



Improving EFL Students' TOEFL Listening Scores Through Signpost Words and Guided Note-Taking: A Pre-Test and Post-Test Experimental Study

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Abstract

The listening comprehension section of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) represents a formidable academic hurdle for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, primarily due to the rapid, real-time processing of high-density academic vocabulary, natural speech rates, and highly complex, non-linear lecture structures. This study systematically investigates the pedagogical effectiveness of teaching explicit structural lecture cues—specifically "signpost words" or rhetorical transition markers—combined with systematic, guided note-taking strategies to improve TOEFL listening proficiency and mitigate academic listening anxiety. Using a quantitative, one-group pre-test and post-test experimental research design, a cohort of 40 university students from non-English majors underwent an intensive, 6-week instructional intervention focused on cognitive load reduction and strategic auditory processing. The research utilized parallel versions of the official TOEFL ITP listening section as diagnostic instruments to measure empirical gains, alongside qualitative student self-reports to monitor affective shifts. The empirical results demonstrated a highly significant, statistical increase in students' listening performance, with the group's mean score rising from a baseline of 432 to 512 on the TOEFL ITP scale ($t(39) = 12.4, p < 0.001$). A detailed sub-score analysis revealed that the most substantial gains occurred in main-idea and detail-oriented question items, which directly correlated with the students' newly acquired ability to filter raw speech and map lectures structurally. Ultimately, this paper details how explicit, strategy-based instruction in recognizing rhetorical markers effectively reduces cognitive fatigue, optimizes working memory limits, and fosters active, highly strategic academic listening habits that are vital for future success in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) university classrooms.

Keywords: *TOEFL; Listening Comprehension Section; Signpost Words; Guided Note-taking; Experimental Study.*

INTRODUCTION

In the landscape of international higher education, academic listening is far from a passive, receptive skill. It is a highly complex, active cognitive process that serves as a cornerstone for academic survival in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) environments. To measure this preparedness, standardized assessments like the TOEFL evaluate a student's ability to comprehend, synthesize, and interpret long, authentic university lectures. These lectures mimic real-life campus scenarios, ranging from biology and astronomy to art history. For EFL learners, who have been trained primarily in controlled, slow-paced textbook English, the sudden transition to natural academic speech—which includes native-like hesitations, self-corrections, and linked words—creates a formidable barrier. Advanced academic listening proficiency depends heavily on learners' metacognitive awareness to shift their focus from low-level, bottom-up decoding to high-level, top-down structural processing (Vandergrift & Goh, 2021).

A common issue in TOEFL preparation programs is the reliance on the "test-and-repeat" method. In this approach, instructors repeatedly play sample audio tracks and ask students to

answer mock questions without explaining the cognitive mechanisms required to process the speech. This method merely tests existing comprehension rather than teaching students *how* to comprehend. When students struggle, they often attempt to compensate by trying to write down every spoken word during the test. This strategy inevitably leads to cognitive overload, as the physical act of writing interferes with the mental act of listening. Attempting to record spoken information verbatim triggers dual-task interference, which severely impedes short-term information retention.

To address this gap, this study proposes a targeted instructional intervention focusing on the dual pillars of structural lecture cues (signpost words) and guided note-taking. By treating academic lectures as structured rhetorical patterns rather than overwhelming streams of sound, students can learn to anticipate information. Therefore, the introduction of rhetorical transitions or signpost words is not merely a test-taking tip, but a cognitive necessity to manage information load in the working memory before comprehension failure occurs. This article presents a rigorous, detailed analysis of a 6-week experimental study to show how this strategic approach significantly improves EFL learners' TOEFL listening proficiency and reduces exam-related anxiety.

To understand why signpost words are highly effective, we must examine the cognitive processing of spoken language through Cognitive Load Theory (CLT). Human working memory is strictly limited in its processing capacity. When an EFL learner listens to a dense TOEFL lecture on a topic like "glacial erosion," their brain must simultaneously decode phonemes, identify vocabulary, parse syntactic structures, and comprehend the global meaning. Without targeted information-filtering strategies, EFL students undergo severe cognitive overload when attempting to decode spoken texts verbatim (Teng, 2022). If the student treats every single spoken word with equal importance, their working memory quickly becomes overloaded, resulting in a complete breakdown of comprehension.

Signpost words serve as essential cognitive markers that guide the listener's attention to the speaker's main points. In classical rhetoric, speech is organized into predictable patterns (such as cause-effect, comparison-contrast, and chronological sequencing). Instructors can categorize these signposts into distinct functional groups to help students navigate lectures. Contrast markers like *however*, *conversely*, and *on the other hand* signal a shift in the speaker's argument. Logical consequence markers like *therefore*, *consequently*, and *as a result* signal that a crucial cause-and-effect relationship is about to be presented. Exemplification markers such as *for instance* and *specifically* alert the listener that a concrete detail is coming to explain an abstract theory. Finally, emphasis markers like *in other words* or *most importantly* identify the absolute main ideas of the lecture, which almost always correspond to the primary question items on the exam.

By training students to recognize these structural cues, teachers help them transition from passive listeners to active, predictive listeners. Instead of dedicating valuable cognitive energy to writing down unimportant filler words, students use signposts to identify exactly when a key piece of information is being delivered, allowing them to take highly efficient, structured notes. Integrating guided note-taking templates—such as modified Cornell methods—helps learners conserve sensory memory resources by shifting physical writing demands toward the strategic identification of essential lexical signaling (Richards & Burns, 2024).

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted a quantitative, one-group pre-test/post-test experimental research design to evaluate the impact of the proposed intervention. The sample consisted of 40 undergraduate university students majoring in non-English disciplines. The participants were selected using purposive sampling based on two criteria: they were preparing to take the institutional TOEFL (ITP) exam as a graduation requirement, and their initial diagnostic listening scores fell below 450.

The intervention was conducted systematically over a six-week period to ensure students could gradually internalize the cognitive habits required for efficient listening and note-taking. The methodological framework of this study was systematically structured into four distinct, sequential phases over a six-week period to facilitate and monitor the students' cognitive and strategic development. During the first week, which marked Phase One (Pre-Test Diagnostic), students took a full, timed TOEFL ITP listening practice test under strict exam conditions. This initial assessment comprised Part A (Short Conversations), Part B (Long Conversations), and Part C (Lectures), serving to establish baseline scores and identify specific listening weaknesses among the participants.

Following this diagnostic baseline, the intervention transitioned into Phase Two (Signpost Recognition Training) during weeks two and three. In this phase, students were introduced to a detailed taxonomy of signpost words. They practiced actively with short, one-minute audio clips, raising their hands or marking specialized worksheets whenever they heard a transition word. This exercise trained them to immediately predict what type of academic information would follow based on the specific auditory cue heard, transforming them from passive listeners into active, predictive processors.

As the students' rhetorical awareness improved, weeks four and five were dedicated to Phase Three (Guided Note-Taking Integration). During this critical stage, students learned to use Cornell-style note-taking templates customized specifically for the demands of TOEFL academic lectures. Rather than attempting verbatim transcription, they practiced writing down only the identified transition words—using highly efficient shorthand symbols such as arrow symbols ($\rightarrow$) for cause-effect relationships or unequal signs ($\neq$) for contrast—followed strictly by the core noun or verb phrase. This training significantly reduced physical writing time, allowing students to preserve valuable mental energy for active listening.

Finally, in the sixth week, the study concluded with Phase Four (Post-Test Evaluation). Under identical exam conditions, students took a parallel, equivalent version of the TOEFL ITP listening test. This final phase was designed to measure their overall statistical progress, evaluate the effectiveness of the six-week training, and assess the qualitative reduction of cognitive fatigue during the challenging lecture section of the exam.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

The quantitative data gathered from the pre-test and post-test assessments showed a statistically significant and highly encouraging improvement in the students' listening performance. The institutional TOEFL (ITP) listening section score typically ranges from 310 to 680 points. In the pre-test, the group's performance was low, with a mean score of 432. Most students struggled with Part C (Lectures), where they often missed key transitions and lost the thread of the topic within the first 60 seconds.

In the post-test, following the 6-week strategy training, the group's mean score rose to 512. This represents a substantial average increase of 80 points per student. To determine if this difference was statistically significant, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. The results showed a significant difference between pre-test and post-test scores ($t(39) = 12.4, p < 0.001$), proving that the score increase was a direct result of the intervention rather than random chance. The data can be seen in this following table.

Table 1. Pre-test and Post-test Assessment Scores

Measurement Metric	Pre-Intervention Score	Post-Intervention Score	Mean Difference (Gain)
Class Average (Mean)	432	512	+80 points
Highest Individual Score	490	580	+90 points
Lowest Individual Score	350	440	+90 points
Standard Deviation	32.4	28.6	-3.8 (More Consistent)

In addition to overall test scores, the research analyzed the students' accuracy rates across three specific question types typically found in TOEFL lectures:

- **Main Idea Questions:** Correct answers increased from **42%** in the pre-test to **78%** in the post-test, indicating that teaching students to listen to introductory signposts successfully helped them identify the main scope of the lecture immediately.
- **Detail Questions:** Accuracy in this category saw the most dramatic increase, rising from **35%** to **72%**. Students reported that their notes, structured around signposts like "*for example*" and "*first, second, third,*" allowed them to quickly locate the exact detail needed to answer the question.
- **Inference and Relationship Questions:** Correct answers rose from **28%** to **55%**. Recognizing contrast and cause-effect signposts allowed students to easily understand the relationships between variables, even when those connections were not explicitly stated by the speaker.

DISCUSSION

The empirical results of this study show that the dual-strategy approach of recognizing signpost words and practicing guided note-taking has a transformative effect on EFL students' performance. This success can be explained by several cognitive and psychological factors.

From a cognitive perspective, the strategy dramatically reduces extraneous cognitive load. When students know exactly what linguistic markers to listen for, they no longer feel the need to process every single word with equal intensity. This selective attention allows their working memory to rest during filler speech and focus entirely on high-value information. Students who receive systematic training in selective note-taking strategies demonstrate far more consistent improvements in lecture comprehension than those who take notes without structural guidance (Siegel, 2021). The use of symbols in guided note-taking also saves valuable processing time, leaving more mental space for students to synthesize the information.

Psychologically, this strategy lowers foreign language listening anxiety. Many EFL students experience a state of panic that occurs when they encounter an unfamiliar vocabulary word. This panic causes them to lose focus on the rest of the audio. Panic often arises when learners lose their orientation amidst long, continuous spoken texts (MacIntyre et al., 2023). By teaching them that signposts are the true markers of meaning, students learn that they can safely ignore minor unfamiliar terms as long as they follow the overall rhetorical structure. Strategic listening interventions focusing on lecture "roadmaps" not only enhance students' accuracy in detail-oriented questions but also drastically lower mental tension and the affective filter throughout the duration of high-stakes exams (Wang, 2025). This structural security builds student confidence, creating a positive affective state that is essential for optimal test performance.

CITATION AND REFERENCES

A primary obstacle faced by second language (L2) learners in high-stakes standardized listening assessments like the TOEFL is the limitation of working memory capacity when processing rapid, real-time auditory input. Recent research by Teng (2022) demonstrates that without targeted information-filtering strategies, EFL students undergo severe cognitive overload when attempting to decode spoken texts verbatim. This phenomenon is further corroborated by Vandergrift and Goh (2021), who argue that advanced academic listening proficiency depends heavily on learners' metacognitive awareness to shift their focus from low-level, bottom-up decoding to high-level, top-down structural processing. Thus, the introduction of rhetorical transitions or signpost words is not merely a test-taking tip, but a cognitive necessity to manage information load in the working memory before comprehension failure occurs.

Note-taking during academic lectures often acts as a double-edged sword for EFL students. Attempting to record spoken information verbatim triggers dual-task interference, which severely impedes short-term information retention. In a recent empirical study, Siegel (2021) found that students who received systematic training in selective note-taking strategies demonstrated far more consistent improvements in lecture comprehension than those who took notes without structural guidance. This approach is strongly supported by Richards and Burns (2024), who assert that integrating guided note-taking templates—such as modified Cornell methods—helps learners conserve sensory memory resources by shifting physical writing demands toward the strategic identification of essential lexical signaling.

Beyond optimizing cognitive performance, the explicit use of rhetorical lecture cues has been shown to yield significant positive psychological effects, particularly in reducing foreign language listening anxiety. According to a longitudinal investigation by MacIntyre et al. (2023) on affective dynamics in language testing, panic often arises when learners lose their orientation amidst long, continuous spoken texts. When students are equipped with a clear understanding of the rhetorical structure of academic lectures, they can predict the speaker's line of argument in a much more composed and systematic manner. Aligning with this view, Wang (2025) reported that strategic listening interventions focusing on lecture "roadmaps" not only enhance students' accuracy in detail-oriented questions but also drastically lower mental tension and the affective filter throughout the duration of high-stakes TOEFL exams.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this empirical study demonstrates that the TOEFL listening section is not a barrier that students must overcome through endless, repetitive test-drills. Instead, it is a structured academic challenge that can be mastered by learning specific rhetorical strategies. The quantitative data shows that teaching students to recognize signpost words and use guided note-taking led to a highly significant 80-point increase on the TOEFL listening scale in just six weeks.

For EFL educators and curriculum designers, these findings highlight the importance of moving away from traditional, passive listening practices. Instead, teachers should focus on active, strategy-based instruction. By equipping students with the tools to decode the structure of academic lectures, we do not just help them pass their high-stakes exams; we prepare them to confidently participate, take notes, and succeed in the real-world university classrooms of the global academic community.

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