



The influence of summary writing on the development of reading skills in a foreign language



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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the influence of summary writing in an FL on the development of students' EFL reading skills. Eighty university students participated in a six-month long quasi-experimental study. They were divided into an experimental and a control group, both of which followed the same syllabus and read the same texts. The difference between them was that the experimental group regularly wrote summaries of the texts they had read while the control group engaged in typical FCE reading tasks: multiple choice questions, true/false statements and matching. The development of students' reading skills was measured by assessing their level of comprehension before and after an EFL course involving summary writing. The study showed a statistically significant difference in the reading skills of the two groups suggesting that summarising has a positive influence on reading development. Progress in students' reading skills did not correlate with the quality of the summaries they wrote. Summary writing was shown to be highly beneficial for weaker readers. The results of the study might assist in the search for effective techniques for developing text comprehension in the FL classroom.

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1. Introduction

Summarising is a task in which students read to write. Reading here, however, is quite specific. Unlike in recall during which mental representations of a text may be formed automatically (Winograd, 1984), reading to summarise involves deliberate active operations aiming at formation of the gist of a text (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). These operations make summarising highly challenging for students as they are engaged in text comprehension which is based on building the macrostructure of the text. In a foreign language context the fact that summarising reflects processes necessary for constructing the meaning of a text makes it a valuable technique in testing reading (e.g. Kobayashi, 2002; Yu, 2007; 2008). It has been also found to positively affect recall and learning (King, Biggs, & Lipsky, 1984; Rinehart, Stahl, & Erickson, 1986; Spurlin, Dansereau, O'Donnell, & Brooks, 1988; Wittrock & Alessandrini, 1990). However there is little research on whether summarising would positively affect students' FL reading skills if used as a technique for developing reading comprehension during FL classes. Therefore this study aims to investigate the influence of regular summarising over a six-month period on development of students' reading comprehension skills in English as a foreign language.

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2. Review of literature

2.1. The relationship between reading and writing

Reading comprehension may be divided into lower- and higher-level processes (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Grabe, 2009), where lower-level processes embrace word recognition, syntactic parsing and semantic-proposition encoding (Grabe, 2009: 22), and higher-level processes entail, among other things, a model of text comprehension, where good readers ‘form a summary model of what the text is likely to mean’ (Grabe & Stoller, 2002: 25). The model of text comprehension defined by Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) has been the essential theory which recognises the cognitive processes that operate during summarising and reading. The model describes summarising as a technique which constructs the macrostructure of a text by extracting its gist. The macrostructure, which is a hierarchical network of propositions consisting of the main information from a text with supporting details, is abstract and a written summary may be viewed as its tangible and material version. In order to summarise efficiently, and to read efficiently, there are three macrooperations (known also as macrorules or strategies of summarising) which should be undertaken: *deletion*, during which unimportant and redundant information is eliminated; *generalisation*, during which details become generalised; and *construction*, a strategy based on inferencing and reading between the lines, which in practice means either identifying or generating the main idea of one or more paragraphs. Development of comprehension, however, will not automatically result in better summarising as summarising involves additional processing operations, selection and reduction (Johnson, 1983), which may not so intensively occur while comprehension (Hidi & Anderson, 1986).

Summarising may also be discussed within the context of deep-level processing (Craig & Lockhart, 1972; Lockhart & Craig, 1990), which engages students in a deep analysis of the read text (Oded & Walters, 2001). Students, when they summarise, put significant mental effort into text analysis, identifying and selecting the most important information, investigating the structure of the text, generalising information, condensing information and constructing the gist of paragraphs, and consequently the gist of a text. Oded and Walters (2001) observed that EFL students who were asked to summarise a text performed better on a multiple choice comprehension test than students who were asked to merely list examples from a text. The difference occurred due to the different processing (deep vs surface processing respectively) required by each task.

The relationship between summarising and reading skills has been investigated by few researchers. Rinehart et al. (1986) analysed the effect of summary training on students' L1 reading and studying behaviour. Seventy sixth-grade students took part in a study in which they were trained in summarising and were later asked to answer comprehension questions. It was observed that the training helped students to recall more significant information in the texts by ‘heightening awareness of top-level information in texts’ (Rinehart et al., 1986, p.433). It also positively affected the notes students made while studying the texts as these were found to contain more of the important pieces of information from the texts. The training also increased the time students spent studying texts. Bean and Steenwyk (1984) analysed how summary training affected students L1 reading comprehension measured by the Nelson-Denny Reading Test. Two groups of sixth grade students received training in summarising in L1 (explicit presentation of macrorules vs a more intuitive approach), while the third group was asked to find main ideas in the text with no instruction. Both treatment groups performed better on a comprehension test than the control group, which may suggest that “a transfer value of summarisation training to other texts” (Bean & Steenwyk, 1984, p. 305) might have occurred. As the training these studies focused on did not concern regular writing of complete summaries the current study seeks to concentrate on this issue.

In the foreign language context Bensoussan and Kreindler (1990) investigated whether summarisation would be a more effective technique to promote reading comprehension than responding to short-answer questions. Ninety two EFL students summarised 10 academic texts while 87 students answered short-answer questions about the same texts. The results showed that all the students improved their reading comprehension significantly, and the hypothesis that students who practiced extracting main ideas via summarising would read more effectively than those who answered questions was not confirmed. The authors hypothesised that the progress all the students made might have resulted from a highly engaging discussion after each task in which all the students negotiated the scoring key with the teacher, and from a final test that focusing mainly on a micro-level comprehension might have favoured the groups involved in responding to questions. Bearing this in mind in the present study attention was paid to the processing skills required of students in the post-reading task and the post-test.

Analysing the influence of a summary writing on text comprehension it seems important to consider to what extent the quality of summaries would correlate with development of students' reading skills. Studies show that summarising is a complex cognitive skill which develops over time (e.g. Brown & Day, 1983; Johns & Mayes, 1990; Winograd, 1984). It is also strictly connected with writers' academic experience and literacy skills (Brown, Day, & Jones, 1983; Keck, 2014; Taylor, 1984). From the studies on developmental aspects of summarising (Brown & Day, 1983; Johns, 1985; Taylor, 1984) it may be concluded that the best summarisers were found to be highly educated adults dealing with writing professionally. In a foreign language summary quality depends also on students language proficiency. Yasuda (2015) observed that high proficiency allows students to employ more grammatical metaphors in summaries which makes their summarising more effective. Baba (2009) found that the ability to write definitions, knowledge of paradigmatic relations between words and metalinguistic

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