what extent is range of meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies included in relation to notetaking?

Each criterion is now explained in more detail, including both relevant theoretical and practical discussion.

1. To what extent can the textbook be used in a start-to-finish manner or with a "pick and choose" approach?

Many times, textbooks begin with simpler teaching points, more accessible texts, and lighter demands, which are then built upon and developed as one progresses through the book. In that sense, the textbook could be viewed in a "start-to-finish" manner, in that the writer has carefully planned, selected and sequenced the content so that each unit supports the next. With that concept in mind, some teachers and course planners may elect to follow a selected course book from beginning to end.

An alternative practice would be to pick and choose specific units or pages in the textbook that meet immediate needs, either of individuals or the class as a whole. In applying this dichotomy to notetaking, one must consider whether various aspects of notetaking are in focus throughout the book so as to warrant a "start-to-finish" approach. The choice may also depend on current notetaking ability of the class. In other words, if the textbook provides many different elements of notetaking and the class is relatively weak, that combination would suggest utilizing the whole textbook. If however, learners struggle with some particular aspect of notetaking (for example, recognizing lecture sign posts or paraphrasing content), then perhaps those units or pages dealing explicitly with the desired skill could be employed.

One would logically expect that easier aspects of notetaking would come earlier in a textbook. These more straightforward techniques would then be incorporated and reviewed in exercises throughout the book and could also be extended in later chapters. When examining the Table of Contents, it is worthwhile to examine and consider whether the notetaking part of the syllabus is laid out in any type of discernible order. In my experience, many represent a scattershot of notetaking activities, often seemingly arranged at random.

While it is difficult to list sequentially the multitude of notetaking skills, strategies and techniques in an organized fashion in the same way that grammar acquisition or graded reading levels can be, some logical possibilities exist. For example, beginning with different types of overall organizational formats early in the textbook could then allow the notetaker to choose from these as they apply other more discrete techniques (e.g., abbreviations, paraphrasing). An alternative could be focusing on capturing key words and main ideas early on before focusing on specific pieces of information and how to record them. In an ideal case, the materials writers would provide explanations of why they choose to sequence the notetaking objectives as they did. I suspect in some cases, a notetaking technique may be highlighted simply because it lends itself well to a selected lecture text, a decision which implies that it is the text itself that dictates how the notes are best taken, and what methods for notetaking the teacher should teach in conjunction with that particular text.

2. To what extent are goals in the Table of Contents specific to notetaking?

Depending on the nature of the EAP coursebook, the Table of Contents contains several types of organizational information. Most contain thematic units to which various language skills, including notetaking, are applied. If it is a general academic skills textbook, headings like "discussion strategies", "presentation strategies", and "listening strategies" may appear. More detailed tables of contents also include vocabulary and pronunciation objectives. For the notetaking objective, it is important to determine whether explicit and distinct notetaking skills and strategies are listed for each unit. From this list, one can get a general overview of the extent to which notetaking is covered from basic steps, or addressed as an "assumed" skill. Example objectives might be: writing the most important words, use an informal outline, using abbreviations, and paraphrasing effectively. I would personally be wary of a textbook that fails to articulate specific notetaking-related objectives throughout the book or fails to provide breadth in the sense of notetaking formats and techniques.

When it comes to the types of activities contained in each unit, an important distinction should be made between listening comprehension and notetaking. Despite these two skills being intrinsically bound, they are two distinct skills. Activities designed for listening comprehension should be acknowledged for their capacity to measure, at least to some degree, student listening proficiency. Comprehension activities include gap-fill, true/false, matching, multiple choice and the like, where students are required to produce a "correct" answer (see the previous question). These should not be disguised as notetaking activities.

Exercises that focus on the stages of notetaking such as choosing and practicing an organizational format, deciding what to record and how, paraphrasing, condensing and/or expanding notes, et. cetera, need to be included in sufficient amounts. It is not enough for a notetaking textbook to merely include comprehension activities about lectures. The presence of many and various activities that center attention on some explicit stage in the notetaking act would better align with a course objective of notetaking. Listening comprehension activities have a place in notetaking materials, but surely they should not be the only exercises included in notetaking textbooks.

3. To what extent are a range of notetaking systems and techniques acknowledged consistently throughout the book?

As pointed out by Hamp-Lyons (1983), a range of notetaking systems should be introduced to learners so that they can select the one(s) with which they are the most comfortable. In addition to acknowledging that "one size does not fit all" and catering to learning individuality, having a variety of options at their disposal will help notetakers apply different formats depending on lecture content or speaker style. Most textbooks seem to focus on only a single format and disregard others. Furthermore, given the increase in options for digital notetaking (e.g., with a laptop or tablet), one would expect textbooks to include activities and exercises aimed at notetaking with technology; however, the majority of current textbooks concentrate only on the traditional pen and paper method and neglect digital notetaking.

4. To what extent are both the encoding and storage functions of notetaking acknowledged?

In theory, notetaking serves two important functions. One is the encoding function, which occurs as notes are being taken. The physical practice of writing notes is thought to aid in learning and retention of that information (e.g., DiVesta and Gray, 1972). Encoding can take many forms, including verbatim, paraphrasing, abbreviations and symbols. After the notes are taken and the listening event is over, the storage function becomes important. This function infers that students revisit their notes to review and reorganize and also that students are in fact able to use their notes to stimulate accurate recall of lecture content.

By examining a textbook's Table of Contents, teachers can get indications of the amounts of emphasis placed on each of these important aspects of notetaking. In many, the encoding function is sufficiently addressed through a range of techniques. However, the storage function is often overlooked, based on the assumption that students intuitively know what to do with their notes after a lecture or class.

The encoding function is linked to L2 listening comprehension and L2 writing, and therefore likely deserves a more prominent role in the content of a course focused on notetaking. The various ways in which students utilize their notes for later learning, review and tasks is more of a general academic skill than one specific to L2 teaching and learning. Students can, for example, reformat, summarize, highlight, and/or test themselves using notes. All of these activities likely strengthen learning. At the same time, some acknowledgement of and support for the storage and later use of notes would help provide a more well-rounded L2 notetaking course.

5. To what extent does the textbook target specific stages of notetaking (e.g. organization, encoding in various ways, reviewing notes)?

The skill of notetaking is multi-faceted and complex. It involves a number of stages: listening to and comprehending the L2; making decisions about the significance of content (i.e. is it important enough to write in notes or is it superfluous?); deciding when to write notes (e.g. when the speaker pauses or begins an aside); deciding how to write notes (e.g. at the levels of overall organizational format and encoding of discrete pieces of information); and utilizing notes in various ways after the listening event.

It would be unrealistic to expect each page or unit to incorporate all of these aspects at once. However, each notetaking activity should have an explicit purpose that is clear to the teacher and learners. If the purpose is instructional, that should be clear and the unit or page should break the specific stage into teachable, learnable and practicable chunks. If the purpose is notetaking practice of previously developed skills, this should also be made clear. The distinction between instruction and practice is a crucial one when it comes to notetaking. Many teachers simply encourage practice (e.g. they say "take notes") and assume that student ability will improve through repeated practice opportunities. Such an approach neglects scaffolded teaching and learning. Therefore, teachers should inspect textbooks to ensure that there is instruction (not just practice) for these various stages.

6. To what extent does the textbook include activities for both generative and non-generative notetaking?

Most notetaking falls into one of two categories or a combination of both. In the generative variety, the notetaker creates their own version of the input they hear (for example, by paraphrasing or using pictures). Non-generative notetaking involves consistent verbatim recording of what the speaker says. Research suggests that generative notetaking leads to better comprehension and retention due to the cognitive effort in transferring an aural message into a similar written message (but with at least some paraphrasing and/or word substitution) (e.g., Mueller & Oppenheimer, 2014). The majority of notes are likely taken with a combination of these two approaches; for example, if a speaker is talking quickly and using many long words, generative notetaking may be more efficient. For definitions or particularly clear explanations, the non-generative alternative may be advisable. Both types offer the notetaker a different tool and can be explored in notetaking materials.

7. To what extent do specific activities allow for individual flexibility?

Hamp-Lyons (1983) bemoaned the fact that each of the eight books she reviewed offered only a single notetaking format. This dissatisfaction stems from the view that individuals all have their own preferences for how to arrange and take notes. Therefore, exposure to a variety of overall and specific notetaking styles and techniques is important as is emphasizing to students that they are developing a range of skills and strategies. They do not need to use the same approaches all the time: individual flexibility and creativity in notetaking should be promoted and strict adherence to a single format or technique avoided, at least until students have awareness of a range of options before settling on one.

Thus, flexibility for how each student successfully records a single idea is vital for recognizing and praising notetaking ability. Teaching materials should suggest a range of possible alternatives that express core ideas as well as acknowledge that other options may be possible. These alternatives represent a valuable teaching point for notetaking in EAP: that the same piece of information can be successfully recorded in a number of ways (e.g. verbatim, paraphrase, abbreviation, picture). Teachers can even use this range to engage students in discussions of the pros and cons of each technique and illustrate how one technique may be preferable to others in certain cases.

8. To what extent is range of meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies included in relation to notetaking?

According to O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) seminal work on language learning strategies, three major categories of strategy are used by language learners: meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective. All of these categories have been promoted as advantageous to listening comprehension, but they are seldom discussed in relation to notetaking. Meta-cognitive strategies relate to overall high-level planning, monitoring, and evaluation of learning and interaction with the target language. In terms of notetaking, this can mean being aware of and selecting a notetaking format prior to listening, determining the effectiveness of certain techniques (for example, using abbreviations or paraphrasing), and reflecting on notetaking quality and performance. Cognitive strategies involve the actual engagement with language. For notetaking, this can mean various encoding strategies, ways in which notes can be utilized after the notetaking event, as well as predicting upcoming input, recognizing sign posts, and writing notes during speaker pauses. Socio-affective strategies can involve collaboration with classmates to fill in gaps in and/or review notes (the social aspect) and employing calming techniques when taking notes becomes stressful (the affective element). Inspecting textbooks in terms of these three strategy categories can help inform teachers of where coverage is appropriate and where it may be lacking. If deficiencies are found, then teachers may need to supplement the coursebook to ensure that a range of strategies in these three areas are incorporated.

4. Conclusion

As notetaking continues to gain importance in EAP classrooms and as commercial publishers strive to keep up with demand for teaching and learning materials to support notetaking, it is essential for EAP teachers and course planners to focus on the objective of notetaking. Listening comprehension and notetaking are two distinct abilities, and notetaking materials should focus as much attention as possible on their main stated objective. The list of prompts presented in this article is meant to serve as a stimulus to scrutinize notetaking materials in the same way other teaching and learning materials are evaluated. It is hoped that this list of questions motivates teachers to better understand the strengths and weakness notetaking materials on the market.

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