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PERCEPTIONS OF ELT STUDENTS ON THEIR LISTENING AND NOTE TAKING SKILLS

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Abstract

Note taking is regarded as an academic skill necessary to pursue ones academic studies. Note taking while listening to lectures is a challenging activity for non-native speakers studying in a foreign language. It is advised that non-native students should be trained in listening and Note taking which will help them to improve their listening comprehension and Note taking skills. This study aimed to investigate first year English Language Teaching (ELT) students' perceptions on their progress in listening and Note taking. It was conducted with 61 Freshman ELT students. Data were collected through a questionnaire comprised of a 3 point Likert scale with 8 items including aspects such as using abbreviations and symbols, noting down only important information, and organizing main ideas and details. 1 open ended question was also used in the questionnaire to support the quantitative data. According to the results, students expressed the most progress in writing down important words, separating and recognizing main ideas, and using abbreviations and symbols.

Keywords: note-taking; listening comprehension; ELT students

1. Introduction

Writing down a phone number, an address or a shopping list are examples of Note taking one may perform on a regular day. In a general sense, writing down notes is a way of recording information for future use and to remember it later on. Piolat, Olive and Kellog (2005) define notes as “short condensations of source material that are generated by writing them down while simultaneously listening, studying, or observing. Their function is to gather information distributed in a lecture, a book or in any other situation that needs to be remembered” (p. 292). It is an activity that is done in various situations and for various aims. However, taking notes during a talk, a meeting or a lecture require different skills. Furthermore, for non-native English speaking students it is regarded as an important part of proficiency and “a question of academic survival” if they prefer to study at English-speaking Universities or want to take internationally recognized tests such as TOEFL or IELTS (Dunkel & Pialorsi, 1982 in Dunkel, 1988a; Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Meer, 2012 ; Siegel, 2015).

Richards (as cited in Flowerdew, 1994) indicates that academic listening compared to conversational listening has its own distinctive features in terms of degree and kind. Differences in degree are the type of background knowledge needed, the ability to determine relevant information, turn taking required in conversational listening, and the amount of implied meaning or direct speech acts. Differences in kind are having to concentrate on and understand long stretches of talk in lectures, taking notes during lectures, and to “integrate the incoming message with information derived from other media”. James (as cited in Flowerdew, 1994) regards Note taking as a five stage process: “decode, comprehend, identify main points, decide when to write these, write quickly and clearly”. Dunkel (1988a) draws on studies in L1 Note taking and adheres that it is widely accepted that Note taking is a beneficial strategy that enhances student attention and retention of information. She cites studies by Aiken, Thomas, and Shennum (1975) and Howe (1970b) who concluded that

taking notes during lectures enhances the recall of information. Despite being a challenging skill, training in Note taking is beneficial.

Flowerdew (1994) asserts that researching the process of lecture comprehension is valuable because such research may provide insight into how lectures are comprehended. Consequently, appropriate ways to encourage second language learners to listen to lectures can be suggested and incorporated into ESL teaching methodology or strategy training. Therefore, looking into studies conducted on listening and Note taking can help gain a broader understanding on the difficulties experienced by ESL learners while taking notes and suggestions provided to aid them.

Taking notes during a lecture requires specific skills. Powers (as cited in Flowerdew, 1994) conducted a study to reveal the most important micro-skills involved in Note taking. Faculty members in the United States, who were asked to rank lecture-related micro-skills, indicated the following 9 skills among 21 lecture-related micro-skills as most important:

- *“Identifying major themes or ideas*
- *Identifying relationships between major ideas*
- *Identifying the topic of a lecture*
- *Retaining information through note-taking*
- *Retrieving information from notes*
- *Inferring relationships between information*
- *Comprehending key vocabulary*
- *Following the spoken mode of lectures*
- *Identifying supporting ideas and examples”* (p.12-13)

Al-Musalli (2015) suggests the following “taxonomy of skills and subskills involved in Note taking from lectures”. The first is the outlining skill which requires the note taker to be able to decide on the layout to record information logically. The second is the writing skill which involves writing important information quickly using symbols and abbreviations. Third is reviewing the notes. It has been revealed that the quantity of notes taken in the L1 and L2 does not necessarily lead to effectively encoding a lecture or retention achievement. Rather, effective L1 and L2 note takers are those who are able to compact information into propositional-type information, note content words using symbols or abbreviations and few structure words (Dunkel, 1988b).

There are various challenges faced by non-native English speaking students during lectures in English. In order to investigate the students’ perceptions of the lecture experience, their problems and strategies they employ to overcome these problems, Flowerdew & Miller (1992) conducted a study with 30 Cantonese speaker students at B.A. level attending a lecture in ESL methods and with no prior exposure to the formal monologue lecture mode of listening. In terms of perception, they found that students indicated contrasts between their exposure to English at school and the lecture experience. They had mixed attitudes towards the lecture and their self-rating of level improved as the course progressed. Students were affected by the lecture style; many were not clear about the purpose of the lecture. While some could bring background knowledge to the lecture, some could not; and they were aware of strategies employed by the lecturer to improve understanding. The problems they encountered during lecture Note taking were the speed of lecture delivery, new terminology and concepts, and difficulty in concentrating. The strategies they used to overcome such difficulties were pre- and post-reading of the lecture topic, asking help from their peers or from the lecturer.

Al-Musalli (2015) argues that Note taking in lectures is challenging for learners because of the speed of input. She cites Chambers and Northedge (1997) who indicate that listening to lectures requires three challenging tasks: “attend and make sense of the argument, think about what is said, and make some kind of notes”. They point out that students need to be selective to take brief notes so that Note taking does not distract them from listening. Lewis & Reinders (2003) mention three main problems with Note taking stated by students. The first problem they mention is that students can’t write down enough information. Second, because they have to be fast while taking notes, their handwriting can be far from neat, thus, they can’t read their own handwriting later. Finally, they hardly find time to go over their notes until just before the examination.

Basing on quantitative analysis of notes indicating a difference between the notes students take in their first language (L1) and notes they take in their second language (L2), Barbier & Roussey (2006) conducted a study to explore “the impact of structural differences between the first language and the second language that is used for taking notes”. Their participants were native Spanish speaking students and native English speaking students whose L2 was French. Their results revealed that regardless of the L1, perceived difficulty of students was larger in L2. Also, more words were written in L1 than in L2, and more abbreviations were used in the L1 than in the L2.

Hayati & Jalilifar (2009) studied “the relationship between note-taking strategy and students’ listening comprehension ability.” Their participants were 60 undergraduate students majoring in English and they were separated into 3 groups. Uninstructed note-takers took notes in their own manner, Cornell note-takers used the Cornell Method, developed for Cornell students by Pauk (1974) to help them to improve the organization of their notes in their lecture classes and the non-note-takers did not take any notes. All students participated in a simulated TOEFL proficiency test. The results showed “a clear link between note-taking strategy and listening comprehension ability.” Students instructed in taking notes revealed significantly better results than students who took notes in their own manner or students who did not take any notes. Their results revealed a positive impact of Note taking instruction on listening comprehension. They suggested that students should be taught the useful techniques of note-taking with a number of lecture topics. They cited Ornstein (1994) who put forward that note-taking should be part of the curriculum. Note taking has benefits for school, work, and life in general. Since it is not possible to listen to a speech or presentation again, it is important to record and keep information for later use. Similarly, Kılıçkaya and Çolak-Karadaş (2009) studied the effect of note-taking while listening on lecture comprehension with 44 Turkish EFL students at the undergraduate level using a quasi-experimental design. Their results revealed that students who took notes during the lectures performed significantly better than those students who did not take notes during the lectures. Also, their participants indicated that when taking notes during lectures they felt at ease, that taking notes helped them to listen carefully and to understand the lectures.

In 1978, Hartley and Davies (as cited in Dunkel, 1988b) suggested the following guidelines for teachers to help their students in Note taking:

1. Make note takers aware that there are different Note taking styles used for different aims and subject matters
2. Clarify the organizing principle of different lectures
3. Provide advance organizers or skeleton notes
4. Teach note takers how to recognize rhetorical cues
5. Teach them to realize changes in topics and themes
6. Indicate that lecturers use asides or digression
7. Give enough time to take notes

8. Encourage students to take notes

Dunkel (1988b) suggests that nonnative students be provided with advance organizers or “skeleton notes” by their ESL instructors so that they can focus on understanding lecture content and grasp the organization and structure of the lecture. Furthermore, Bui & McDaniel (2015) suggest providing aids such as outlines or illustrative diagrams improve learning compared to taking notes without any aid. Thus, such aid would promote successful learning. Studies on the effect of training EFL university students on how to take notes effectively revealed that such training had positive impacts on most students and that the number of information noted increased. It is advised that both teaching and practicing EFL note taking skills are very valuable and can help students to comprehend their lectures better (Tsai & Wu, 2010; Crawford, 2015; Siegel, 2015). Also, it is indicated that students express a positive opinion about such training (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992; Hayati & Jalilifar, 2009; Crawford, 2015).

Considering the importance and challenge of note taking while listening particularly for non-native English speaking University students and the need to train students in this skill, the present study aimed at determining students’ perceptions on how much they have improved in their listening and note taking skills after they received training. The training included the following skills:

- * deciding which note-taking format to use (outline or column)
- * leaving space for additional information while taking notes
- * determining main ideas, supporting ideas, and details
- * differentiating important information, omitting unnecessary words and writing down important content words
- * paraphrasing or using their own words when possible
- * using abbreviations and symbols
- * listening for signal words and expressions
- * identifying topic shift

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

Participants of this study were 1st year students enrolled in the English Language Teaching Program at a state University in Turkey. All 61 participants voluntarily participated in the study. All participants were exposed to 2 hours of listening comprehension training for 12 teaching weeks in the fall term. In the spring term, they were exposed to two hours and 12 teaching weeks of listening and note taking practice. Thus participants were chosen through convenience sampling because they were “willing and available to be studied” (Creswell, 2014).

Before entering the department, subjects underwent extensive exposure to grammar, vocabulary and reading instruction in their high school education because they needed to pass a multiple choice test in the University Entrance Exam. In other words, listening comprehension was not part of the University Entrance Exam and, thus, was mostly not focused on by high school English teachers. In the first year at the ELT department, classes conducted in English are language skill courses like reading, writing, speaking and listening comprehension, and grammar. These courses are conducted in the first and second term; the second term is a follow up of the first term. The syllabus of the Listening Comprehension course in the first term focuses on developing students’ ability to recognize numbers, intonation, question types, the purpose of the speaker, topics, main ideas, supporting ideas, and to differentiate between facts and opinions. In the second term, participants take the

Listening and Note Taking course which is a follow up the Listening Comprehension course in the first term. The syllabus of this course consists of the following skills related to listening and note taking: deciding which note taking format to use (outline or column); leaving space for additional information while taking notes; determining main ideas, supporting ideas, and details; differentiating important information, omitting unnecessary words and writing down important content words; paraphrasing or using their own words when possible; using abbreviations and symbols; listening for signal words and expressions; identifying topic shift.

2.2. Instrument

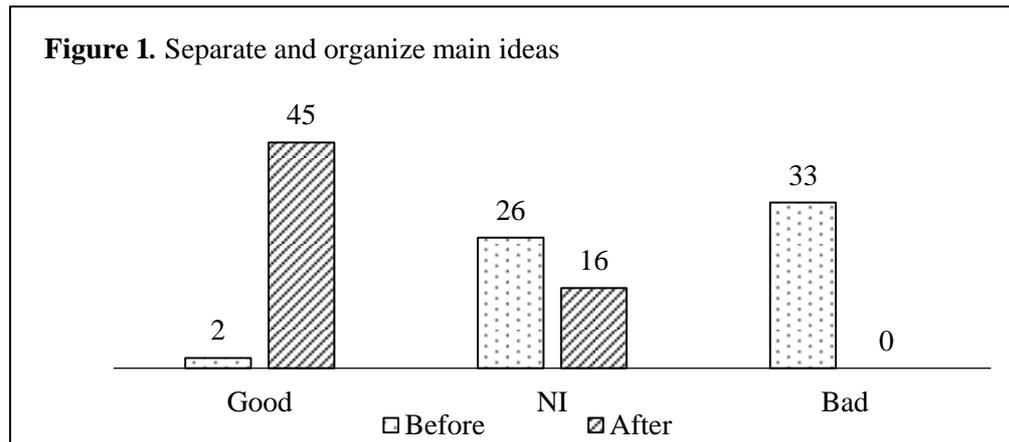
In order to determine students' perceptions on their listening and note taking skills, a questionnaire was constructed. The questionnaire consisted of 8 items which were formed based on the self-evaluation checklist provided in the students' course book (LeRoi Gilbert and Rogers, 2011), the note taking skills self-evaluation checklists by the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Ottawa. For each item in the questionnaire there were 3 options: good, needs improvement, and bad. In addition, in order to support the quantitative data and to gain a deeper insight into their perceptions, participants were asked an open-ended question. In this question they were asked to indicate what they have gained from the Listening and Note Taking course.

2.3. Data Collection Procedure and Data Analysis

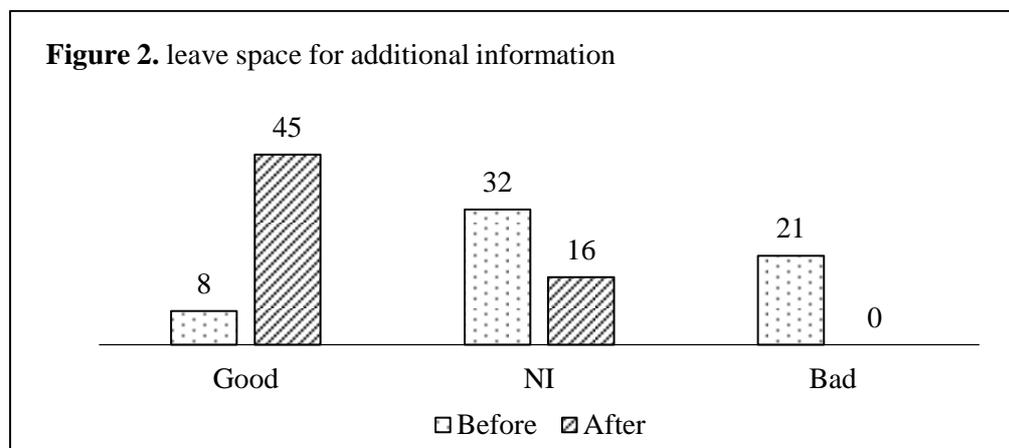
The questionnaire was administered at the end of the second term. Students had received 24 hours of listening comprehension instruction in the first term followed by 24 hours of training in listening and note taking in the second term. Participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire during the final course hour of the year. They were informed about the aim of the study and were asked to sign a consent form stating that they voluntarily participated in the study. The questionnaire was analyzed through frequency analysis. The frequency of the responses for each item was determined. The open-ended question was analyzed through content analysis. Questionnaire items were used as headings to group the data obtained from the open-ended question. Participants' responses were grouped under the relevant heading; and when a response did not fit a heading, it was grouped as "others".

2.4. Findings

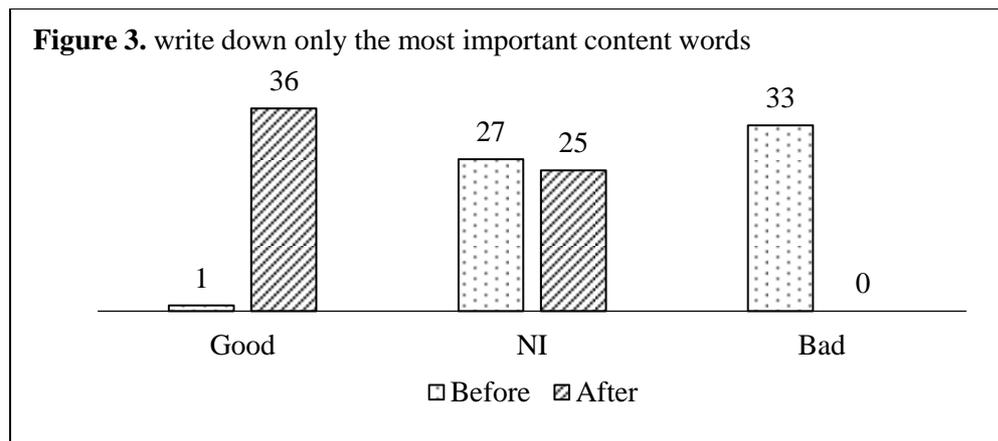
The findings to the first questionnaire item which was on the ability of participants to separate and organize main ideas and details are shown in Figure 1. It is revealed that 2 students indicated that their ability to separate and organize main ideas and details was good, 26 indicated that they needed to improve this skill and 33 students said that they were bad in separating and organizing main ideas and details before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. However, after taking the course, while no student indicated that they were bad, 16 said that they still needed to improve this skill, and 45 said that they were good in separating and organizing main ideas and details after taking the Listening and Note Taking course. These results indicate that while most of the students, 45, saw themselves as being good in separating and organizing main ideas and details, 16 still thought they needed to improve. This result was also supported by the results of the open ended question where 13 students indicated that they were able to recognize main ideas, details, definitions, and examples.



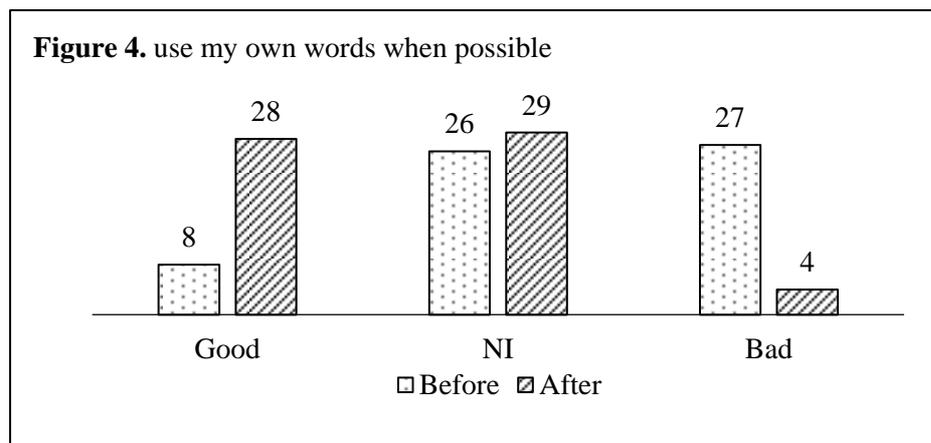
The results to the second questionnaire item on the ability of participants to leave space for additional information are shown in Figure 2. It can be seen that 8 students were good in leaving space for additional information, 32 indicated that they needed to improve this skill and that 21 students said that they were bad in leaving space for additional information before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. However, after taking the course while no student indicated that they were bad, 16 said that they still needed to improve this skill, and 45 said that they were good in leaving space for additional information after taking the course. These results show that while most of the students, 45, were able to leave space for additional information after taking the course, 16 students believed they needed to improve this skill.



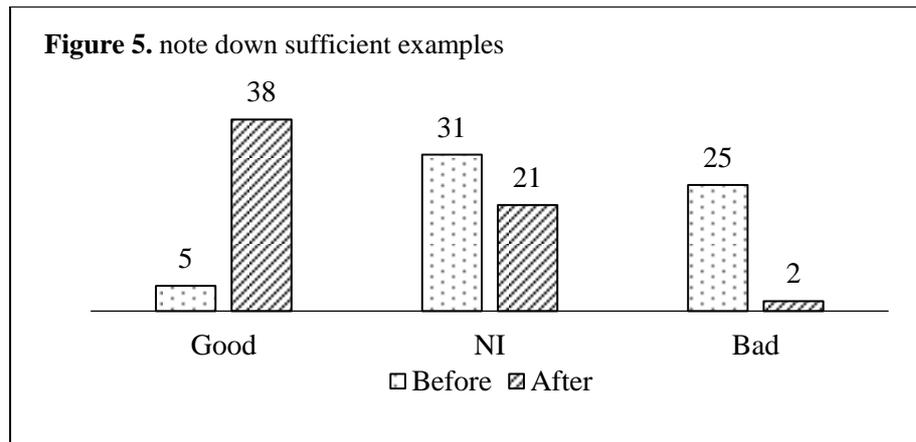
Considering the third questionnaire item regarding the ability to write the most important content words, shown in Figure 3, only 1 student indicated that he/she was good in this task before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. 27 indicated that they needed to improve this skill and 33 students said that they were bad in writing down the most important content words. After taking the course, though, no student indicated that they were bad; 25 said that they still needed to improve this skill, and 36 said that they were good in writing down the most important content. These results indicate that while 36 students out of 61 could write down the most important content words, 25 still needed to improve this skill. This item was also supported by the results of the open ended question. Here, 20 students indicated that after taking the course they were able to recognize what information is important and what is not. That is, they could recognize key words and important information.



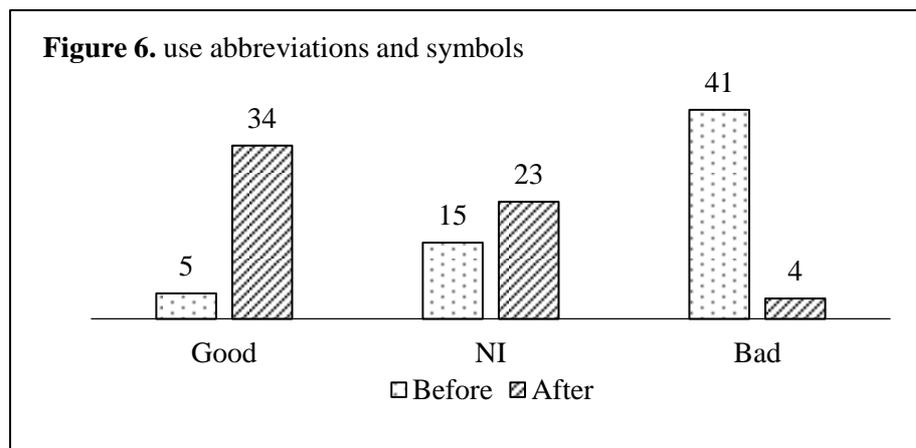
The findings to the fourth questionnaire item which was on the ability of participants to use their own words when possible are shown in Figure 4. It is revealed that 8 participants indicated that their ability to use their own words while taking notes was good before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. However, after taking the course the number went up to 28. 26 participants indicated that they needed to improve this skill and 27 students said that they were bad in using their own words before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. However, after taking the course 29 students indicated that they needed to improve, 4 said that they were still bad in using their own words. These results indicate that more than half of the participants needed to work further on using their own words while taking notes.



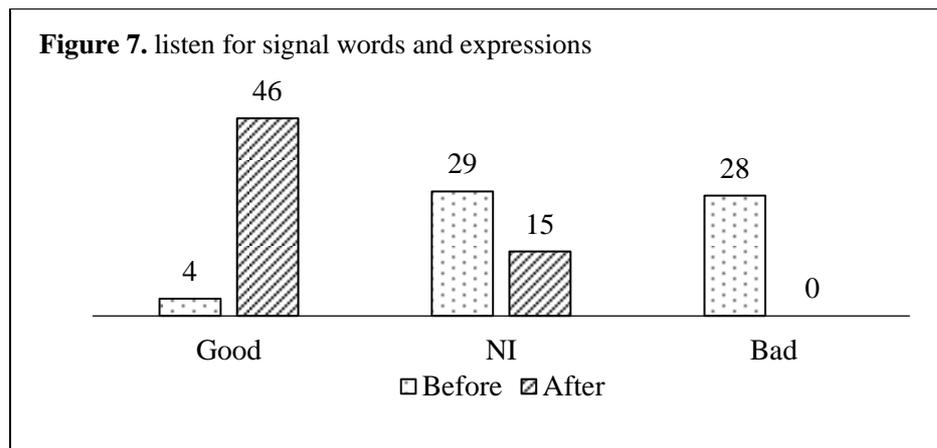
The results to item 5 on the ability to note down sufficient examples is presented in Figure 5. It can be seen that 5 students were good in noting down sufficient examples before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. However, after taking the course the number went up to 38. 31 indicated that they needed to improve this skill and 25 students said that they were bad in noting down sufficient examples before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. However, after taking the course while only 2 students indicated that they were bad, 21 said that they still needed to improve this skill. These results revealed that while most of the students, 38, were able to note down sufficient examples after taking the course, 21 students still needed to improve this skill.



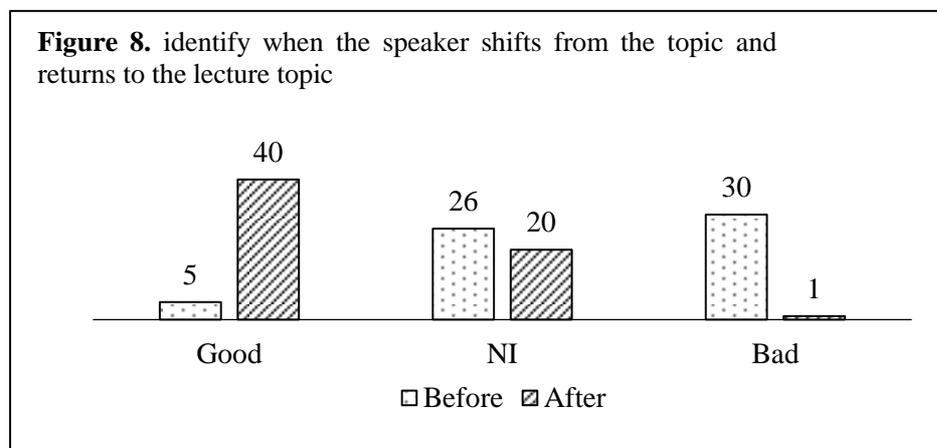
The results concerning the ability to use abbreviations and symbols, item 6, is shown in Figure 6. 5 participants indicated that they were good in using abbreviations and symbols before taking the course and this number went up to 34 after taking the course. 15 indicated that they needed to improve this skill and more than half of the students, 41, said that they were bad in using abbreviations and symbols before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. However, after taking the course, while 23 students indicated that they needed to improve, only 4 students said they were still bad. These results revealed that while more than half of the students, 34, were able to use abbreviations and symbols after taking the course, 23 students still needed to work on this skill.



The results concerning the ability to recognize signal words and expressions, item 7, is shown in Figure 7. Only 4 students indicated that they were good in listening for signal words and phrases before taking the course and this number went up to 46. 15 indicated that they needed to improve this skill and 28 students indicated that they were bad before taking the course. However, after taking the course 15 students indicated that they needed to improve and no student was still bad. These results revealed that while the majority, 75%, of the students, can recognize signal words and phrases after taking the course, 15 students still needed to work on this skill. Similarly, 10 students indicated that they could use abbreviations while taking notes as a response to the open ended question.



The results to the ability to identify when the speaker shifts from the topic and returns to the lecture topic, item 8, is shown in Figure 8. 5 students said that they were good in this skill before taking the course and this number went up to 40 after taking the course. 26 indicated that they needed to improve this skill and almost half of the students, 30, said that they were bad in identifying when the speaker shifts from the topic and returns to the lecture topic before taking the Listening and Note Taking course. However, after taking the course, 20 students indicated that they needed to improve and only 1 student seemed to be still bad. These results showed that while more than half of the students, 40, are able to identify when the speaker shifts from the topic and returns to the lecture topic after taking the course, 21 students still had to improve.



In addition, participants, though less than 10, indicated the following benefits of the Listening and Note Taking course in the open-ended question:

- they learned about different note taking formats
- they improved their note taking skills in general
- they could organize their notes and write neatly
- they improved their listening comprehension
- the course contributed to their pronunciation
- they learned which note taking skills to use
- they comprehended different accents and different speeds

3. Discussion and Conclusion

Considering that listening to a lecture is a difficult task for second language students, for which they may be inadequately prepared (Flowerdew & Miller, 1992), the findings of this study support the importance of training students in note taking (Al-Musalli, 2015; Hayati & Jalilifar, 2009; Kılıçkaya & Çolak-Karadaş, 2009). Especially the ability to separate and organize main ideas, leave space for additional information, and to listen to signal words and expressions were perceived to have improved by the majority of students. The ability to write down only the most important content words and to use their own words, were the two skills perceived to need improvement the most by the participants. Finally, writing down sufficient examples, using abbreviations and symbols, and recognizing topic shift were the only skills that were perceived as bad, though, by 4 or less participants.

Furthermore, the open ended question revealed the contributions of training students in note taking is not limited to the skills in the questionnaire. The contributions of such training were listed as: learning about different note taking formats, improving note taking skills in general, organizing notes and writing neatly, improving listening comprehension, improving pronunciation, knowing which note taking skills to use, and comprehending different accents and different speeds.

Providing EFL learners with training in listening and note taking is vital. However, it should be remembered that “only after successful listening occurs can attention be turned to the next stages of the note-taking process” (Siegel, 2015). Thus, teachers need to first, help students to improve their listening skill and then provide them with help on note taking. Designing courses based on the needs of non-native students pursuing their education in a L2 on note taking will help them to improve their academic skills as well.

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