

SUMMARY WRITING – REMEDY AND RESOURCE

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Abstract. *Analyzing a corpus of summaries written by second-year students of History and Anthropology (at Belgrade's Faculty of Philosophy), the author points to the effectiveness of summary writing in mastering a range of writing/reading skills, particularly those that students have failed to acquire in their earlier education. A considerable emphasis is placed on the relevance of selected information, its coherence and organization, as well as to adopting the appropriate tone/stance while summarizing a text. Given the varied language proficiency levels of the ESP/EAP students in question, the teacher can use summary writing to cover tasks ranging from basic paragraph writing to the more demanding ones such as discourse analysis. Summary writing is here seen not only as a remedial tool and a rich source of material for dealing with the challenges of both writing and reading (basic to advanced) but also as an efficient device for assessing these skills. Hence the author's strong belief that summary writing, as an integral part of an ESP/EAP course, paves the way for mastering other, more complex and more sophisticated academic tasks.*

Key words: *summary writing, academic skills, remedial tool, text structure, relevance, coherence, assessment*

1. INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of this paper is to provide sufficient rationale for including summary writing in an undergraduate ESP/EAP course and substantiate it with teaching practice experience and the results of an analysis of a relatively large corpus of students' summaries.

There is, however, a dilemma about how realistic it is to include summary writing as an academic assignment in an ESP/EAP course, in view of the two important factors:

1. The overall language proficiency of most students entering university in this country is well below what could be described as a B2 level, very rarely above it.
2. The amount of time language teachers have at their disposal to meet the course curriculum requirements is often insufficient, and not rarely compounded by a large number of students in class.

Against such an unfavourable backdrop, opponents of the inclusion of summary writing in an ESP/EAP course also claim that this particular skill is too demanding even for students of higher proficiency levels, which indeed it often is. However, certain levels of language competence can be achieved by various methodological means, summary writing playing an important part in the process. It could be used by teachers to serve the following purposes: to point to the weaknesses in students' writing, as a result of their

recurring failure to acquire necessary (language) tools in their earlier education; to overcome these weaknesses and eventually equip students with the necessary tools, which will enable them to successfully tackle their future academic/career related writing tasks.

This takes us back to the title of the paper and the word *remedy* to which the above mentioned purpose of summary writing is partly related. Namely, it is through the remedial work on students' summaries, that is by dealing with what they seem to have failed to master in their earlier stages of education, that they can be guided towards acquiring more sophisticated language tools and academic/writing skills. Hence summary writing as *resource* in the title of this paper.

Let us first briefly look at what is usually implied by summarizing/summaries, why our students need summary writing and what kind of materials can be used for dealing with it.

Summarizing is most often spoken of as a productive writing skill used in study situations and activities such as writing essays, reports, dissertations, theses, in exam preparation, private study etc. (Jordan 1997, 6). Jordan makes the distinction between general writing skills (i.e. introducing, concluding, summarizing, paraphrasing) and the so called specific academic concepts/functions (e.g. definition, description, exemplification etc.). Chazal, on the other hand, introduces the term essential elements, defined as "the major components of texts" which are "informed by the purpose of the text" and he sees summary as one of them (Chazal 2014, 130). The list also includes elements such as argument, cause, classification, definition, exemplification, narration etc., some of which have been labeled differently in the existing EAP literature (e.g. as academic, rhetorical functions or simply functions). Chazal relates essential elements to critical thinking and offers examples of critical thinking processes associated with particular essential elements, e.g. identifying the author's stance in order to express it in the summary (ibid.). It is precisely this aspect of Chazal's study that has been pointed out in this paper, for, apart from identifying the main points in the text, it is seen as crucial for grasping the meaning of a text.

Students come across all kinds of summaries in their everyday (non)academic activities, such as exam preparations, lectures, discussions, conversations, video productions. So its utility as a skill is unquestionable even when it is not strictly related to academic tasks. Nevertheless, it seems that without the ability to summarize, no serious academic work can be carried out. The following are some of the purposes of writing a summary, proposed by the aforementioned author (Chazal 2014, 170-171):

- to assist the student in the process of understanding the text, especially in identifying the main points
- to provide tangible evidence for their teacher that the student has understood the text effectively; or in the case of flawed summaries, understood the text less well
- to use a citation in a new written or spoken text, for example as part of a literature review or as supporting evidence
- to use as a revision aid when recalling and consolidating knowledge for an examination
- to provide tangible evidence of effective reading

Since our students will soon be expected to take part in conferences and write papers in their fields of study, the mastering of the skill of summarizing is seen as vital, its utility being most evident in writing abstracts, syntheses, results of research papers etc.

In order to engage students in this task, it is important to make the right choice of materials to be summarized. The needs of students of different levels of language proficiency must be carefully examined so that the materials can be graded according to the degree of text complexity (genre, content, style, structure, level of reasoning required, length, even medium – written/spoken). The materials used with the students whose summaries will be analyzed here – that is the second-year students of History and Anthropology (at Belgrade University, Faculty of Philosophy) – mostly consist of newspaper articles and to a smaller extent of academic texts, all of which are related to the content of the students' fields of study.

A corpus of some 400 summaries written by two consecutive generations of students have been analyzed. For the purpose of this study the descriptive and analytic-synthetic methods have been employed with the focus on the analysis of the recurrent errors that have been grouped into three broad categories. The categories have been formed on the basis of Swales and Feak's definition of a good summary (1994), and the errors are seen as deviations from the principles underlying a good summary.

2. WHAT IS A GOOD SUMMARY?

According to Swales and Feak (1994, 104-105), a good summary must be based on the following three principles (in reverse order):

1. It should condense the source material and be presented in the summary writer's *own* words. (condensed and restated)
2. It should present the source material in a *neutral* fashion. (unbiased)
3. It should offer a *balanced* coverage of the original. In other words it should exclusively focus on the source text information.

We will take these three principles as a starting point in attempting to classify the recurrent problems that students face when writing summaries. First of all, these problems can be roughly divided into those related to the *use of language*, (e.g. grammar, vocabulary) and into those pertaining to what we could broadly label as *reasoning*.

The former group of problems, those related to the use of language, will be addressed in this paper only in so far as they have direct bearing on the principles mentioned above. This is where the skepticism of those opposed to the inclusion of summary writing assignment in an ESP course falls on fertile ground for they claim that summary writing is too demanding a task for students of lower language proficiency. In order to substantiate the opposite claim, we may ask the following two questions: Is it more demanding language-wise to insist that students write a summary rather than any other kind of writing (short essays, letters, commentaries, reports, stories) and, what are the potential benefits of using summaries over other types of writing assignments in addressing recurrent grammar mistakes?

The following is a student's summary of the article entitled *In China, a Struggle to Preserve a Dying Language* (Lague 2007):

"The main theme of this text are Manchu language and Manchu people. Manchu people live in the north-eastern provinces of China. They are descendants of famous Qing dynasty from 17th century, and they speak Manchu language. The main problem is disappearing of Manchu language. Even if there is 10 million of Manchu people, most of them are speaking chinese. Some people like Ms Meng and her grandson Shi Jung are

trying to learn pupils old Manchu language. Bad thing is that Manchu language is one of 3400 languages which will die in next 100 years.”

If this is taken as a representative sample of an average student/learner’s language proficiency level (although the range is much wider), it may be noted that most grammar mistakes are related to the use of tenses, articles and orthography, which are in no way the consequence of the demanding nature of summary writing. The few vocabulary related mistakes (e.g. learn/teach) will be ignored here, for their bearing on the overall quality of the summary in question would be the same as on any other type of writing task. We will return to some aspects of lexical accuracy later on. However, as can be seen from the above summary, there are some aspects of grammar/syntax, hinging on reasoning, which could be improved precisely through acquiring the skill of summarizing. This, again, takes us back to the first principle offered by Swales and Feak (the need to condense the source material), which often poses a problem for most of our students. We will examine this in greater detail.

2.1. Condensed and restated

The reason why our students fail to produce condensed and restated version of the original is, in the first place, because they fail to recognize the *underlying text structure* as a key to both reading comprehension and summarizing texts. This is an area of language study highly neglected in primary and secondary schools language tuition. That is why most students arriving at university come across the notion of text structure for the first time either when engaged in reading comprehension tasks or in summary writing. Focusing on text structure in summary writing is of crucial importance, for without recognizing the underlying structure, any writing based on the given text is stripped of the skeleton, of the foundation on which all successive stages of writing are to be built. To quote Robert Alan Granville “the underlying structure of the message is as much a part of the message as the contents of the message.” (Granville 2014)

Depending on the writing genre they need to summarize (narrative or expository), students should learn how to identify the organizational pattern of a text (signalling devices, text cohesion, sentence level factors etc.) (Cochran and Hain 2014). Most texts the summaries of which have been analyzed here are those that fall within the expository genre, more precisely comparison-contrast, problem-solution, cause-and-effect and to a lesser degree persuasive texts. It is the signalling devices within the text that should give a clue to the readers/students about what kind of text they are dealing with. So, the failure to recognize signalling devices, the most obvious ones being headlines, subheadings, topic sentences, introductory statements, signal words (e.g. first, second, because, therefore, consequently, however whereas etc.) leads to the failure to identify the underlying text structure and eventually to missing the main point of the text. The following excerpts from students summaries (80-100 words) of two newspaper articles (*After more Than Sixty Years Nazi Records Come to Light* and *A System Afraid of its Own History*) provide an illustration for this (Landler 2007; Tatlow 2010).

The first article, with elements of cause and result structure, is more or less an expanded version of the news about the opening of archives in Germany and the benefits this has brought to researchers and the families of victims. The second one, which deals with the reluctance of the Chinese authorities to face the facts and realities of its recent history and the implications of this on the educational system, has more obvious elements of both cause-and-result and problem-solution text structure. The following sentences are all introductory ones, aimed at stating the main point of the texts:

After More than Sixty Years Nazi Records Come to Light

- This article provides various data which attests to the German concentration camps Holocaust and other camps.
- This article talks about German tracing service situated in Bad Arolsen.
- This text is about Nazi records...
- This is a story about horrible Holocaust that happened during World War II.
- This text talks about Nazi victims in World War II.
- A former prisoner of Auschwitz returns to this place that revives horrible memories from her past, but one day she is astonished to find her own signature on a piece of paper...
- Mrs Ban was in Auschwitz in Poland and she survived.

A System Afraid of its Own History

- Mr Meizhong became a history teacher so that he could tell his children about the country they live in.
- This text talks about the Chinese history of which Fan Meizhong is afraid.
- This article is about telling the truth about history in many countries.
- The author of this text gives us reasons why he became teacher.
- Fan Meizong decided to become a history teacher because he hadn't had a good education.
- In this article two Chinese historians Mr Fan and Mr Yuan talk about problems in China.

Failure to recognize the text structure has obviously resulted in the inability to grasp the essential points of the text, although the titles already clearly point to it. In addition, the role of the characters in both stories belongs to what could be labeled as minor support, and as such should most probably be omitted in summaries. The characters mentioned in texts, to whose role most students attach crucial importance, are in fact only representative of two groups of people, survivors in the first case and educators in the second and only as such could find their place in summarized texts. The same applies to the summary of the text on the struggle to preserve a dying language in China, mentioned earlier, in which the character of Ms Mang represents the few remaining speakers of the dying Manchu language. So the text is certainly not about Ms Mang nor is it about the Manchu language or the people who speak it but about the struggle to keep the language alive.

It is within the existing language teaching practice in primary and secondary schools that we can search for the reason why most students who arrive at university have never analyzed texts in such a way. This, combined with the practice of learning an incredible amount of materials to all of which equal importance is attached, often results in learning things by heart, without genuine understanding and critical approach, and eventually in acquiring too much useless information with no tools for processing it.

For these reasons, again, students often find themselves in the position best described as 'not seeing the forest for the trees', and therefore they include in the summary parts of the text easiest to understand and digest - names (as can be seen from the examples above), figures, enumeration of all kinds, places and years etc., thus missing the quintessence.

Examples of gist evasion abound, the most frequent being resorting to narration:

After More than Sixty Years Nazi Records Come to Light

- Auschwitz – Birkeanu was a Nazi concentration camp in Poland where Noemi Ban and he family arrived in 1944. In this tranquil town in central Germany she found a faded scrap of paper that she remembers signing on the day when she arrived at the camp...
- This is a story about Naomi Ban who survived the Nazi Concentration camp in Auschwitich. Her family arrived there in July 1944, but unfortunately her family died there. One day she visited Holocaust archive and she was very surprised when she saw her handwriting.
- Survived Holocaust victim, Noemi Ban was imprisoned in the Nazi concentration camp named Auschwitz – Birkenau. She said she was shocked when she saw her handwriting sign for entrance in camp, because she did not understand why Nazi needed that this precise data...

The following are parts of students' summaries of the article entitled *Young Sikh Men Get Haircuts, Annoying Their Elders* (Gentleman 2007), which obviously addresses the tendency among young Sikhs to abandon turban wearing and the reaction it causes among the more traditional community members:

- Jugraj Singh abandoned his turban and got his hair cut off. He collected the tresses from the barbershop floor, packed them in a bag and put that bag into a river floating out of Amritsar.
- Jugraj Singh, 14 year boy, was one of the main characters, and for him haircutting and throwing the bag full of hair into the river wasn't an emotional moment. He felt smarter without it.
- Jugraj Singh abandoned his turban at the age of 14, saying it got in the way when he took judo classes. When he cut off his hair, he collected from the barbershop floor and then threw it into the river.

So failure to identify the underlying structure and the *topic sentence* leads to failure to distinguish between *important and less important and unimportant information* in the text. This is often reflected in the very first sentence of students' summaries where they seem to be unable to choose the right *reporting verb*, which is also evident in the above quoted examples. Namely, it is the reporting verb that is supposed to indicate the author's stance, attitude, opinion or point of view. If ill-chosen and combined with failure to produce *general terms* that often clearly indicate what the text is about or what the author is focused on, boils down to missing the entire point of the text. The reporting verbs that our students most often opt for are literal translations from their mother tongue, those they were taught to use when retelling plots or themes of literary works they dealt with in their previous language classes. The following are the most common ones:

- This is story about Noemi Ban, the lady who was able to see her own handwriting...
- This article is talking about the Holocaust archive...
- This article speaks about Nazi records in archives in Bad Arolsen.
- This text is about the young Sikh man who abandoned his turban...
- This article discusses a long practice of turban wearing.
- The text final words are telling about that main problem ...

Rarely do students manage to come up with either the appropriate reporting verb (e.g. *argue, claim, examine, propose* etc.) with the right degree of objectivity or the general terms/nouns that best express the issue in question, though instances of the use of words such as *rising trend, tendency, rationale, consequences* are occasionally found in their summaries. Here are some attempts at finding similar ones:

- The article deals with the gradual abandoning of the practice of turban wearing among young Sikhs...
- The author of the article describes the accelerating westernizing of Indian life and its effects on the traditional Sikh community ...
- The article deals with the attitude of the modern Chinese society to its own history and the attempts of individuals to present it objectively...
- The author reveals the truth about the thirst for historical truth in today's China and the attempts of the ruling party to contain it.
- This article deals with the struggle of a few brave teachers to fix the errors of the old teaching practice and the price they pay for it.

Closely related to the failure to provide the appropriate reporting verb and general terms/nouns is students' reluctance to use simple, short sentences or more 'basic' vocabulary. They seem to believe that opting for simpler syntactic/lexical choices would reduce the quality of their writing. This can also be the consequence of literal translations from their mother tongue, resulting in long, imprecise, repetitive and occasionally illogical sentences and very often in unrelated sentences, wrong word order etc.

- Teachers like Mr Fan were having many problems in their fight against the system. Mr Zuan was dealing with pretty much the same issue, although he was helped by his school... The things are getting better although there is a lot of stuff that needs to be fixed.
- Mr Fan is a teacher in Beijing. He became a history teacher because he wanted to tell the truth. He wanted to present a real history of the people's Republic of China and Communist Party which caused many tragedies.
- Fan Meizhing, who is teaching history, is the teacher who is telling the truth.
- Education system is hiding the truth. Many things that happened in China's history are hidden, because the political party that caused it don't want the society to know about their mistakes that caused tragedies.
- Mr Fan thinks that people need to know what happened in their past, and he is telling his students the truth, not lies that are in school books...

We have, so far, pointed to the most frequent deviations from the principle that summaries should be condensed and restated version of the original. Even if they are condensed and restated, what is often missing is *coherence*. That is why students should be taught basic clause types and various linking devices used to express different relationships between clauses in all stages of the writing process. This is where simple paragraph writing comes in, enabling less proficient students to get acquainted with the basic rules of writing. By paying attention to the proper organization and coherence of the paragraph, students are more likely to avoid the use of unrelated sentences, the instances of which are numerous:

- This article reveals how a dying language holds a group of people together. Ms Meng is one the few residents of a small village in northeast China. Despite utility of modern Chinese, Manchu is still spoken by older generations. It appears that

this old language is hard to preserve. This language was the official language of the Qing dynasty, so it's part of the tradition.

- This text tells us about Holocaust documents and Nazi victims. Mrs. Ban, Holocaust survivor, found her entry document in Bad Arolsen. The ICRC keeps all Nazi documents from the concentration camps. Tracing Service is open to all survivors and scholars. Transferring digital copies is primary task.

Another, almost totally overlooked area in writing assignments in our schools is *plagiarism*. It has become an almost legitimate way of dealing with different types of writing tasks, primarily those referring to the analyses of literary works. Students use internet sources indiscriminately and abundantly resort to copy-pasting. There is very little information given about and attention devoted to the problem of plagiarism and almost no responsibility to bear in case it occurs.

In our students' summaries plagiarism appears in the following forms:

1. Copying the entire sentences, of which examples abound. The following are the headlines of two articles incorporated in the summary, in almost their entirety:
 - This article focuses on the struggle in China against a system afraid of its own history.
 - This article is about Nazi records which come to light after more than 60 years.
2. Copying very specific phrases or words that do not fit the style and register of the summary, for which adequate synonyms could obviously not be found (e.g. *mired in cover-ups*, *miasma of ignorance*, *unfettered access*, *conspicuous emblem*, *a maverick teacher* etc.)
3. Copying by quoting too much text (often irrelevant):
 - At last, the author quotes the words of Paul Shapiro, the director of Advanced Holocaust studies at the museum in Washington: 'That's a big job, but it's one we're committed to doing.'
 - 'The Manchu language is now a living fossil' - this sentence from the text best describes what the whole text is about.

It is within the scope of the two remaining principles to be followed in summary writing (i.e. presenting source material in a neutral way and focusing on the source text information) that we can detect students' tendency to copy and apply certain writing patterns and practices they have adopted in previous schooling. Most of them have rarely, if ever, had a chance to analyze texts in terms of genre, style, register and write essays for different purposes, (reporting, summarizing, reviewing, arguing). Consequently, their summaries are full of personal comments, added information and other deviations from the original text.

2.2. Unbiased

It is in this category of students' errors that the importance of identifying the author's stance, mentioned earlier in this paper, finds its justification. In order to avoid slipping into bias, students' need to be acquainted with the evaluative language (both lexical and grammatical). It is also important to note that using evaluative language does not inevitably represent the author's stance, but is often used to present the views of others. Therefore, in order to clearly identify the author's stance, the reader "needs to go beyond the surface and more deeply into the meaning and context" (Chazal 2014, 172).

In our students' summaries the evaluative language appears most frequently in the form of comment adverbs such as *(un)fortunately*, *luckily*, *obviously*; certain impersonal expressions that introduce an aspect of subjectivity such as *it's interesting*, *it's important*, *it's natural*, and very often in semi-rhetorical sentences, usually at the end of the summary, which serve as a kind of conclusion, frequently considered indispensable. Here are some examples of subjectivity in the widest sense of the word that illustrate the deviation from the neutral tone or stance to be maintained in summaries.

- It's interesting that the same language was the official voice of the Qing dynasty.
- There are only ten million Manchus and their future is not shining.
- Luckily, some schools support nonconformist historians...
- I like this story, it is an interesting presentation of ...
- I think that this story insults real Christians and, by the way, this is a story about ...
- For me an interesting moment is when ...
- Probably new technology will help, but Mrs Ban is too old and she can't wait for a long time ...
- The question is: Is it worth to throw away culture and tradition for fashion and trends?
- It is natural that the communist try to hide as much crimes they have done as they can.

2.3. Balanced

Some of the above quoted sentences also illustrate the deviation from the principle that summary writers should exclusively focus on the source text information. Students often ignore this principle by adding information, in all kinds of language 'improvisations', which most often appear in three forms/positions:

1. In introductions, or in the opening sentences with the aim of providing more background information or 'catchy' beginning sentences:
 - Anthropology is the most tolerant and the most humanistic science of all human sciences.
 - Modern China has a very big population with 1.3 billion citizens and many language and ethnic groups.
 - Sikhs are the religious group based mostly in Punjab.
 - Cultural revolution in 50's completely changed China and that revolution is a last step in progress of PRC. Price of progress in China is very high.
 - Mind controls the nation!
2. As a display of knowledge only widely related to the topic in question:
 - This is how governments treat general population, the principles are the same if rulers want to go to war they lie to people, telling them that enemy is bad, which was the situation in Yugoslavia.
 - This problem does not exist only in China, it is a problem of many countries in the world.
 - China's economy and society organization is diversified and sophisticated.
 - People don't know about many great things that happened in years of communist rule.
 - Man is easiest to brainwash when he is young. So make sure u control the teachers or have them aligned with u to be sure that no one steps out of boundaries that u set.

3. In conclusions, aimed at providing the ‘moral’ of the story, or a ‘powerful’, effective ending.
 - The story of Ms Ban can be used as framework of useful information and can serve the purpose of expanding the current knowledge in the area.
 - Control of the mind is on the greatest level.
 - At the end, in this system history is the greatest loser and winner is only the government.
 - In conclusion, the technology is a key of success for the future of all archives.
 - The new documents are important for next generation to prevent the new Holocaust in the future.
 - In conclusion, young men don’t care about elders’ opinion or about tradition, they only want to look good and feel comfortable.

The last point to be mentioned here, not strictly related to the three principles discussed above, is students’ reluctance to conform to the formal rules of summary writing. It is very difficult to discipline them into writing summaries of a preset length and in the given format. They refuse to count the number of words they have written, to leave margins, use paragraphs etc.

3. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the students’ summaries has pointed to a number of seriously neglected areas of language education that need to be addressed. That is why most students find the task of writing summaries extremely demanding, for they have never been acquainted with a range of skills needed to carry it out.

The potential benefits of using summaries as writing assignments, particularly in addressing recurrent mistakes seem to be undeniable. So is the potential of summary writing in improving all other language skills. It enhances students’ reading comprehension, for which the acquaintance with the text organization and structure, mentioned earlier, is indispensable because “as readers interact with the text to construct meaning, their comprehension is facilitated when they organize their thinking in a manner similar to that used by the author” (Cochran & Hain 2014). The potential benefits of summarizing is equally applicable in developing speaking skills, for which the acquisition of all the above mentioned elements is equally important. As such, summary writing appears to be a perfect remedial tool, providing a rich source of material for dealing with the challenges of writing/reading/speaking (basic to advanced) and an efficient device for assessing these skills. It is also a useful tool for both developing and assessing critical thinking skills, a highly neglected area of study in our educational system. As an integral part of an ESP/EAP course, it most certainly paves the way for mastering many other, more complex and more sophisticated academic tasks.

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