

TEACHING SUMMARIZATION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Summary writing is widely used as both a means for assessing student learning as well as a way to use other sources in academic writing. As writing teachers we know that our students have difficulty with summarizing information in an organized and accurate way. In their summaries our students focused on trivial information, or simply copied entire sentences from the source text and gave their own opinions and experiences in their summaries. Unskilled readers may need instruction and practice in summarizing paragraphs; other readers may need instruction and practice in summarizing larger chunks of information. They need an approach to sort information, and they need to see how skilled readers with sufficient background knowledge identify important information and summarize. The difficulty of the materials must be graded so that the students' strategies and skills can be developed progressively. Learning should start from single paragraph level summarizing and work up to section summarization and summarization of entire chapters. Finally, they can summarize from multiple sources. The teacher's instructional materials and models of how to use an appropriate summarization strategy of various text lengths, content area and complexity will improve the ability of students to summarize. The students' background knowledge is also important in making judgments about the important information in summarizing.

Keywords: summary, strategy, paragraph, academic writing

INTRODUCTION

The ability to identify main ideas in a text represents the skill of summarizing. Why do learners need a summary? During reading, learners have to memorize information from the texts. To enhance the memory, readers need to construct a meaning. Summarization is one of meaning constructions. Furthermore, a summary is needed in academic writing when students have to use other sources to enter their writing. Finally, summarizing is one of study techniques for students to help them recall the information. The information need to be condensed. Summarizing is the way to condense the information.

This article evaluates the benefits of a summarizing instructional program designed to teach students to create written summaries in various classes. It gives insight on how to teach summarizing by addressing practical teaching program of summarization strategy teaching. The teaching program is designed to employ direct, explicit instruction, including description, modeling, and paired practices as well as individual works combined with feedback, to teach students to employ a summarizing strategy, and summarizing rules to create a written paragraph summary of multiple-paragraph expository passages.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Summarization Strategies

A summary is a brief statement that is used to show condensed information from a larger chunk of source information. Sometimes this message is called the gist of the text. Summarizing is a process

where the source material is condensed and adequately presented basically in the summarizer's own words (Swales & Feak, 1994, p.105-106). Instead of being simply rewriting source texts briefly and in one's own words, summarizing is a task which depends on textual variables such as: the ability to find the main ideas (Casazza, 1993); the use of organizational patterns (Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978), the source text complexity (Kirkland and Saunders, 1991) and the topic of the source text (Gaskins, 1996). Thus, summarization strategies are a complex skill that only a few students have the skills. Students must learn multiple methods of summarizing through practice. Summary has some characteristics. Swales and Feak (1994) state three features of a good summary. It covers balanced and condensed material of the source presented in the summarizer's own words but free from summarizers' opinions.

Teaching summarization is often neglected by teachers. The main reason is an abundant of work for teachers to evaluate and give feedback on large number of students' summaries. In addition, many teachers do not have enough information about how to teach summarization. Consequently, students are generally told to summarize the text but they are not given enough instruction for using this strategy, thereby summarizing is sometimes not effective (Taylor, 1983).

Summary writing is a skill that does not develop on its own, but requires progressive instruction (Guido and Colwell, 1987). Some studies revealed students' difficulties and successes in summarizing. Tavares (1991) holds that students usually find difficulties in the summarizing task. Taylor (1983) observed lack of skills when students in a college freshman class summarized a text without any instruction. Similarly, Brown (1983) found students' problem while summarizing. The fifth and seventh grade students relied primarily on the copy-delete strategy where the original text is simply copied verbatim. However, older high school and college students used more sophisticated condensation rules, such as construction and generalization.

Summary writing skills should be developed through learning strategy development. Oxford (1993, p.18) holds that learning strategies are "specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques that students (often intentionally) use to improve their progress in developing second language skills". Brown (1980, p.83) proposes that a strategy is "a particular method of approaching a problem or task, a mode of operation for achieving a particular end, a planned design for controlling and manipulating certain information". This article defines strategies as specific steps or techniques employed by an individual in a learning situation to develop second language skills. Summarizing is the identification process of the main ideas from longer source texts. It is the process where the source materials are condensed and adequately expressed by the summarizers in their own words (Swales and Feak, 1994). A summary is a condensed version of a text that contains all important parts of the original passage and it excludes summarizers' opinion (Hare and Borchardt, 1984).

Benefits of Summarization Strategies

Students who can read and summarize text fairly well will learn materials and memorize them better. In the study of the use of summary writing in a college psychology course, Radmacher and Latosi-Sawin (1995) found that those who were given specific summarization instruction scored 8% higher on the final. Similarly, the teaching of summarization that enhanced students' understanding in all subject areas at various levels had been evidenced in the study of Pearson and Fielding (1991).

How a Reader Summarizes

Most of the research which has been done on teaching summarization is based on the model of text comprehension developed by Brown and Day (1983) and Kintsch and Van Dijk (1978). Brown and Day (1983) identified six rules for condensing text to its gist following the processes suggested by Kintsch and Van Dijk (1978). These rules are: (1) delete unimportant information, (2) delete redundant information, (3) superordinate a term for a list of items, (4) superordinate a term for a list of actions, (5) select topic sentences, if any, and (6) invent topic sentences if none is provided (Al-Haidari, 1991, p.6-7).

Unskilled readers may need instruction and practice in summarizing paragraphs; other students may need instruction and practice in summarizing larger chunks of information. However,

if the material is more difficult to comprehend, students who previously could summarize multi paragraph sections should return to paragraph level summarizing and then work up to section summarization and summarization of whole chapters.

To write a summary, the writer needs to understand thoroughly the source text. Any unfamiliar words must be clarified. In the first reading the reader must identify main idea and controlling ideas and the purpose of the text. Taylor (1983) reports his study that compared good summarizers and poor summarizers. Good summarizers removed unnecessary details from the text and made conclusion. In addition good summarizer made a plan and focus on topic. On the other hand, poor summarizers did not make plan and did not recognize the topic of the text. Text structures are important in helping good summarizers in identifying main ideas and make generalizations. Poor summarizers were struggling to substitute the original words of the source text with their own words.

Types of Summarization Strategies

There are several types of summarization strategies. The following discussion of summarization strategy is based on the length of text ranging from one paragraph to several paragraphs of multiple sources (University of Kansas, 1999).

1. **Paragraph Summarization Strategy.** This strategy focuses on students reading one paragraph, stopping at the end of each paragraph, and then asking some questions to find the main idea and supporting details. Students can tell what they think the paragraph is about, or they can write it.
2. **Section Summarization Strategy.** Students summarize a multi-paragraph section that covers a topic. The students begin their activity by raising questions about the section. During reading, they make one important summary statement about each paragraph; at the end, they answer the questions they raised at the beginning of the section, write a connected summary using the important statements recorded during reading, and then describe how these sections are related. The practice focuses on the integration of multiple main ideas and the identification of the significance of the ideas as a whole.
3. **Multi-Section Summarization Strategy.** This strategy focuses on the type of summarization that is required for report writing. As the student reads each section in a chapter or chapter of a book, he/she makes at least three summarizing main statements. The statements should be enough to help the student remember what the section or chapter was about. If the report chapters are written in a narrative text, the statements might focus on what happened at the beginning, middle, or end of the chapter. When the students start writing a summary they use the three importance statements. A paragraph with a topic sentence, at least three supporting sentences, and a closing sentence are created. If the student has trouble with summarizing for report writing, then more instruction and practice in section summarization is provided.
4. **Multiple Source Summarization Strategy.** The Multiple Source Summarization Strategy focuses on the type of summarization that is required when students use other various sources. This strategy is considered more difficult as they judge not only the selection of main ideas but also the agreement among ideas over the different texts. If the source texts are written based on a controversial issue, the statements might focus on what one text says and what the other argues. The student evaluates various texts on a single topic; he/she judges the ideas from the sources. If the student has trouble with summarizing for report writing, then more instruction and practice in multi-section summarization should be provided.

DISCUSSION

In many cases summarizing activities are neglected. However, this type of learning has been widely used by many other teachers as an effective learning activity and study skill, and also as a

determiner of academic success. Almost all learning activities require a student to get main ideas, condense and remember what has been read. It helps a reader to distinguish between important, less important, and to make a judgment about what are the main ideas and supporting details of the paragraph and topic levels.

How do teachers teach the paragraph summarization strategy? Teachers can start by explaining the purpose of learning a paragraph summarization strategy. Students should be told that it helps the reader to really think about and remember what the writer wants to communicate.

Teachers should initiate the activities by writing simple paragraphs, and then continue to more complex paragraphs. Both teacher and student work together on a paragraph. During the reading of the source text, the teacher should help them to locate the main idea sentence then rewrite it in their own words as much as possible. They also add to it some important details.

To make the students aware of the summarizing techniques teachers should give a model of the process by thinking aloud as they summarize before they do it independently. It is important to list the steps on the board. Students write the steps and what to do in each step and keep this information in their notes for future guide.

During summarizing, the main idea can be inferred from all the statements about the topic by ignoring unnecessary or trivial information, creating one category name for lists of items and substituting an overall term for components of an action. They can look at the first and last sentence for cues for the main idea. They must confirm the main idea by identifying some details that support or prove their main idea. Finally, they write the summary by paraphrasing it using their own words to restate the main idea without changing the meaning. Teacher must separate the activities of reading the source and summarizing. They must not read the source texts during writing to avoid copies works.

Teachers give a model on how the strategy should be used and explain the steps as teachers model it, so students can follow each step. Repeating the strategy by using another paragraph is necessary.

To increase the awareness and reinforce the strategy, the students should do the following steps. Teachers can have them describe the steps to one another. They refer to their notes to guide them describe each step. After the partner practice, move into a group review and ask them about the purpose of each step of the strategy to check student understanding of each step.

As students summarize paragraphs see which students have difficulty with paragraph summarization. Individual attention should be given to the students who have difficulty with paragraph summarization. Teachers then assign students to summarize more difficult materials, five or six paragraphs. Students who become fluent with paragraph summarization should either move to summarize paragraphs from multiple sources.

In the next step of the critical strategy, teachers could facilitate students with independence work with the aid of a prompt on which the rules of summarizing are provided by teachers.

Self-question strategy during reading can be added to the student strategies. The strategy is described in the following steps:

Step 1: Students identify the topic of the source text by self questioning "What is this text about?".

They write:

This text is about ____ (say the topic one word or a few words) ____."

Students are guided to focus on the first paragraph and the last paragraph to search for key words. They look for synonyms for key words that are repeated throughout the paragraphs.

Step 2: Students identify the main idea of each paragraph by self questioning "What does this paragraph say about?". ____ (Answer in one word or a few words) ____ . It tells that ____.

Richardson and Morgan (2005) propose the use of GIST (Generating Interactions between Schemata & Text) to help students summarize. The GIST strategy should be used to summarize a small passage into one sentence containing the main "gist" of the section. The teacher selects an article and divides it into short passages (3-5 paragraphs each) and draw out 20 blanks below each paragraph. The students do the following steps:

1. Read the first paragraph

2. Write a sentence summarizing the first paragraph using 20 or fewer blanks (one word per blank)
3. Read the second paragraph
4. Write a 20 word or less statement about the first and second paragraphs combined.
5. Continue until the entire passage has been read and summarized using one sentence of 20 words or less. At the end of the text, students will have written four or five sentences, or a concise summary of the text.

Teachers must provide corrective feedback after the students have finished with their summaries. The feedback can help review their achievements

The teacher's instructional materials and models of how to use an appropriate summarization strategy of various text lengths, content area and complexity will improve the ability of students to summarize. However, the students' judgments about importance often depend on their background knowledge. Their background information includes their mastery of the contents as well as material organization. They need an approach to sort information, and they need to see how individuals with sufficient background knowledge identify important information and summarize.

CONCLUSION

The strategy of copy-paste is found to be the most widespread practices in the written assignment among students. Summarization skills are crucial to improve students' learning. Thus, it is important for teachers to guide their students to develop summarization strategy and identify its incorrect usage. The teacher's description and models of how to use an appropriate summarization strategy of varying text length, content area and complexity will improve the ability of students to summarize. However, since judgments about importance are often based on the background knowledge or the expertise of the reader students need strategies to sort information, and they need to see how individuals with sufficient background knowledge identify important information and summarize. Finally, teachers need to teach the strategies based on their capacity and progress.

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