

Original Article

Developing an Effective and Practical Notebook for Learners of English as a Foreign Language

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Good study skills are essential for attaining academic success. Within this skill-set, an important subset is the ability to take effectively organized, complete and accurate notes. However, many Japanese students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are relatively poor at taking and effectively structuring their EFL course notes as an aid to learning and review. There is therefore an urgent need for a commercially available notebook that is specifically designed to assist EFL students with their note-taking. *The Foreign Language Learners' Notebook* seeks to meet this need. In this paper, the notebook's design and contents are explained and justified, working from front to back to include the cover pages, supporting content and note-pages. The paper also outlines an ongoing field-test of the notebook's design.

Keywords: Foreign language learning, Study skills, Note-taking, Learner autonomy, Field-test

Introduction

Our personal experiences, both as students and teachers, inform us that good study skills assist in making the learning process much more effective and efficient. Indeed Gettinger & Seibert (2002) view good study skills as "fundamental to academic competence", stating that they are "associated with positive outcomes across multiple academic content areas and for diverse learners". This would include Japanese students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

The term 'study skills' includes any strategy, technique or behavior intended to enhance a student's capacity to familiarize him or herself with, record, organize and internalize information, for example by previewing before class, note-taking during class or

reviewing after class.

Despite the importance of good study skills in general, and note-taking in particular (Bode, 2018) to academic success, these skills are not usually taught overtly in Japanese schools, colleges or universities. Instead, students are left to develop their own methods. However, this can often lead to poor and ineffective study skills, especially with respect to note-taking. I have often observed my students taking notes on any scraps of paper that they have to hand, including the back of unrelated prints or worksheets. This leads to notes that are jumbled out of sequence and often on separately-sized papers. They are also often susceptible to loss for lack of a folder, resulting in incomplete notes. Some students take few or no notes at all.

There seems then to be an urgent need for a notebook specifically designed for EFL classes, one that appeals to students and encourages them to use it routinely. An EFL notebook already exists (McMahon, 2009), but is of a very basic design. This paper therefore describes *The Foreign Language Learners'*

Notebook, which I have developed to meet this need. Specifically, I will describe its size, paper, binding and content, as well as an ongoing field trial of the design.

Notebook size, paper and binding

A preliminary survey among teachers at the Department of International Liberal Arts (DILA) indicated that they preferred to have an A4 size notebook as this gives more space for notes than B5. The content was therefore set out as an A4 double-page spread (i.e. A3) design, which improves upon McMahon's (2009) single page, B5 design. For durability and a professional, attractive appearance, the cover is printed on thicker card, while the internal pages are standard copy-quality paper. These are held together with two strong staples.

Content

The notebook's content is described below, working from front to back.

Front cover

Beyond merely displaying the notebook's title, the front cover also includes a cartoon-style color illustration of a dog holding a notepad and pen to attract and appeal to students. Under this is a space for students to write their name, student ID number, the course title for which the notebook is being used and their department and university name. This greatly increases the chance that the notebook will be returned to the owner if lost. These features make the front cover aesthetically attractive, appealing and functional.

Front supporting content

On the inside of the front cover is a Japanese-English bilingual list of parts of speech, complete with abbreviations and example sentences in English to aid comprehension. These abbreviations can be applied by students in the 'New words' section of the note-pages to identify a new word's part of speech, which in turn can aid correct usage.

Below that is a list of useful classroom English phrases to encourage students to use English to check translation equivalents, pronunciation, meaning, spelling, part of speech and usage.

On the opposite (right) page is a color-coded chart

showing the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) complete with example words. This helps students to learn and use correct pronunciation autonomously.

Overleaf, the next double-page spread, provided in appendix 1, shows how the note-page is set out and exemplifies how each section can be used. This is intended to help students understand and use the notebook's contents and design to take good notes. Turning over the page takes students to the note-pages proper, detailed in the next section.

The note-pages

The note-pages' design provides a structure around which students can organize their notes. Firstly, the header area is comprised of spaces to note the lesson's date and number, the textbook page(s) covered and the lesson's topic and learning goals. These content features help students to organize, identify and locate specific notes more easily later for review.

There is then a large, lined area for free-style notes, to the right of which is a column to note new words. For each new word, the design encourages students to note the spelling, syllable stress, part of speech (using the abbreviations listed on the inside front cover), pronunciation (using the IPA chart), translation equivalent and an example sentence for usage practice. This helps students to spell, pronounce, understand and use new vocabulary correctly.

On the right side of the double-page is a large space for diagrams, charts, tables or pictures. It is divided into quarters with vertical and horizontal lines, but students can divide the space up as necessary to accommodate multiple images.

Below this space is a section for students to note new grammar patterns, with a line for the English sentence and another for the Japanese translation equivalent.

Next is a space for noting irregular but important information such as schedule changes, test dates or things to bring to class. This helps students to prepare properly for lessons and tests.

Finally, since students often do not note homework assignments or deadlines and therefore fail to do or submit their homework on time, there are also spaces for this information.

Back supporting content

After the last note-page there is a color, dou-

ble-page, bilingual schematic detailing the Process Approach to Writing, to help students develop their writing skills.

Finally, there is a bilingual checklist of language errors commonly made by Japanese EFL learners. This was developed by the author over 22 years of EFL teaching in Japan. The checklist also highlights content and layout issues commonly found in Japanese students' EFL writing.

Back cover

The back cover explains the notebook's design features in bullet-point form. Each point explains a component of the note-pages' content or a feature of the supporting content. This informs the reader of the notebook's design features and functions, and persuades them to buy and use the notebook.

Trialing

To gauge the notebook's efficacy in helping students to take good notes, it is currently being field-tested with 38 1st-year Integrated English A students, 19 2nd-year Integrated English C students, 15 3rd-year Business English B students and eight 3rd-year English Debate students within DILA (N=80). Each student received a free copy of the notebook which was made with the author's own printing and binding resources and consumables.

The notebook's trial version has only enough note-pages for the first half of the semester. At the semester's midpoint, a feedback survey will be administered to the participating students to gather their comments on its content, design and functionality. The

feedback will then be used to further develop the notebook in these areas.

In the latter half of the semester, students will use their own note-taking methods rather than *The Foreign Language Learners' Notebook*. At the end of the semester, a second survey will be administered to gather data on participating students' own note-taking practices and how effective they found those practices to be in assisting their EFL learning compared with the notebook. With this research design, the students will be their own control for the study. The results of both surveys will be published later in separate papers.

Conclusion

Good note-taking is an essential study skill for academic success, particularly for Japanese EFL learners who do not get much exposure to English in their daily lives. Through considered content and design choices, *The Foreign Language Learners' Notebook* seeks to aid DILA students' EFL learning by assisting them in organizing language-related and other necessary information. The results of the notebook's field-test will be published later.

References

- Bode, J. (2018). Note-taking methods for academic and professional purposes. *Tokiwa University Faculty of Human Sciences Journal*, 35(2), 85–95.
- Gettinger, M. & Seibert, J. K. (2002). Contributions of study skills to academic competence. *School Psychology Review*, 31(3), 350–365.
- McMahon, R. (2009). *Language Note*. Brief.

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Appendix 1

Date: 10th April, 2018		Lesson topic: Course orientation and introductions	
Lesson # 1	Pages: 1 ~ 2		
Lesson's learning goals			
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> To learn about the course and our teacher. To introduce ourselves to our classmates. 			
Notes		New words	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> This course is compulsory, so I must pass this course. We have to keep to the rules and deadlines. Our teacher is Miss Lisa Hill. She is from Brighton, England. Her hobbies are cycling and drawing. She seems strict but friendly. Greeting: Hello. Pleased to meet you. Name: My name is Hiroko Yamada. Age: I'm 18 years old. From: I'm from Onomichi in Hiroshima prefecture. Hobbies: My hobbies are listening to Korean pop music and chatting with my friends. They are fun. Like: I like to spend time with friends because it's relaxing. Dislike: I dislike spiders because they are scary. 		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> attendance (n) / ə'tendəns / = 出席 E.g. We must have 67% attendance in this course. participate (v) / pɑ:tɪsɪpeɪt / = 参加する E.g. It is important to participate actively in class. effective (adj) / ɪ'fektɪv / = 効果的な E.g. Good notes are very important for effective learning. 	
_____		4. _____ ()	
_____		/ /	
_____		= _____	
_____		E.g. _____	
_____		_____	
_____		5. _____ ()	
_____		/ /	
_____		= _____	
_____		E.g. _____	
_____		_____	
_____		6. _____ ()	
_____		/ /	
_____		= _____	
_____		E.g. _____	
_____		_____	
_____		7. _____ ()	
_____		/ /	
_____		= _____	
_____		E.g. _____	
_____		_____	

Diagram(s), charts(s), table(s), picture(s)			
90%~100%	A	GP 4.0	Excellent
80%~89%	B	GP 3.0	Very good
70%~79%	C	GP 2.0	Good
60~69%	D	GP 1.0	Satisfactory
<60%	F	GP 0	Fail
Example sentences of new grammar			
1. I like to listen to KPop. 私は KPop を聞くことが好きです。			
2. I like listening to KPop. 私は KPop を聞くことが好きです。			
3. I enjoy listening to KPop. 私は KPop を聞くことを楽しみます。			
Important information (schedule changes, tests, things to bring to class, things to do, etc.)			
1. Bring a computer to the next lesson.			
2. <u>Vocabulary mini-test on 24th April. (Don't be absent!)</u>			
3. Miss Hill will be absent on 1st May.			
Homework			Deadline(s)
1. Review vocabulary list on textbook page 1.			24th April
2. _____			_____
3. _____			_____