Summarizing Techniques: The Effective Indicators of Reading Comprehension?

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were twofold: 1) to find out whether summarizing techniques have effects on learners’ reading comprehension through their summary writing and; 2) to investigate how much the summarizing techniques affect students on plagiarism and distortion in their summaries. The subjects in this study were 78 high school students. Three instruments were used: the pre-test, the summarizing techniques training lesson plans and the post-test. The findings revealed that summarizing techniques have obvious effects to the subjects’ reading comprehension and their summaries especially in cases of finding the main ideas, committing plagiarism and committing distortion. This is supported by the fact that the scores on main idea in the post-test of the experimental group are better than the post-test scores of the controlled group at the level 0.01. Also, it was found that the subjects treated with summarizing techniques committed significantly less plagiarism in their post-test than the subjects in the controlled group at the level 0.01. Moreover, the amount of distortion in the post-test of both groups is significantly different at the level 0.01.

Key words: summarizing techniques, effective indicators, reading comprehension

Background

Reading plays the crucial role in all fields of studies because the learners can acquire a great deal of knowledge through reading activities (Carrell and Eisterhold, 1983). Summary writing is also one of the important academic skills for students to show their reading comprehension. It can be said that if students can summarize well, exactly, they improve their reading ability (Budi, 2009; Palmer, 2003). It is a valuable practice for students in developing reading and writing skills, also it is related to paraphrasing (Sotiriou, 2002).
Many researchers found that summarization process connected with reading and writing. Corbeil (2000) pointed out that “the summarization process in second language becomes a valuable assessment tool to conduct students’ progress towards the acquisition of second language reading comprehension skills”. Also, cultivating students’ writing skill through reading is important (LIU, 2008).

Brown, Day and Jones cited in Moghaddam, 2007 declared that summarization involves additional and deliberate processing strategies than what are required in comprehension. Palmer (2003) stated that summarizing is based on a learning process, and the perfect comprehension of a text will be a necessary step in order to teach students to condense information in a new piece of discourse. Therefore, he used Kintsch and van Dijk Summarization model to develop fifteen rules to summary writing. Those are: 1) writing a short version including maintaining the gist of the information, the ideas of the authors of the original texts with different written structure, 2) including all the important information appealing in the source text and irrelevant information should be deleted, 3) should not have repeated information, 4) starting by finding the main topic of the summary, the main purpose of the author then start selecting information, 5) reading the text once and see what the main topic is then reading it again and starting to underline all the important information, 6) using planning techniques to select important information, 7) keeping texts as short as possible by deletion, combination, and generalization, 8) doing not copy sentences from the original text, 9) an average of 15-20% of the total length of the source text is advisable, 10) only use examples when it is really necessary, 11) avoiding personal comments and opinion, 12) getting rid of extra-textual information, 13) maintaining coherence and cohesion in your summaries, 14) combining clauses and 15) after understanding the text completely, you can comprehend the different lexical, semantic, and grammar choices.

Making students good at summary writing seems difficult in many reasons especially in Thai language community. The use of summarizing techniques in high school is not strictly emphasized. When students were asked to read and summarize a text, they usually struggle to write by themselves without the knowledge in summarizing technique (Laosooksri, 2006). Many researches in the field of summary writing found that students’ summary writing showed many problems such as distortion of the contents of the texts, copying the same words as the original text, identifying the key points of a text, lack of coherence, and lack of ability to paraphrase (Laosooksri, 2006; LIU, 2008; Newfeilds, 2001;
Palmer, 2003; Sriratampai, 1999). Moreover, they have some difficulties in reducing text to its gist in the absence of space constraints (Hahn and Garner, 1985).

Many researchers in Thailand have studied students’ reading comprehension. They found that most students had many problems failing to comprehend English texts, identifying the main idea, interpreting, analyzing, synthesizing, and summarizing (Hiransathit, 2005; Ravangvong, 2000). Moreover, Sriratampai (1999) studied Thai students’ summary writing. The results maintained that there were three important problems in the students’ summary writing. First, the students did not restate all the main ideas and their significant supporting details in their summaries. Second, they committed plagiarism because they were not able to paraphrase the main ideas in the reading text. Finally, they committed distortion from the original text because they were lack of both writing and reading skills.

Furthermore, Thai students’ summary writing usually found the failing to capture the main idea and changing the original ideas into their own words. Most students struggled to write a summary by without understanding the text they read, and some usually underlined some important ideas and then joined those underlined sentences together (Laosooksri, 2006). From these problems, basic reading strategies should be guided for students simultaneously as Bamford and Day (2004) suggested. It is better if students have the chance to study writing summary in the class.

This research, therefore, tried to emphasize summarizing techniques in particular to Mattayom Suksa 4 students in Science Maths Ability Program (SMAP) of Phimanphittayasan School, Satun province. This program was created to support students who have high proficiency in science, math, and English. Usually they had to read the text and participated in seminar in English, so they would be absolutely fulfilled the potential in science, math, computer, and English language ability. The researcher expected that training the use of summarizing techniques to the students can improve their reading comprehension and summarizing ability. Moreover, it can have positive effects on the students to face with the text in the future.

**Purposes**

The main purposes of this study are: to find out whether summarizing techniques have any effects on learners’ reading comprehension through their summary writing performances
and to investigate how much the summarizing techniques affect students on plagiarism and distortion in their summaries.

Terms

- **Summarizing** is an abridgement expressing the main ideas of a text through reported speech and relating to paraphrasing. It has to be shorter than the original text, contain the main idea of the text, and when necessary, reported speech was obligatorily used.

- **Summarizing techniques**, in this research, focused on four important techniques: reading at least twice to get the main idea of each paragraph, making an outline before writing a summary; using ones’ own words to avoid plagiarism; and checking the correctness of summary writing with the original text to avoid committing distortion.

- **Reading comprehension**, in this research, refers to the changing of the post-test scores under three main issues: finding main ideas, committing plagiarism and committing distortion.

- **Plagiarism** can be defined as copying of at least four consecutive words from the original text into the summary.

- **Distortion**, in summarizing context, means where the writer changes the meaning of the original text. It covers a word or a group of words that distorted the content of the passage.

- The **T-unit (minimal terminable unit)**, in this research, is used to analyze the plagiarism and the distortion found in students’ summarizing. The T-unit is a clause-level or sentence level units used to analyze the basic unit in written form. It was counted under the following conditions: a) a sentence is analyzed as two (or more) T-units when two (or more) independent clauses (with subjects and finite verbs) are conjoined, b) a single T-unit is counted when one or more clauses are embedded in an independent clause, c) comma splices are counted as two T-units (or more), d) a coordinate clause without a grammatical subject is counted as one T-unit, e) the expression with a finite verb in which the subject aimed to form a clause (dependent or independent
clause) is not considered to be a T-unit, f) the sentence contains with subordinating clause and main clause is counted as two (or more) T-unit.

Framework

The framework of this study is to examine whether summarizing technique can help develop reading comprehension of students in Mattayom Suksa 4 of Phimanphittayasan School in their English summary writing or not. This study, however, has some limitations about a number of subjects and time. The subjects of this study were 78 students: 39 of them enrolled in Science Maths Ability Program (SMAP) and other 39 were from the high English proficiency group during the academic year 2010. Most of the subjects had good English background, so the outcomes of this study were not generalized to all students who are studying at the same education level in other schools. The time of the study was also limited in only one semester. It just involved 12 weeks of the total 10 lesson plans with 100 minutes each.

Methodology

1. Subjects

The subjects of this study were 78 students studying in Mattayom Suksa 4 in the first semester of academic year 2010 of Phimanphitayasan School, Satun province. They were randomly sampled based on their high English proficiency. The subjects were divided into two groups in this research: the experimental and the controlled groups. Thirty-nine of them studying in the Science Maths Ability Program (SMAP) were considered as experimental group and the rests 39 were the high English proficiency students of a science-based class who were considered as the controlled group. It was assumed at the beginning that all of the subjects were at the same level abilities on reading comprehension, so the score of the pre-test was analyzed. It was found that the subjects of the two groups were at the same level of reading comprehension. Their pre-test scores were not significantly different (t-value = 0.473), that is, before the summarizing techniques treatment, the subjects of both groups had the same levels of English reading comprehension.
2. **Instruments**

In this study, there are 3 research instruments: the pre-test, the summarizing techniques training lesson plans and the post-test. The pre-test consisted of two passages. They were used to investigate learners’ reading comprehension focusing on finding the main ideas, committing plagiarism and distortion. The researcher chose two different kinds of passages to measure that the subjects really had reading ability. The researcher adapted these texts to suite the subjects’ English proficiency. Each text was designed into 4 paragraphs. Each paragraph was about 100 words. Moreover, the passages used in the pre-test were used as the post-test after the treatment on summarizing techniques.

3. **Procedures**

The pre-test was administered with the subjects in the first week of the semester. The subjects in the experimental group were provided with explicit summarizing techniques training consisted of 10 lesson plans. These ten lesson plans consisted of 8 topics and 2 reviews.

This treatment was conducted step by step from the 2nd to the 11th week as following: 1) introducing to summary writing and reading; 2) identifying the main idea; 3) avoiding plagiarism; 4) paraphrasing; 5) outlining; 6) how to combine clauses and sentences; 7) writing short summaries and 8) writing longer summaries, and the researcher used 9th and 10th week for reviewing the use of summarizing techniques to the students to make sure that they understood the summarizing techniques they had learned.

While the experimental group was administered with summarizing techniques, the controlled group was treated with the traditional teaching. This means the researcher played an important role to lead students in learning how to read and summarize a text focusing on questioning and telling a story roughly in Thai to the students before asking them to read by themselves. In every session, the students were assigned to do post-reading practices and later do summary writing. All passages except the methodology, some extra handouts and explicit teaching about using summarizing techniques which were used in this group were the same as those used in the experimental group.

The post-test was administered to compare the subjects’ reading comprehension through their summaries at the end of the course.
4. Data Collection

The pre-test was conducted with both groups in the first week of the semester. The time used in testing was 120 minutes with the following steps. The researcher gave the first 50 minutes for the subjects to read and summarize the first passage. When the time was up, their first answer sheets and the passages were returned to the researcher. Then the second passage was assigned after the 10 minutes break, and students had to complete it and handed it over before the class finished. The post-test was administered in the last week of the semester after the treatment.

5. Data Analysis

Scores on main idea, plagiarism and distortion were separately collected. The students’ summaries tests were examined by the researcher to find out if they include the main ideas of each paragraph, or if there are the cases of committing plagiarism and distortion. The main’s idea scores were compared by using t-test. To examine students’ committing plagiarism and distortion, the T-unit (see its definition under item “terms”) was used as the criterion. Amount of plagiarism and amount of distortion were calculated into percentage then compared by using t-test.

Findings

Effectiveness of summarizing techniques

Finding main ideas

In order to answer the first research question whether the summarizing techniques have any effects on students’ reading comprehension, the result shows that summarizing techniques obviously have effects on students’ reading comprehension especially in cases of finding the main ideas, committing plagiarism and committing distortion. This is illustrated in table 1.
Table 1 Subjects’ performances on main ideas of the two groups in the pre-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Controlled group (N=39)</th>
<th>Experimental group(N=39)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(\bar{\chi}) SD</td>
<td>(\bar{\chi}) SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>3.74 1.14</td>
<td>3.59 1.68</td>
<td>0.473</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the pre-test, the mean score of finding the main ideas of the two groups was not significantly difference at the 0.01 level. It was assumed that they were the same ability on finding the main ideas.

After the treatment, the mean score in the post-test of the subjects in two groups was significantly higher than that in the pre-test at the level of 0.01 as shown in table 2.

Table 2 Subjects’ performances on main ideas of the two groups in the post-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Controlled group (N=39)</th>
<th>Experimental group (N=39)</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(\bar{\chi}) SD</td>
<td>(\bar{\chi}) SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>78</td>
<td>4.03 1.53</td>
<td>5.00 1.62</td>
<td>2.729</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows that the mean score of the experimental group (\(\bar{\chi} = 5.00\), SD 1.62) was better than that of the controlled group (\(\bar{\chi} = 4.03\), SD 1.53). That is the mean score in the post-test of the subjects in the experimental group was significantly higher than that in the controlled group at the 0.01 level (\(t = 2.729\)). It means the summarizing techniques affect on the reading comprehension of the subjects in the experimental group.

**Effectiveness of Summarizing Techniques in Avoiding Plagiarism and committing distortion**

To answer the second research question how much the summarizing techniques affect students on plagiarism and distortion in their summaries. It was found that summarizing techniques affect to the subjects’ summaries on committing plagiarism. The results are shown in table 3.
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Table 3 Comparison of the post-tests on plagiarism performed by both groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>$\bar{X}$</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controlled (N=39)</td>
<td>75.60</td>
<td>21.67</td>
<td>13.620</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental (N=39)</td>
<td>26.24</td>
<td>24.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Based on the information in table 3, the mean score on committing plagiarism of the experimental group ($\bar{X}=26.24$, SD = 24.85) was significantly less than that of the controlled group ($\bar{X}=75.60$, SD = 21.67). The post mean score of the experimental group and the controlled group were significantly different at the 0.01 level ($t$-value = 13.620). The great decrease of plagiarism in experimental group indicated that the subjects were aware of the fact that they did not have to commit plagiarism, so they tried to use summarizing techniques which they had learned such as using transitional signals and transforming sentences to avoid committing plagiarism in their summaries.

Moreover, it was found that summarizing techniques affect to the subjects’ summaries on committing distortion. The results are shown in table 4.

Table 4 Comparison of the post-test on distortion performed by both groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>$\bar{X}$</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Controlled (N=39)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>-4.745</td>
<td>0.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental (N=39)</td>
<td>8.47</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows that the amount of distortion in the post-test of both groups was significantly different at the level of 0.01 ($t$-value = -475) because the subjects in the experimental group, after being treated with summarizing techniques, tried to avoid plagiarism. It can be interpreted that the subjects were trying harder to paraphrase the original, but in some parts of the reading, they ignored the original content of the passages.

Conclusions

This research studied effectiveness of summarizing techniques on reading comprehension as evaluated from their summaries of 78 students in Mattayom Suksa 4 in one semester. The data analysis of this research is focused on three main issues: finding main ideas, committing plagiarism and committing distortion. The results show that the scores of
the main ideas found in the post-test of the experimental group are significantly higher than those of the controlled group. The scores of plagiarism were found significantly less in the post-test whereas the scores of distortion were increased. To sum up, the summarizing techniques have obvious effects to reading comprehension and student’s summary.

Discussions

The results of the study showed that training the students with the use of summarizing techniques to high school students had positive effects – this made students have awareness of using summarizing to improve reading comprehension. Most students were able to find the main ideas, and they tried to paraphrase sentences from the original texts. The subjects in experimental group used much less plagiarism in their summaries. This confirmed that summarizing techniques are beneficial.

In regard to distortion, it seems that students were highly occupied with using their own words. They sometimes used inappropriate words to substitute the original words in their post-test. This means they misunderstood some contents of the original texts. However, they had a greater struggle to change the original sentences.

Based on the finding of this study, the researcher found that they had problems on grammar and writing. Sometimes, although they understood what the texts said about, they did not know how to write, so grammar knowledge is also important in summarizing. This agrees with Kirkland and Suanders (1991) that the students need to have vocabulary, reading and writing skills. That is the important skills in summarizing are to have adequate reading and writing skills. If the practice of summarizing is prolonged, certainly, the students will gradually improve their reading and writing skills.

Recommendations

From the findings of this research, the summarizing techniques are obviously useful for the students, especially in terms of main idea, plagiarism and distortion. If learners have opportunity to practice more about summarizing, they will better improve their reading comprehension and summary writing ability, so high schools should include the use of summarizing techniques or summary writing in curriculums to benefit the students.
Moreover, grammar and sentence structures should be more focused to make sure that the students can paraphrase the original text accurately and do not commit the distortion.

References


