

## SOME STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE SUMMARY WRITING SKILL FOR NON-ENGLISH MAJOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

*Summary writing plays a vital role in learning English, particularly for students engaged in English for specific purposes. This study aims to propose effective strategies in teaching summary writing and to assess their impact on the language competence of non-English major university students. The findings indicate that summary writing positively influences students' ability in other language skills, helps to improve their critical thinking and enriches their vocabulary. The study also gives pedagogical implications and insights into the role of summarizing skills in reading comprehension and boosting writing skill. To achieve the intended goals, both students and teachers should have regular interactions through practices and make continuous improvements on use of language and writing skill.*

**Keywords:** *Summary writing, measure reading comprehension, summarizing text, teaching strategies.*

### Chiến lược cải thiện kỹ năng viết tóm tắt văn bản Tiếng Anh cho sinh viên đại học không chuyên

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### Tóm tắt

Viết tóm tắt đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong việc học tiếng Anh, đặc biệt đối với sinh viên học tiếng Anh chuyên ngành. Nghiên cứu này nhằm gợi ý một số chiến lược giảng dạy kỹ năng viết tóm tắt văn bản Tiếng Anh cho sinh viên đại học không chuyên và tìm hiểu tính hiệu quả của chúng tới khả năng cải thiện ngôn ngữ của sinh viên. Kết quả cho thấy viết tóm tắt có tác động tích cực đến khả năng sử dụng các kỹ năng ngôn ngữ khác của sinh viên, giúp cải thiện tư duy phê bình và làm giàu thêm vốn từ vựng của sinh viên. Nghiên cứu đưa ra những đề xuất mang tính sư phạm, cách hiểu sâu hơn về vai trò của kỹ năng tóm tắt trong đọc hiểu văn bản Tiếng Anh và việc nâng cao kỹ năng viết nói chung. Để đạt được mục tiêu đề ra, sinh viên và giáo viên cần có sự tương tác thường xuyên thông qua các bài tập thực hành và liên tục trau dồi khả năng sử dụng ngôn ngữ cũng như kỹ năng viết.

**Từ khóa:** *Viết tóm tắt, khả năng đọc hiểu, tóm tắt văn bản, chiến lược giảng dạy.*

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### 1. Introduction

Summary writing is an indispensable skill for students of tertiary education. It is noted that the ability to summarize

the main ideas of a text is an essential skill helping students to navigate their learning more successfully, especially as many assignments, writing activities,

experiments, reading tasks and research work require the students to synthesize the content of the source texts. The ability of summarizing can be used to measure students' reading comprehension, develop speaking and writing skills, increase students' vocabulary retention and, more importantly, provoke students' critical thinking ability. In many cases, students often copy other people's ideas when required to speak or write to express their opinion. Evidently, English incompetence and the inability to develop effective strategies to take control of reading and writing process impede their writing competence. Therefore, this study on "Some strategies to improve summary writing skill for non – English major students" aims at illuminating features, processes to write a summary, approaches to teaching summary writing for colleagues' references, as well as assisting my students in writing a good summary.

In this study, theoretical research method was used as fundamental. Class observation and question surveys were other two instruments to discover students' problems and propose some solutions. The students chosen for this study are mostly rated as pre-intermediate and low-intermediate levels.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Definition of summary**

Summary writing has been defined in various ways both formally and informally. While Winograd (1984) simplifies the definition of summarization as the ability to convey the main points of the source text in an concise way, Hidi and Anderson (1986) state that a summary is a succinct statement representing the condensation of information accessible to a subject and reflecting the gist of the discourse. Similarly, Langan (1993) defines summarization as the ability to reduce a large amount of information of the original text to its key points. However, summarizing is not simply a mechanical process. In fact, summarizing needs high cognitive skills to determine the most important content in a

passage and reconstruct it into a succinct statement in one's own words (Friend, 2001). To restructure the source text requires students to engage with the text and to formulate ideas in their own words. Therefore, students have to shift from being consumers of knowledge to creators of knowledge. Moreover, Kim (2001) stresses that in summary writing any main ideas should not be lost and the content of the source text should be remained. Kirkland and Saunders (1991) acknowledge that summary writing is a highly complicated, interactive and recursive reading-writing activity in which students are required to work back and forth between the text by "rereading, rewriting, and continually reflecting on and comparing aspects".

### **2.2. Characteristics of a Good Summary**

Loren (2015) claims that a good summary satisfies three basic characteristics including conciseness, accuracy, and objectivity.

#### ***Conciseness***

According to Loren (2015), summary condenses information. The degree of density can vary in accordance with the purpose of summarizing. A summary should be one-fourth to one-third as long as the original text if that text has one to three pages.

If the goal is just to present a summary, then you can use whatever space you need. If you are writing a book review, only part of the review summarizes the book.

#### ***Accuracy***

A summary should offer a clear and precise picture of the material. To do so, the summary writer has to understand the material thoroughly, then convey such understanding in a clear, condensed and unbiased manner.

#### ***Objectivity***

A summary comes directly from the original text, so it should only include what is in the text. The summary writer's background knowledge or any opinions should not be added in the text as they can distort the author's ideas in the text.

To achieve such features, Oshima et

al., (2014) summarizes three notes for an effective summary including:

- Using the summary writer's own words and sentence structure;
- Shortening the original text by including only the main points and supporting points;
- Sticking to the meaning of the original text.

Burns (2010) shares the same viewpoint by emphasizing the necessity of

- Giving only the main idea and core

supporting details;

- Using synonyms or the summary writer's own words instead of copying words, sentences from the text;

- Not including the summary writer's own viewpoints.

In the compilation of writing skills for English for academic purposes by Hanoi university (2010), they suggest the following editing checklist for a good summary.

### EDITING CHECKLIST

#### Organization

1. Are the ideas and points of the paraphrase well connected with appropriate transition devices that ensure a smooth presentation?

#### Content

2. Does the paraphrase contain all the information of the original text (the main idea, the main supporting points, primary and secondary supporting details)?

3. Does the paraphrase exclude the writer's opinion / comment or any other material that is not in the original?

4. Does the paraphrase display a high level of understanding, and do you understand the information and how it is interrelated?

#### Language

5. Is there an appropriate change in the use of vocabulary and sentence structures to avoid plagiarism?

6. If the writer uses the exact words of the original, are quotation marks used?

7. Does the writer try not to rewrite specialized vocabulary or technical terms?

8. Is the paraphrase grammatically correct?

9. Does the writer document the source of the original text appropriately?

#### Length

10. Is the length of the paraphrase similar to that of the original text?

### 2.3. The process of writing a summary

Bacinschii (2018) suggests steps to write a summary as follows.

1. Write the title of the book/journal, the author and article, publisher and date at the beginning.

2. Skim the text to get the overall picture of the text.

3. Reread the text carefully to identify the main points.

4. Take notes the main points by noting down key words, topic sentences.

5. Copy exact words or sentences and put them in inverted commas if they are

important and useful to quote.

6. Remove unnecessary examples and details.

7. Condense the points into straightforward statements and rewrite in your own words.

8. Ensure that the summary is accurate and neutral by writing clearly, concisely, coherently and logically.

Oshima et al., (2014) also recommend a seven-step process to write a summary.

1. Read the original text several times to understand it fully.

2. Decide the most important points

by underlining, taking notes on the text, writing down only a few words for each idea.

3. Use the notes to write a summary without looking at the original text while you are writing.

4. Include a sentence summarizing the main idea of the article.

5. Use transition signals between sentences if needed.

6. Check the summary to ensure different words are used and the original meaning is not changed.

7. Add an in-text citation at the end of

the summary.

For example:

- In the article "The Making of the Dutch Landscape," Audrey Lambert states that

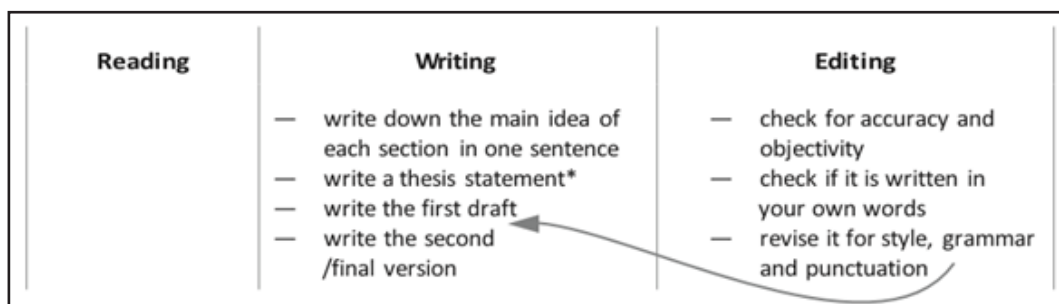
...

- *Assignments in Exposition*, a book by Louise E. Rorabaches, discuss...

- According to Boskin (2004), ...

- Bernstein (2004) states / claims / argues / maintains that...

- Bainaga (2004) suggests / asserts / hypothesizes / states / concludes that ...



Two suggested summarizing processes emphasize the importance of identifying the main ideas, deleting details, and expressing those main ideas in one's own language, or paraphrasing. Therefore, summary instructions can pay attention to reinforce such skills for effective summarizing.

## 2.4. Paraphrasing in Summary Writing

### 2.4.1. What is paraphrasing?

Many students may feel confused to clarify paraphrase and summary. In fact, the difference between them is their objectives. As mentioned above, a summary is a brief summing up of main point while paraphrase is a restatement or rewording of a paragraph or text, in order to borrow, clarify, or expand on information without plagiarizing (Belcher and Hirvela, 2001). However, paraphrasing is an essential skill that learners should master in writing a good summary. Correct paraphrasing is important, it allows writers to examine the meaning of others' work, creatively rephrase their statements, and craft information to suit an essay

or composition's goal or focus. Also, paraphrasing can be used as a strategy for students and an assessment tool for the teacher to evaluate their students' comprehension.

### 2.4.2. Strategies for Paraphrasing

In a summary, the author is supposed to rewrite the idea in their own ways. According to Oshima et al., (2014), the following steps should be applied when writing a summary is put into practice.

1. Read the original two or three times or until you understand it.

2. Put the original aside and try to write the main ideas in your own words. Say what the source says, but no more, and try to reproduce the source's order of ideas and emphasis.

3. Look closely at unfamiliar words, observing carefully the exact sense in which the writer uses the words.

4. Check your paraphrase, as often as needed, against the original for accurate tone and meaning, changing any words or phrases that match the original too closely.

5. If you choose to use exact words

or phrases from the original source, quote them in your paraphrased version.

6. Include a citation for the source of the information so that you can cite the source accurately. Even when you paraphrase, you must still give credit to the original author.

### **3. Application in teaching**

Generally, students face different problems in writing a summary of an English text and the major barriers are vocabulary retention, procedure and guideline of writing a summary. Therefore, teachers should have a good design for their lesson plan and provide clear and step-by-step instructions as well as regular correction, feedback. Based on the theoretical background reviewed above, teachers can apply these following strategies to instruct learners necessary skills in writing a summary.

#### **3.1. Giving lesson on “how to paraphrase”**

In this lesson, the students are taught how to paraphrase by applying flexibly different types of paraphrasing and given texts for their practice.

1. Change of parts of speech: Parts of speech ranging from verbs and nouns to adjectives and adverbs are replaced with new parts of speech.

2. Change of structure: This type of paraphrasing involves changing the sentence's structure, sometimes creating a passive voice from an active voice and vice versa. The change in structure can be used to reflect the writer's interpretation of the original quote.

3. Reduction of clauses: This type reduces the number of clauses in a sentence, which can be interruptive or confusing, by incorporating the phrases into the sentence.

4. Synonym replacement: Synonym replacement paraphrasing is one of the simplest forms of paraphrasing: replacing words with similar words, or synonyms.

#### **3.2. Giving lesson on “how to write a summary”**

In this lesson, the students are guided to scaffold how to write a summary based

on what has been pointed out in the literature review.

##### **3.2.1. Activity one: scaffolding**

The students are asked to read texts and underline important information in each passage, write a title for the passage related to its main idea, and create a summary. The students are supposed to keep in mind the following criteria:

- Create a title for the passage related to the main idea.

- Accurately summarize the text.

- The summary must describe all key ideas from the text.

- Do not include opinions or personal info in the summary.

- Highlight or underline key ideas in each passage.

##### **3.2.2. Activity two: Peer-editing**

In this activity, after the students have finished their drafts, teacher would ask them to work in groups of 3 or 4 to exchange their drafts with group members to compare and get their peers' correction.

##### **3.2.3. Activity three: Revising and correction**

The students are given time to revise their drafts. Then, the teacher asks some students to represent their revised work in front of the class, and asks other students to give comments. Afterwards, the teacher gives the sample answer and asks students to edit their drafts.

### **3.3. Free summary writing practice**

One of the two types of writing presented by Frey, Fisher and Hernandez (2003) is the evaluation summary which is a brief focus on the thesis of the reading but it concludes with the writer's opinions and insights. An example of the evaluation summary is book report. I, therefore, employed this activity to teach free summary writing. In fact, this is really a challenging and time-consuming task, so students should be required to work in groups. Students have the right to choose the book regarding their majors and they are supposed to write summaries for each chapter regularly and submit the final book report afterwards.



#### 4. Findings

The strategies applied for my students have brought some preliminary success. Firstly, the students have been pointed out some common mistakes they may make when writing a summary. After that, they have been step by step guided through various learning techniques for summary writing. Furthermore, this writing genre is really useful for them as they can develop further for other writing practices. Secondly, when I teach my students skills of summary writing, I can contribute to helping them to develop vocabulary on different topics and/or themes for their majors. In addition, good summary writing will also help the students to be better at other English skills of listening, reading, and speaking, which, in turn, fosters their writing quality. Last but not least, teachers need to frequently explore reading materials from different sources, by this way, they can broaden their knowledge and update themselves.

#### 5. Conclusion and recommendation

##### 5.1. Conclusion

It can be briefly concluded that learning how to write a summary benefits the students in many ways. That is, summarizing does help students improve their vocabulary, and other English skills. More importantly, it helps develop the students' critical thinking.

Summarizing is an important writing skill but it is not easy to learn. Because of this, it is necessary that teachers seriously and continuously facilitate and provide assistance so as to help the students improve the quality of writing. First, before teaching, teachers need to know what writing problems their students are struggling with by examining their

writing skill through pre-tests. Second, the teachers provides reading materials for specific purposes such as reading for main ideas so that the students are familiar with grasping main points. Third, the teachers need to prepare carefully teaching materials as scaffoldings for the students to follow. Furthermore, the teachers should use different techniques of writing a summary, as were mentioned but not limited to in this study, to help the students write effectively. Finally, teacher-student regular conference is of great importance in learning a language in general and in writing in particular.

##### 5.2. Limitations and Recommendations

The study itself indicates some unavoidable limitations, which should be addressed in order to obtain more reliable results in future studies. First, the participants are at levels pre-intermediate or low-intermediate, so it is unable to generalise the results. Second, the students may have been subjective in their response. Finally, there should be more innovative methods of teaching summary writing.

Due to the limitations above, I would like to recommend some suggestions for future study in order to gain strongly reliable results. First, multiple groups of participants such as teachers, students, and educational administrators should be recruited so that the research findings can be generated from diverse sources of information. Second, other methods of teaching summary writing should be considered and compared to maximize the benefits. Third, the application of information technology in teaching summary writing and its effects on learners should be conducted for future research.

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