



Summary writing in a Thai EFL university context

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that L2 writers experience difficulty writing summaries of texts in ways that avoid direct copying or superficial modifications to source text sentences, but fewer studies have explored whether summary writing instruction leads to improved textual appropriation. The current study analyzes three summary paragraphs written by Thai EFL university students ($N = 46$) during a 17-week EFL writing class that included explicit instruction in paragraph writing and paraphrasing strategies. Their texts were analyzed in terms of the rhetorical organization of a summary paragraph and the incorporation of source text information. The findings revealed a significant increase in the number of students who explicitly referenced the source texts, along with significant changes in the occurrence of copied and modified word strings. Considerations for the use of summary writing in EFL settings are discussed.

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Introduction

Although it is widely acknowledged that the ability to use information from sources is a crucial skill in academic writing, considerable debate remains across disciplines as to what constitutes an “appropriate” use of source texts and how to help writers avoid textual misappropriation (for recent overviews see [Polio & Shi, 2012](#) and [Shaw & Pecorari, 2013](#)). In addition to conceptual challenges and disciplinary variation, L2 writers may experience difficulty incorporating source text information into their own writing because of low reading comprehension skills ([Esmaeili, 2002](#); [Plakans, 2009](#)) and limits on their vocabulary knowledge ([Baba, 2009](#)). It may be particularly difficult for lower-proficiency L2 writers to restate source information without copying entire stretches of words exactly as they appeared in the text (i.e., verbatim or exact copying) or making largely superficial, word-level modifications ([Cumming, Kantor, Baba, Erdosy, Eouanzoui, & James, 2005](#); [Currie, 1998](#); [Gebril & Plakans, 2009](#); [Johns & Mayes, 1990](#)). Verbatim copying has been shown to occur to varying degrees across instructional and assessment settings when L2 writers compose different kinds of texts, ranging from argumentative essays ([Weigle, 2004](#); [Weigle & Parker, 2012](#)), research papers ([Shi, 2008, 2012](#)), expository essays ([Cumming et al., 2005](#); [Li & Casanave, 2012](#)), opinion essays ([Shi, 2004](#)),

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literature reviews (Pecorari & Shaw, 2012; Wette, 2010), dissertations (Pecorari, 2003), to summaries (Keck, 2006; Kim, 2001; Shi, 2004).

Verbatim copying occurs to varying degrees across different text types, but it may be particularly prevalent in summary writing. In summary writing as a stand-alone task, the purpose is to restate all main ideas, which requires that the writer completely understand the text and make judgments about which details can be omitted or condensed without losing the main gist or emphasis of the original text (Kim, 2001). It also requires the ability to manipulate words and structures in ways that retain the meaning of the source text but replace words with synonyms and change sentence structure (Baba, 2009). The use of summary writing to assess reading comprehension or to check understanding of course content (Abasi & Akbari, 2008) may encourage students to reproduce source text information closely as a form of knowledge display rather than more selectively appropriate main ideas and reasons. This contrasts with other types of source-based writing in which writers are expected to ‘mine’ source texts for specific types of information (quotations, statistics, claims) that are useful for supporting their main ideas (Plakans, 2009). When selectively sampling source texts, it may be unnecessary to restate the entire content of a source text, and any sections of the source text that are irrelevant for the writer’s purpose can be ignored.

Even though summary writing can serve as a foundation of some academic tasks (such as an annotated bibliography; see Kirsznier & Mandell, 2011), summarizing is often presented in L1 academic writing textbooks, along with paraphrasing and quoting, as a technique for integrating and synthesizing sources in research-based writing (for discussion of the distinctions between paraphrasing and summarizing, see Hirvela & Du, 2013). English L2 writing textbooks designed for higher proficiency students (e.g., McCormack & Slaght, 2009; Oshima & Hogue, 2006) are similar to the L1 books discussed above in that they describe summarizing and paraphrasing as skills that are useful for integrating and synthesizing sources. In these textbooks, summarizing is presented as a strategy for incorporating information into source-based writing in ways that support the writer’s own purpose or argument. Instruction is focused on helping novice writers develop multiple strategies that can be deployed when writing academic texts (e.g., essays, literature reviews, or research reports) that require reference to information obtained from source materials.

In contrast, writing textbooks designed for lower-proficiency L2 writers often present summary writing as an independent writing task. Textbooks that focus on the development of paragraph-level writing skills (e.g., Blanchard & Root, 2010; Reid, 1994) provide explicit instruction in summary writing consisting of information about the rhetorical structure and length of summary paragraphs. For example, common guidelines are that summaries should be shorter than the original text and need to include main ideas but not details. These textbooks also highlight the importance of a topic sentence that explicitly states the author, title of article, and main idea of the source text in a single sentence, followed by supporting sentences that restate the main points, and a concluding statement which captures the author’s main idea. This explicit information is often followed by activities that promote recognition of the correct placement of these key components in a summary paragraph, such as underlining the topic sentence in paragraphs or putting scrambled sentences from a summary paragraph into the correct order. This approach to summary writing also involves a strong connection with reading comprehension, which is evident through sequences of activities in which students are asked to read a short text, answer reading comprehension questions, and then either select the most appropriate example summary or write their own summary.

Previous studies that focused specifically on summary writing investigated writers’ ability to provide a brief overview of a single text without requiring them to integrate the source text information into a larger piece of writing (Abasi, 2012; Baba, 2009; Chen & Su, 2012; Choy & Lee, 2012; Keck, 2006; Kim, 2001; Liao & Tseng, 2010; Shi, 2004; Wichadee, 2010). Summary writing studies that focused on textual appropriation (Keck, 2006; Shi, 2004) found that summaries written by L2 writers contained more verbatim copying and near copies of source text information than those composed by L1 writers, who tended to make more substantial revisions across syntactic constituents. In addition, the occurrence of verbatim copying by L2 writers was greater in summaries than opinion essays (Shi, 2004). Studies that elicited writers’ perceptions of summary writing and paraphrasing (Chen & Su, 2012; Choy & Lee, 2012; Liao & Tseng, 2010) have identified text comprehension and difficulty rephrasing source text information as potential problems for L2 writers, with word substitution and re-ordering strategies viewed more favorably than syntactic changes (Sun, 2009).

Despite the accumulation of evidence that L2 writers experience difficulty summarizing and paraphrasing sentences from source texts, relatively few studies have explored how L2 writers’ summaries and textual appropriation skills develop over time in instructional settings. Four studies have examined how L2 writers’ ability to paraphrase changed over time while they were enrolled in a writing courses at universities in Australia (Wette, 2010), Malaysia (Choy & Lee, 2012), Taiwan (Chen & Su, 2012) and Thailand (Wichadee, 2010). Wette (2010) examined students’

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