

## Developing Vocabulary Acquisition through Effective Listening and Appropriate Note Taking

### Abstract :

Vocabulary is a basic element in any language, for that students use some tools to help them in learning vocabulary, like checking in dictionaries, asking teachers or peers and learning from word lists. In the current article, we shed some light on students' attitudes and performances on some types of texts. In our study, we noticed that from the exposure to some texts read to students, they listen and take notes at the same time. After listening and taking notes, students write new essays based on the notes taken. From this practice, students also get used to the combination between modules and to benefit from the information they get in classes. In this case, it is the combination between the Oral Expression and the Written Expression module. At the end of the experiment, we noticed that teacher's verbal language and body language helped students to develop their listening comprehension, way of taking notes, their system of abbreviations and symbols and they could benefit from taking notes to learn new words.

**Key words:** Vocabulary Acquisition ; Effective Listening ; Appropriate Note Taking

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### ملخص:

يهدف البحث إلى إثبات فرضيتين أو العكس وذلك بانجاز استفتاء على طلبة الصف الثاني قسم اللغة الانجليزية بجامعة قسنطينة بعد معاينة الاستفتاء والذي خلص إلى مجموعة من النقاط والتي في مجملها حول إجماع الطلبة إلى أن المفردات شرط أساسي في تعلم أي لغة وكذلك الاستماع الجيد والذي يقوم بدوره أيضا في اخذ نقاط جيدة ، بينما يهدف الفصل الثاني تأكيد الصيغة الموضوعية من قبل قمتنا بانجاز خمسة نصوص الأول منها و يهدف إلى تشخيص المشكلة والتي تتمثل في مشاكل الطلبة في السمع الجيد وعدم اعتمادهم على الكلمات المنبهاة للعثور على الأفكار الرئيسية وكذلك الأفكار الجزئية ثم بعد ذلك مشكلة الطلبة في اخذ رؤوس أقلام باستخدام المختصرات والرموز وذلك لربح الوقت، بينما جل الطلبة يضعون رؤوس الأقلام في منزلة الإملاء. بعد عدة نصوص تدرّب الطلبة على السمع الجيد و اعتمادهم على الكلمات المنبهاة و كيفية اخذ رؤوس أقلام وأيضا توظيف المفردات المقدمة من طرف الأساتذة في المواد الأخرى لبناء فقرات في مادة التعبير الكتابي.

### Introduction :

**According** to Foreign Language students of English, the English language contains some difficulties like vocabulary and pronunciation. The latter are basic components of any language and not just English, in the sense that Algerian students who study English face some difficulties which are related to the language. In the current article, we shed some light on students' difficulties in listening comprehension and note taking, and try to make them treated by teachers of English.

During many years, researchers made many studies including the variables reading and note taking, and note taking and vocabulary, but research on listening skills and note taking is rarely found.

At university, teachers ask students to take notes while they explain lessons, but students do not really know how to take appropriate notes since they did not have enough practice during their first and second years at university in the Study Skills module.

## **1. Theoretical Background**

### **1.1. Vocabulary Acquisition**

Vocabulary is a major element in learning any language, Wilkins (1972: 111-112) defends this idea saying “*without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed*”. The definitions differ from one theorist to another concerning the word, the phoneme and the vocabulary. The word, from an orthographic point of view, is “... *any sequence of letters (and a limited number of other characteristics such as hyphen and apostrophe) bounded on either side by space or punctuation mark*” (Carter, 1992: 4; cited in Tatač, 2008); whereas from a semantic point of view, the word is the smallest meaningful unit of language (Carter, *ibid*; cited in Tatač, 2008). In addition, before saying that students know a given word, they have first to know all the related words to that word like the written form, pronunciation and its collocations (Richards, 1976 cited in Meara, 1996). The lexeme or the lexical item is the smallest unit in the meaning of a language, and it is a part of lexicography which is the study of dictionary making (Richards and Schmidt, 2002). The lexeme remains the same lexeme even if other parts of language, like the ‘s’ of the present tense are added to it. Lexemes are the parts of language which are found in dictionaries and thesaurus, and are the best ways that provide students with new words and vocabulary.

Vocabulary can be learnt intentionally or accidentally. In the first situation, everything is prepared like the materials used in teaching and the setting where teaching takes place. In the second situation, vocabulary is not meant to be learnt by focus on the vocabulary. Ellis (1994b: 1; cited in Vienna, 2003) defines implicit learning as the “*acquisition of the underlying knowledge structure of a complex stimulus environment by a process which takes place naturally, simply and without conscious operation*”, whereas explicit learning is “*more conscious operation where the individual makes and tests hypotheses in a search for structure*”. In order to facilitate students’ learning new vocabulary, Schmitt (2000) puts forward the following ways: first, to increase the amount of words in the language classroom; second, to encourage students’ group work to help them learn new words from each other (students do not have the same knowledge of words); third, to encourage students to communicate with native speakers or more advanced English users; fourth and finally, if possible to spend time in an English speaking environment.

Students may use some learning strategies depending on the situation, so that they help them to acquire new words. There are two main taxonomies related to the learning strategies which are Oxford's (1990) and O'Malley and Chamot's taxonomies (1990) as summarised in the following table.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990)	Oxford (1990)
<p>A. Metacognitive strategies, e.g. 'selective attention' (deciding in advance to attend to specific aspects of language input)</p> <p>B. Cognitive strategies, e.g. 'inferencing' (using available information to guess meanings of new items, predict outcomes, or fill in missing information)</p> <p>C. Social/affective, e.g. 'question for clarification' (asking a teacher or another native speaker for repetition, paraphrasing, explanation and/or examples)</p>	<p>A. Direct</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Memory strategies, e.g. 'grouping' (classifying or reclassifying materials into meaningful units)</li> <li>2. Cognitive strategies, e.g. 'practising' (repeating, formally practising, recognizing and using formulas, recombining, and practising naturalistically)</li> <li>3. Compensation strategies, e.g. 'switching to mother tongue'</li> </ol> <p>B. Indirect</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Metacognitive strategies; e.g. 'setting goals and objectives'</li> <li>2. Affective strategies, e.g. (taking risks wisely)</li> <li>3. Social strategies, e.g. 'asking for clarification or verification'</li> </ol>

**Table 1.1** Two Taxonomies of Learning Strategies (Ellis, 2008)

These two taxonomies differentiate between strategies, in the sense that each main heading includes sub strategies which have a direct relation with the skill taught or learned. For example, in listening comprehension, a learner can use many strategies in order to understand like inferring from context and compensating for missing information. In case of vocabulary learning, a learner can use a list of strategies such as repetition of words to acquire them. In vocabulary teaching of strategies, too, Presseley (2006; cited in Hirai et al., 2010) argues that students should be explicitly taught strategies to link between prior knowledge and unfamiliar words. According to Nation (2005), there are four main vocabulary strategies used by students which should be learned and practised alone in a given period of time: these strategies include guessing from context, learning from context, using word cards and using dictionaries.

On another scale, word frequency is another issue which students of English may encounter, that is to say, words can be learned if they repeatedly appear in the students' input and output (Nation, 2005); as opposed to high-frequent words, low frequent words are thousands and countless, for that reason, students should cope with them by using strategies to learn them.

In order to make students more efficient learners, teachers have to make them aware of language elements like in the case of vocabulary learning. First, language awareness makes teachers know what weaknesses their students have in given points and then, build on the lessons. Field (1999; cited in Pachler: 1999) argues that teachers should guarantee that topics they are presenting are interesting and that students share with them the same interests. Second, there is a group of activities which helps students raise awareness and help them in their studies. Keeping journals is one activity which help students' in developing their awareness, in the sense that they reflect on their learning process, at the same time, teachers are going to have an idea about their students' interests (Matsumoto, 1996; cited in Takaç, 2008). Other activities can be used, like the Keyword Method where teachers give students a group of words to practise them starting from concrete words to abstract words.

### **1.2. Listening Comprehension**

Listening comprehension is as important as vocabulary learning. If students do not understand a native speaker while talking, it is clear that they are not competent listeners. In the process of listening, the speaker and listener share or use three processes which are the top-down, the bottom-up and the interactive model. According to Field (2008: 132), the bottom-up model "*refers to building small units into larger...*" that is to say, the listener has to start by the small units like sounds and phonemes to build up the larger units like words and sentences. This is how it works in listening comprehension; if students cannot understand the smallest units of speech delivered by native speakers or even by proficient second language users, they cannot react or give the required information or answers. The top-down process is defined by Rost (2006: 53) as "*the use of expectations in order to infer what the speaker may have said or intended to say*". In this case, the listener may use his prior knowledge to fill in the missing information by speakers. In some cases, Algerian students who study English, may fail in filling the gaps or cannot expect what the speaker is willing to say. The interactive model is the combination of the two models. In this case, the speaker is going to start building information from the smallest units of speech and fill them with the expected ones. Flowerdew and Miller, (2005: 27) explain this saying "*for advanced learners, however, who have mastered basic phonology and syntax, emphasize on the development of top-down skills for applying schematic knowledge may be more appropriate*".

When listening to any piece of information, the listener may use different elements in order to make that piece understandable. First, memory plays an

important role in listening and learning by activating the working memory using rehearsal and repetition. By repeating a word heard by a speaker or a teacher, the student may quickly acquire that word (Criado and Sanchez, in press). Second, concentration has a considerable role since learners find it easier when they find the topic interesting which is argued by Underwood (1989, 19) saying, “*if students find the topic interesting they will find concentration easier*”. The other issue which is related to concentration is attention. Attention, as Richards and Schmidt (2002) explain, is needed in language classes in the sense that students focus on the lecture discussion and ignore other distractions like noise and family problems. Third, motivation, which is a critical field in language learning or any other field, plays a crucial role in students’ achievements. In a research done by Gardener and Lambert (1972; cited in Baker, 1988), it was found that students who are more competent are those with integrative orientation. At last, vocabulary stays undoubtedly the obstacle to students of a foreign language, in the sense that students may find unknown words in a small text. This, consequently, may lead to the impossible interpretation of the meaning of the text (Grauberg, 1997).

There are other characteristics that interfere in language learning like teacher talk. In English as a Foreign Language classes, most of the time, teachers are the dominant of speech; this is the conclusion which is found in many studies. One of these studies is Nunan’s research (2005) which finds that teacher’s talk is the average of the double of students’ talk.

### **1.3. Note Taking**

Note taking is a technique used by students at university so that they record what their teachers say. The main principle in taking notes is that students do not use long sentences but simple and short ones. They may also use phrases, in addition to using abbreviations and symbols which are the main elements in note taking.

Abbreviations are defined by Crystal (1995:122), as “*one of the noticeable features of present-day English linguistic life*” Abbreviations and symbols are divided into three categories: Jones and Mort classification, Crystal classification and the lexicography classification. According to Jones and Mort (1994), abbreviations could be divided into common abbreviations like “e.g.”, discipline-specific abbreviations like “Au” for “gold” and “Mg” for “magnesium” and personal abbreviations like “W R” which means “written expression” or “ling.” which refers to “linguistics” . Whereas Crystal classification is divided into six types which are initialisms (BBC and USA), acronyms (NATO and UNISCO), clippings (pub, plane and flu), blends (helicopter + airport = heliport), awkward cases (like pro-BBC) and facetious forms (CMG to mean Companion of St Michael and St George) (Crystal, 1995). The lexicography classification is divided into alphabetism, acronyms and contractions. Alphabetism is pronouncing abbreviations as they are written

like in BBC. Acronyms are the opposite of alphabetism which means that abbreviations are pronounced as words like in “NATO”. The last one is contractions, that is to say two parts of two different words that are pronounced as one word like in “wouldn’t” and “can’t” (Atkins, 2008).

Even if researchers tried to classify types of abbreviations and symbols, there is a resemblance between some of these types of abbreviations. For example, alphabetism and initialisms, which are indicated by lexicographers and Crystal respectively, are different in names, but both of them refer to a group of letters pronounced separately like BBC and USA. Another example is acronyms which are used by Crystal and Jones and Mort. The classification given by Jones and Mort can include the two classifications, since all the abbreviations given by lexicographers and Crystal could be under one of the three types given by Jones and Mort. For example, CDROM is a discipline-specific abbreviation. Another idea which is related to abbreviations is that there are some abbreviated forms which are confusing like PC which means personal computer, police constable (in Britain) and politically correct; CD which means compact disc and corps diplomatic; and PM which means prime minister and post meridian.

Note taking can be of many ways depending on the lecture presented. For example, in the “outline method” the student writes each idea in a line. It is used when the student can differentiate between the major and minor ideas. In the “mapping method”, students put the main idea in the centre and the less important ideas around the main one, and the minor ideas could also have sub-ideas. In the “sentence method”, students use sentences when taking notes instead of phrases. The “Cornell method” is a method developed in the Cornell University and has some specifications (Rauschhpaut, 2010). First, the students have to download the copies from the internet, if not, they can divide the pages of their copybooks like the ones downloaded. The principle is that the paper downloaded is divided into three parts which are as follows: one column is reserved to the key words of the lesson which is on the left, the second column is reserved to the writing of details of the lesson, and the third column is reserved to any questions the student may ask which is at the bottom of the paper under the two columns.

#### **1.4. Listening Comprehension, Note Taking and Vocabulary Acquisition**

In the available research, finding the combination listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, or taking notes and vocabulary acquisition is commonly an option, but the combination of the three is rarely investigated. Concerning vocabulary or words proved to be essential in listening comprehension; Goh (2005) argues that saying “*vocabulary knowledge has been shown to be an important variable in successful listening comprehension among listeners of different abilities*” (66). Elley (1989) finds that students

acquire vocabulary when they find the story they hear interesting, comprehensible and could be repeated. Vocabulary learning could have many ways, one of which is through taking notes or using notebooks. According to McCarthy (1990), after students receive new information, they may take notes in vocabulary notebooks, vocabulary cards or they just write it in the margin. According to Gu (2003), a few research was done on note taking and vocabulary, and how that affects vocabulary learning, students could take the new vocabulary down in the margin, between the lines, or on separate notebooks.

In the present article, the combination of listening comprehension, note taking and vocabulary acquisition is done in the sense that students need note taking during all their learning process. If students cannot understand what their teacher says, they cannot take notes and simultaneously, they cannot understand lectures and cannot provide answers in exams. For this reason, the study done focuses on making students able to take correct notes based on their teachers' explanations which include major and minor ideas.

## **2. Developing Vocabulary Acquisition**

In order to realize the experimental part and in order to find out whether students' use of listening strategies would lead to better notes taken, and if the notes are taken in an organized way and followed with memorization, the students' acquisition of vocabulary would be better and last long. Two descriptive tools are used: a students' questionnaire and an experiment based on a pre-test, a treatment and a post-test.

### **2.1. The Students' Questionnaire**

The students' questionnaire is made up of twenty four questions divided into four sections: vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, note taking skills and further suggestions. The sample chosen to answer the questionnaire is fifty second year LMD students who have been chosen randomly among the population of students. The students' questionnaire aims at investigating the students' attitudes towards the note taking skill. Since the note taking skill is basically based on abbreviations and symbols, it appears that students believe that when they do not revise their lessons directly after the classes, they will have problems, and this was basically proved during the experiment. Students, too, use some methods to improve their bulk of vocabulary and one of these methods is note taking.

The results of the students' questionnaire show that first of all, students' best way to learn new words either of their own or during lectures is dictionaries. So, dictionaries are the best way to learn vocabulary for students of English. Second, students agreed that the listening ability is a major element in understanding lectures. More precisely, students argue that the main difficulties they face when listening to teachers are vocabulary and speed. Teachers seem to use difficult words when explaining lessons or when

communicating with students, and on the other hand, students see that teachers speak faster than they can follow. Third, concerning note taking, students answered that they take notes without waiting for their teachers to tell them so. Moreover, students' best and suitable way of taking notes is the "outline method" which is much easier than the others. Students, also, revealed that their teachers only sometimes ask them to take notes. Concerning rewriting notes at home, the majority of students said that they do not rewrite notes at home but keep them as they are, that the notes taken are understood even if they use abbreviations and symbols, and that they do not confuse them. Concerning abbreviations and symbols, students answered that they use them, and when revising they do not find any difficulty concerning the meaning of the short forms. However, even if students said they do not find any difficulties while taking notes and there were no difficulties while decoding the notes, they prefer to have teachers' notes or dictation, as they explain, because "they help us in examinations". The students' questionnaire also showed that students believe that vocabulary plays an important role in listening comprehension and, thus, in understanding lectures.

## **2.2. Listening Comprehension and Note Taking**

In order to fulfil what the students' questionnaire has revealed, we developed an experiment based on a pre-test, a treatment and a post-test. Both the pre-test and the post-test were taken by both the control and the experimental group. In the pre-test, students listened to a text about a biological phenomenon which is "obesity, and the type of essay is a cause-effect one. Students had to take notes while listening; and during listening, the teacher gave some words to the students and explained them. After that, students wrote an essay respecting the type of the text and were expected to use the vocabulary given. In the Control Group, the students showed more positive results than the Experimental Group, in the sense that they took more organized notes and more than that, they benefited from the words given by the teacher to write the essay or, in other words, to rewrite the notes.

After the pre-test, in the Experimental Group, the students had a lesson about how to take notes (speaking theoretically), how to make differences between important and less important ideas, with the help of clues: verbal, like "first, what I mean is..., and I repeat"; and non-verbal, such as body language, stress and speaking loudly. In the same session, students were given the different methods of taking notes like the Outline Method and the Cornell Method. The lesson was given to students taped and composed of definition, methods of note-taking, a list of thirty-two abbreviations and symbols, and at the end of the lesson the first text in the post-test as a practice. For the Experimental Group, in the Oral Expression module, the teacher (experimenter) made students listen to texts of different types and at the same time explain the topic, have discussions and introduce the vocabulary proposed.

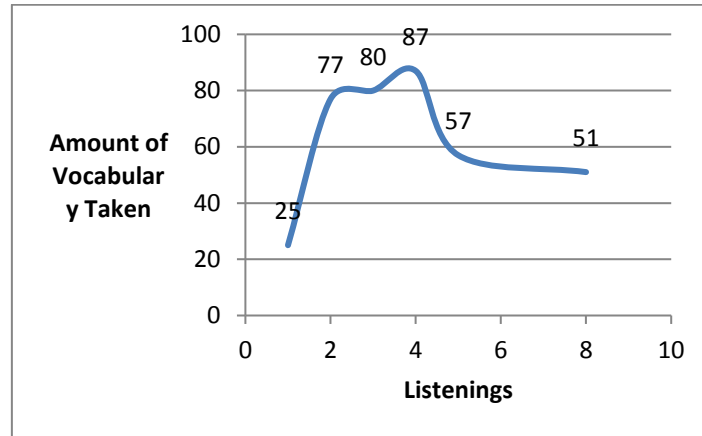


Concerning the texts read to the students are five texts including the pre-test “obesity”, two of them are cause- effect texts entitled “our daily tutor” and “SAD”, whereas the texts of comparison- contrast type are “Two Web Sites” and “Puma and Adidas”. In the Written Expression module, students are expected to rewrite their notes in the form of essays based on the notes taken. From one session to another, students in the Experimental Group started to grasp the concept of note-taking being not dictation i.e. not taking every word said by the teacher, but rather notes based on understating speakers, in this case the teacher, and taking short sentences and phrases using abbreviations and symbols.

The results of the students in the Experimental Group were divided into four steps according to students’ performances: the method used while taking notes, the listening comprehension, vocabulary taken while listening and vocabulary used while writing the essays. From the results, students, in the Experimental Group, best used method is the Outline Method. We can say that the majority of students know how to use this method, but they do not know its name as the other methods. The newest method for students is the Cornell Method [this method is based on uploading sheets from the net which are divided into three columns: one for key words, one for the explanations and the other one for the questions]. Students could not use it because they found difficulty in dividing their copybooks each time. The Mapping Method was used also since it helps to visualise the topic. Students’ listening comprehension was measured by counting the number of ideas taken by students in each listening, that is to say dividing the script into important ideas and sub-ideas and see to what extent students succeeded to take down those ideas. The conclusion of this step is that students, from the first text to the last one, succeeded to grasp the concepts of verbal and non-verbal clues which helped them in their notes.

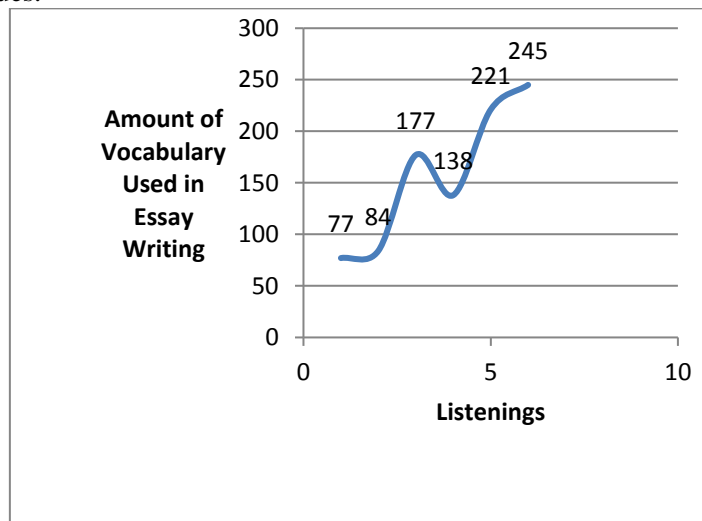
The following graphs represent the improvements of students’ in the Experimental Group during the experiment concerning vocabulary, listening and note taking, and the use of abbreviations and symbols.

## Developing Vocabulary Acquisition through Effective Listening and Appropriate Note Taking



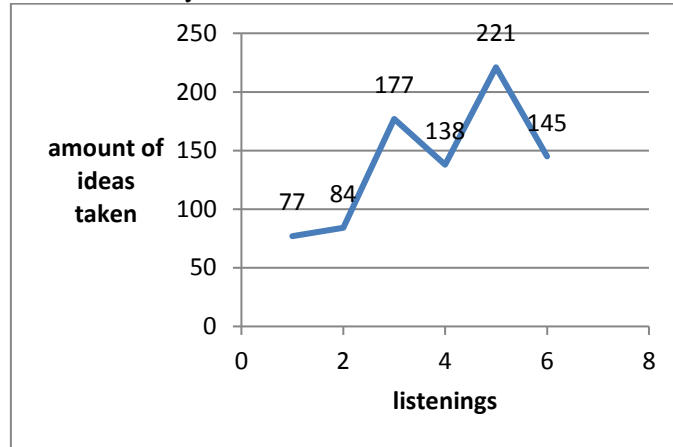
**Graph 01: Vocabulary Use while Note Taking of the Experimental Group**

This graph shows the successive results of vocabulary while note taking. The results reveal that until the fourth text (Hills Cycles and Wheels Unlimited, which is a comparison and contrast text), students showed improvement. Students of the Experimental Group have some difficulties in understanding native speakers' natural talk in the sense that there is a free fall compared to the other results. After that, students of the Experimental Group showed improvements in understanding what others say focusing on their verbal, non-verbal clues.



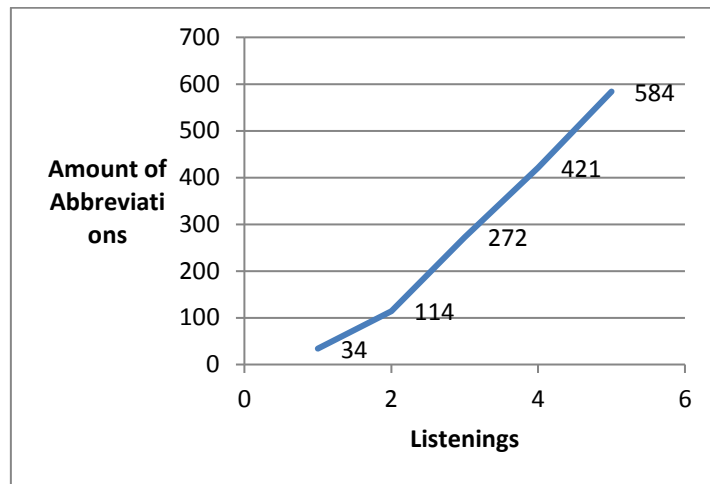
**Graph 2 Amount of Ideas Taken while Essay Writing of the Experimental Group**

The second graph shows students' results of using vocabulary while writing their essays. Students' of the Experimental Group use of the vocabulary given depends on the topic or their preferences while writing. For example, text 5 about comparing two websites shows that almost all students used the vocabulary given since they cannot replace them with other words. In the last text, students listened to two texts one about Puma and the other about Adidas. The students have to decide about the words to use in their essays since each text has its own vocabulary.



**Graph 3 Students' Listening Comprehension**

This graph shows students' improvements in listening comprehension during the experiment. All the students of the Experimental Group showed improvements in all the texts except in the text "Two Web Sites". The reason behind this failure is the way of exposing the text. Students used to listen to their teachers who are non-native speakers who help them with non-verbal expressions like gestures. This was a kind of obstacle to students which prevents them from taking the appropriate notes.



**Graph 4 Students' Use of Abbreviations and Symbols of the Experimental Group**

The use of abbreviations and symbols is the best improvement students in the Experimental Group reach in the sense that they kept using abbreviations and symbols from the beginning to the end. The results show the improvement from 34 abbreviations and symbols used in the first text (obesity as a pre-test) to 584 abbreviations and symbols in the last text students listened to which is "Puma and Adidas". Even if the text "Two Web Sites" was poorly interpreted by students; this did not interfere in using abbreviations and symbols.

As opposed to the pre-test, the students of the Experimental Group showed more positive results than the Control Group in the post-test, in the sense that students in the Experimental Group could take more notes related to the main and sub ideas of the text. Moreover, students in the Experimental Group used more abbreviations and symbols based on what they used to do during the experiment and used more the words proposed by the experimenter in rewriting their notes.

### **Conclusion**

As a general conclusion to both the Students' Questionnaire and the experiment, it could be said that there was a correlation between what the students answered in the Students' Questionnaire and what they applied during the experiment. First, the listening skill which is a basic element in the learning process of any second or foreign language appeared to be a problematic point to students of English. Second, note taking is a useful skill in the learning process and in any field of work; however, students do not know its importance and its use until they become advanced learners, that is to say when they start to prepare their dissertations or when teachers ask them to do so. Third, students at the beginning showed some weaknesses in doing so, but after practice, they started to use the words properly. Fourth, students develop

awareness, they started to pay attention to other expressions or other parts of language which are non-verbal like facial expressions, body language, gestures and voice change, especially that the majority of listening the students had are full of that. Fifth, students learn that other modules may give them many opportunities to be active in the classroom and to understand better.

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