SUMMARISING TECHNIQUES IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Summarising information taken from different source texts has proved to be a difficult activity for many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students, especially when dealing with complex pieces of discourse. Despite its importance, not many scholars have devoted their efforts to analyse this topic. In this paper, and after showing a brief account of prior research on the topic, we will try to point out how abridging can enhance EFL students' ability to select relevant information from texts, implementing both their reading and writing abilities in a foreign language. Our attempt will be to introduce a set of fifteen steps that will allow EFL practitioners to effectively teach summarising techniques to their students.

1. Introduction

Summarising is not a simple activity. To abridge a text is to reduce the complexity and length of an original piece of discourse, while retaining its essential qualities. However, the more we study how to summarise a text, the more we observe a number of fine nuances that may jeopardise the overall success of our task. Summarising texts is a difficult task, as many authors have pointed out (Brown, Day & Jones, 1983; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1978; Friend, 2001; Fung, Wilkinson & Moore, 2003; Garner, 1982; Kupiec, Pedersen & Chen, 1999; Palmer,

1996; Stotesbury, 1990). Different studies have proved that not many people are able to abridge a text, even in their own native language. This may be due to the fact that summarising is based on a learning process, as Brown and Day (1983) pointed out. In fact, a young learner is able to select important information in his/her own language as a child, though the following processes of deletion, combination and generalisation are often acquired some years later.

If this is the case when dealing with native speakers, the situation is even harder

among non-native English language users. In these cases, learning to summarise a text in a different language can be a tough experience. In this article we want to look at the different reasons for teaching summarising techniques in the EFL classroom. Initially, it is hard to deny that this task is important, if we consider that it is often used in our classes. In fact, summarising can be used for several purposes, such as retelling, clarifying, notetaking or essay writing (Palmer, 1997). However, as we have unfortunately observed, few students receive any specific summarising training during their secondary education, and when they did, it was not compulsory.

Additionally, and regarding the future challenges most EFL students will face, they will probably have to create different types of abridgements in their prospective work places. In an era of free-access information, clarity and conciseness become important elements in order to transmit messages (Endres-Niggemeyer, 1998; Rau, Jacobs & Zernick, 1989). The importance implied by this activity in day-to-day work seems clear just by considering the great number of expressions used to define different tasks related to summarisation, such as *synopsis, précis, abstract, abridgement, paraphrase, compendium, digest, outline, or résumé* (Lucisano & Kadar-Fulop, 1988). Thus, it seems relevant to teach our students how to summarise a text.

2.   What is a summary?

To start with, we should define the term *summary*. As Stotesbury (1990, p.4) points out, a well-established pragmatic idea of a summary is that "it is a reading-writing encounter where the summariser interacts as a reader, a comprehender and a writer."

Thus, it is a valid discourse exercise that can be carried out within the classroom in order to help our students read and write, as Johns (1985), Holmes and Ramos (1993), Horowitz (1986; 1990), or Usó and Palmer (2000) developed in their research.

In our opinion, it is McAnulty (1981, p.50) who offers the most appropriate definition:

> An abridgement is a condensed version, in one's own words, of the writing of someone else, reproducing the thought, emphasis, and tone of the original source text, and abstracting all its significant facts (overall thesis, main points, important supporting details, etc.), as well as getting rid of all the irrelevant ones.

As this author points out, summarising has to do with both reading and writing. The activity generated by the study of the abridging task, under a linguistic perspective, is based on the reading and writing processes. It is mainly an intellectual skill; only those who can understand a text clearly will be able to distinguish the more important from the less important and thereby create good abridgements.

Considering this dichotomy, we can see that summarising activities may be important in the development of our English language classes. In fact, if we teach our students to create summaries we are fulfilling two different objectives: they will improve their reading ability, as well as their writing fluency. Summarising, therefore, becomes a basic element in order to save time and energy, making the best possible use of the few hours that EFL classes have within academic curricula.

In any case, a good definition of the term summary will have to pay attention to two different aspects. First of all, this activity implies many others, all clearly necessary, such as comprehension, thinking, planning and, finally, writing (Bangs, 1980). Secondly, we can say that the task is creative in itself. As previous research has pointed out (Brown & Day, 1983; Brown, Day, & Jones, 1983; Sarig, 1988; Stotesbury, 1990; Usó & Palmer, 1998; Winograd, 1984) those just trying to copy bits and pieces from the original text, without fully understanding the gist of the text, run the risk of failure. Only relevant information should appear in the abridged text.

However, summarising is not only a linguistic activity (Endres-Niggemeyer, 1998). In fact, this type of activity has also been studied in other fields of research, such as cognitive psychology, computing engineering or educational sciences. Regarding the first field of study, we can point out that van Dijk (1979) paid great attention to memory recall among students. Subjects in his experiment used conceptual structures (schemata) for text comprehension; similarly, they also interpreted texts in the light of previous experience (episodic memory). These aspects were also tested and proved in a previous analysis (Palmer, forthcoming). In both cases experiments reveal that humans create a hierarchical discourse organisation, which provides retrieval cues for memory. As Mani and Maybury (1999, p.xi) point out, "people restore missing information through inference-based reconstruction processes". However, as we will later point out when drawing up some summarising rules for our students, it is a particularly striking tendency to include comments, opinions and attitudes when a person is asked to summarise information.

One of the most interesting studies on summarising was carried out by Kintsch and van Dijk (1978, p.366). In their article, they defined a summary as "the product of a deletion-selection-generalization-construction process where the summary equates to the macrostructure of the source text". The complexity of this statement is simplified by Sherrard (1989, p.2), who defines the four rules introduced by Kintsch and van Dijk. To start with, the deletion rule directs the omission of inessential propositions. Secondly, the selection rule directs the deletion of propositions that could be inferred from the remaining propositions, given knowledge of normal situations and conditions. Thirdly, the generalisation rule directs the substitution of a general term for a list of specific items. Finally, the construction rule directs the construction of a new proposition that allows deleted propositions to be inferred, again through the knowledge of normal situations and conditions.

After analysing all these previous studies on the topic, we should admit that abridging a text is not a simple task. What we want to do in this article is to analyse some of the dimensions implied by this in the design and implementation of summaries. In order to do so, we have looked at four areas:

a)   Enhancing comprehension skills.
b)   Processing and organising information.
c)   Developing academic skills.
d)   Implementing communication skills.

We will attempt to analyse how these four aspects can be observed in our classroom practice when teaching

summarising techniques to our students. After this analysis we will introduce a general framework that can be used with that aim in mind.

3. Four aspects to be concerned while teaching summarisation

3.1 Enhancing comprehension skills

Summarising is interesting because it implies many comprehension skills. Previous seminal studies on abridging processes have paid attention to some of these skills (Brown & Day, 1983; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). Some of them are:

- Paraphrasing
- Selection of relevant information
- Deletion of irrelevant information
- Generalising ideas

As we commented above, it is important to understand a text completely in order to create and design a properly written summary. There are some features, commented on by Mani and Maybury (1999, p.x), that may help us to understand a text completely, before starting our abridging activity. These features are:

- Thematic features (presence of statistically salient terms, based on term frequency statistics)
- Location (position in text, position in paragraph, section depth, particular sections)
- Background (presence of terms from the title or headings in the text, the initial part of the text, or a user's query)
- Cue words and phrases (e.g., in-text summary cues such as "in summary," or "our investigation," or emphasising expressions such as "important," or "in particular")

In all these cases, the features may help us understand what is relevant within a text, giving us specific clues on what should (or should not) appear in our abridgement (Thiede & Anderson, 2003). Similarly, we should also pay attention to all these features when assigning tasks in the ESL classroom, as some texts will be easier to summarise than others. As Johns (1988, p. 81) points out, we will have to be extremely cautious in order to choose the right text for our students to abridge. In fact, there might be some unexpected problems if the text chosen does not depict clearly thematic features, cue words and phrases, or any other elements that could enhance students' comprehension of the text.

3.2 Processing and organising information

Summarising is an essential component of any academic study skills course because, when a student is asked to abridge a passage from a book (or from a lecture he has listened to), he should provide a shortened version of the text or speech. This task will help students to minimise later efforts when asked to recall relevant information.

Creating a summary is also identified with the development of organising abilities, based on the rearrangement of the information in a way that should be both clear and appealing. We should write, revise and edit our text in order to ensure the accuracy and correctness of the summary we are working on.

In order to do this, we have to teach our students to read the text carefully, without making notes or marks, and look for what the writer is saying. After reading the text, the summariser should write down a sentence stating the writer's thesis. Finally, we should pay attention to our own view on

the topic, analysing if it slants towards one of the essay's minor points. If this is so, we need to adjust the sentence so that it is slanted towards the writer's major point.

Once we have analysed the central idea of the text, the following step will be based on organising the summary. Whereas most people follow the original pattern presented by the author of the source text (Palmer, 1998b), we should recommend creating a new layout, in such a way that the summariser will design a brand new approach to the text, though maintaining the gist of the original text. This is difficult, especially among non-native summarisers, but it will help them to develop important academic skills (Oded & Walters, 2001).

3.3 Developing academic skills

Some studies have been developed about the subject, and Swales and Feak (1994, p.105) have recently stated that this task *"is relatively common in graduate student writing and may be a foundation for other writing tasks."* This definition implies that students can benefit from learning how to create an abridgement in order to improve their results regarding other reading and writing activities. This opinion is also mentioned by Oded and Walters (2001), among other scholars.

It is probably Houghton (1995) who better defines all the different implications that abridging a text can have for non-native students. In her opinion (1995, p.1), summarising could be used for several academic purposes, as the following figure explains:

- *Retelling*: reporting on what you have read for a seminar; reporting a group's decision in a case study.
- *Clarifying*: helping to make points clearer when learning or revising a topic.
- *Notetaking*: enabling you to take down what is said in limited time; or in limited writing space.
- *Essay writing*: describing or explaining briefly; writing within an explicit word limit.

Figure 1. Houghton's four purposes of summarising.

Therefore, it seems reasonable to think that our ESL classes will benefit by teaching summarising strategies, helping our students to be able to understand complete sets of information and, at the same time, helping them to develop their writing abilities. By carrying out summarising activities, we can help our students to improve the way they write, revise and edit texts. These academic skills will be highly valuable for their overall

performance in English, helping them to implement their communication ability.

3.4 Implementing communication skills

Summary writing is not merely a linguistic activity, but also a communicative and discursive one, in which students apply previously acquired knowledge. This type of activity also shows the full comprehension of the source text; only those who can

understand the original piece of discourse will be able to create an abridgement by condensing the most important information of the source text.

In order to point out the communicative dimensions of mastering summarisation techniques within the ESL class, as a basic step to develop cognitive abilities, Ramspott (1995, p.56) thinks that:

> If we start thinking of the many occasions, besides those strictly professional, on which we have to produce or receive summaries, we will have to agree and understand this task as a communicative activity, mainly controlled by those parameters dealing with text production. If we pay attention to these parameters, we will easily understand how an abridgement is determined by the summariser's own features, by his/her own intentions and by the receiver who will receive it.

This communicative approach will be based on the features commented on by Ramspott, together with a basic need to express the gist of a text which has been previously comprehended. Therefore, the perfect comprehension of a text will be a necessary step in order to teach our students to condense information in a new piece of discourse. Nobody should try to summarise a text without understanding all the fine nuances implied by its author. Only those who have perfectly comprehended all the information appearing in a text will be able to abridge it, as there are many factors that could jeopardise their performance.

After observing all these features, we can conclude that one important feature of the summarising process is that many strategies take place simultaneously. If this is the case, we should be able to point out a number of strategies that take place in the comprehension process. Compiling previous research on the subject, Stotesbury (1990, p.5) lists different types of strategies used for that purpose, which appear in the following figure:

- sociocultural strategies
- communicative strategies
- general reading strategies
- local comprehension strategies
- propositional strategies
- local coherence strategies
- global coherence strategies or macrostrategies
- schematic strategies
- knowledge use strategies
- production strategies
- other strategies, (e.g., stylistic and rhetorical)

Figure 2. Stotesbury's types of strategies affecting summarisation.

After observing these strategies, and assuming our students' interest in learning how to summarise a text, we offer fifteen rules that have to be observed in order to abridge a text properly.

4.   Fifteen rules to be considered in order to summarise a text

The following rules have been used in recent years by English language students at Universitat Jaume I (Castelló), and they have proved to be successful. All students doing Business Sciences and English Studies degrees have to complete eight different summarising tasks during the course, in all cases following the set of rules (Palmer, 1998a, pp.79-80) that follow:

1. Summarising means writing a shorter version of another person's work maintaining the gist of the information. Good summaries maintain the ideas of the authors of the original texts, though represented with different written structures.

2. Although summaries have to be short, they should include all the important information appearing in the source text. Irrelevant information should be deleted.

3. Summaries should not have repeated information. Any unnecessary repetition diminishes the overall quality of the summary.

4. We should start by finding the main topic of the summary, the main purpose of the author, in order to write this text. Afterwards, we can start selecting information.

5. Read the texts thoroughly once in order to see what the main topic is. Read it again, starting to underline all the important information.

6. To select important information, use planning techniques, such as underlining, or mapping. Do not try to create a summary without using any previous planning.

7. In order to keep texts short, there are different strategies, such as deletion, combination, and generalisation. You can use them to keep texts as short as possible.

8. Do not copy verbatim sentences from the original text. Only do this in cases where you find it impossible to represent the same information with your own words. In case of doubt, paraphrasing is always better than copying.

9. Although the length of the summaries depends on the importance of the information appearing in the source texts, an average of 15-20% of the total length of the source text is advisable. However, try to be flexible about this.

10. You should only use examples when it is absolutely necessary.

11. Avoid personal comments and opinions. Summarising has nothing to do with creative writing.

12. Get rid of extra-textual information; most of the time it simply creates reading digressions, and can add unnecessary difficulties to your task.

13. Summaries are written to be read. Keep this in mind while writing the final draft. Maintain coherence and cohesion in your summaries.

14. Combining clauses can help you to shorten your summaries, but it is a difficult task, and has to be carried out with great care.

15. After understanding the text completely, you can comprehend the different lexical, semantic, and grammar choices

selected by the author. Once there, you will be able to make your own decisions regarding the creation of your own summary.

All these rules should be enforced in the classroom. Results in prior research (Palmer, 1996; 1997; 1998b; 2000; Usó & Palmer, 1998; 2000) have proved the validity of these guidelines, especially among non-native business English students. Further studies are currently being developed on the use of these techniques in different EFL settings (courses on tourism, teacher training, advertising and mass media), trying to prove their usefulness for university students.

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