Extended Abstract: Using Summaries to Integrate Reading, Writing, and Critical Thinking Skills

Teaching Summarizing: Pedagogical Background

In teaching English for academic or communicative purposes, there is a long-standing consensus in the literature around the value of integrating language skills within the curriculum (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Nation, 2008). Students require language for functional, communicative purposes, which often involve an authentic and natural transference between listening and speaking, reading and writing, and so on. Nowadays, the integrated skills approach will be familiar to anyone involved in content-based or task-based learning instruction as these methods promote the natural use of language and approximate real-life interactions and experiences (Oxford, 2001).

One of the more common integrated skills tasks in an academic setting is the production of summaries, both in oral and written form. Language learning aside, summarizing is an explicit and implicit task in just about any course as it allows instructors the opportunity to assess students' comprehension levels and critical thinking skills. In academic writing coursework, the ability to write summaries is considered "a core requirement for students to make the shift from consumers of research-based knowledge to creators of research-based knowledge" (Hood, 2008, p. 351). Moreover, summarizing is seen as essential to academic success and a principal means of avoiding the academic crime of plagiarism (Kirkland & Saunders, 1991). However, formal summarizing is not just merely an academic exercise; it is a complex set of cognitive skills that are built into many routine tasks across a whole range of disciplines and professions.

Since tasks and materials in the academic English or English for specific purposes (ESP) classroom should reflect those that students expect to encounter in their content classes content and task-based academic English courses, summary writing is a useful task for exploring authentic or sheltered content, developing comprehension, and integrating skills (Shih, 1992). Summary writing allows students to practice and develop a host of discrete L2 skills and strategies in both reading (reading for main ideas and details, annotating, identifying genre, purpose, and audience) and writing (note-taking, paraphrasing, applying academic language and syntax; Kim, 2001). In several studies, summary writing is closely tied to improved reading comprehension in language learners (Baleghizadeh & Babapour, 2011; Gao, 2013).

However, and perhaps as a result of the presumption that students already know how to do it, summary writing is often not explicitly taught. This is unfortunate, as it should be recognized as a complex task involving higher-order, critical thinking skills that need to be individually addressed and actively cultivated. Furthermore, L2 summary writers face additional challenges that complicate the process and should not be underestimated. For Kirkland and Saunders (1991), summarizing involves both external and internal constraints for language learners, which impact the cognitive load involved. This load can be "overwhelming" and often leads to poor results. External constraints include purpose and audience, as well as textual features such as genre, complexity of language, and length. Internal constraints include target language proficiency, content and formal schemata, and cognitive and metacognitive skills.

Curriculum designers and instructors need to be aware of the complexity and cognitive constraints involved in preparing summaries in order to fully support their students in completing such tasks successfully. Therefore, in designing summary tasks, care should be taken to minimize the more controllable external constraints in light of a proper assessment of students' less controllable internal constraints, with the goal of minimizing the overall cognitive load (Kirkland & Saunders, 1991). At the same time, instruction should aim toward building the skills students need to overcome internal constraints by scaffolding and modeling the summarizing task, especially the cognitive and metacognitive skills that go into it. A pedagogy for reading to write summaries must account for the tapestry of skills and knowledge that make up such a complex task and provide a path to success that supports students at all stages in the process.

Designing an ESP Content-Based Summary Writing Curriculum

The Language for Credit (LANC) program at Sultan Qaboos University is a subset of courses run by the Center for Preparatory Studies. LANC courses are required, credit-bearing ESP courses that are designed and tailored to the needs and requirements of each college at the university. In the College of Engineering, there are two required courses: LANC I and LANC II. In the LANC I course, for which this curriculum was designed, there is a general focus on reading and writing development in Engineering-related topics, with an emphasis on academic and subject-specific language and vocabulary. Approximately half of the writing curriculum focuses on summary writing, and there is a summary writing exam that makes up 15% of the students' marks for the course.

As a content-based ESP course, language input is focused on authentic sources, especially authentic reading texts. Since the course is for general Engineering, the subject content is based on the different specifications offered at the university and divided into four units. Summary writing is covered during the first half of the course, and therefore summary text topics come from the first two units, namely Civil and Mechanical Engineering. Source materials for summaries were selected from Engineering-themed, informative news sources. This genre/formal schema was chosen as it is expected to be familiar and accessible to students (Kirkland & Saunders, 1991). Specific articles were chosen to extend the general reading topics. For example, in chapter one, "Civil Engineering," there are readings about dams and skyscrapers as well as listening, speaking, and critical thinking activities related to the themes.

Although summary source materials are drawn from authentic sources, there is generally a need to mediate in order to ensure comprehension (Gao, 2013) and minimize external constraints. To varying degrees, texts selected for summary writing were synthesized and graded to match the abilities of the students and adjust for length, with an aim of 450–650 words and a target Flesch-Kincaid index of 10. In addition, texts were edited to recycle the targeted vocabulary from the relevant chapter so that each text contains 10–15 target vocabulary words. A sample summary text can be found in Appendix A.

To scaffold the procedure, students are given practice on relevant skills such as identifying main ideas and details and constructing various models of note-taking while working on general reading texts. Oral summaries, which are particularly useful in cultures that focus on oral skills, are also practiced. Plagiarism avoidance, paraphrasing strategies such as the RRLC method (Kettel & DeFauw, 2018), and the use of reporting verbs are also reviewed as well as general rules for summary (e.g., avoiding opinion and extraneous information). Models of appropriate summaries are shown and discussed, and the summary process is modeled by the instructor.

In executing the summaries, students are given specific parameters. Firstly, they are required to follow a writing procedure that involves reading and annotating, note-taking, and writing specifically from notes. As Shih (1992) notes, these ancillary steps greatly help to guide students towards using their own words and thus prevent plagiarism. To further focus on the concept of summarization, students are also instructed to write one-third of the original text, so a 600-word text, for example, would result in a 200-word summary (with a leeway of +/-10%).

Collaborative Writing

Once the goals and procedure for the summary task are set up and appropriately modeled, students are given several practice summaries to complete in the weeks prior to their formal assessment. Scaffolding aids, such as post-reading discussions and sample notes, are gradually reduced as students work towards producing summaries more independently. Students receive continued support through teacher coaching and feedback and, more significantly, through collaborative opportunities with fellow students throughout the recursive reading-writing process. Allowing students to discuss texts and construct notes and summaries in pairs and small groups is an important feature of the curricular design.

The use of collaborative writing as an effective developmental language practice is well supported in the ESL research literature. Besides limiting a teacher-centered approach to the classroom and further integrating other core language functions, collaborative writing activities—including summaries—are generally perceived positively by students, especially in terms of improving motivation, grammatical accuracy, and metacognitive thinking (Lin & Maarof, 2013; Storch, 2005). Moreover, measurable writing improvement in task achievement, accuracy, and complexity has been demonstrated in both pairs (Storch, 2005) and small groups (Dobao, 2012). Other studies, such as Sajedi (2014), have noted improvements in content, organization, and vocabulary in writing summaries in pairs and triads.

Arising out of Vygotskyian sociocultural learning theory, collaborative writing in the classroom is an opportunity for students to mediate and negotiate meaning through social interaction and pool resources to successfully solve complex linguistic problems. As Lin and Maarof observe, “By collaborating with each other in creating and communicating meaning, learners are able to engage in the composition process with more clarity and understanding” (2013, p. 601). In short, collaboration is another means of helping students manage the cognitive load involved in the construction of summary texts.

Summary Writing Assessment

A well-planned curriculum design should be complemented with an appropriate and effective assessment tool. In this instance, the assessment task is essentially the same as the task performed in the classroom: take notes on a given text and write an organized and coherent summary of a specified length from those notes. However, although the assessment tool is straightforward, the

evaluation of task achievement is less so. As Cummings (2013) notes, there are several challenges in assessing integrated tasks. Among those that are significant to this context are the difficulty in assessing genres that are poorly defined and the difficulty in assessing language production distinguishable from the source material.

Addressing the first issue, Yu (2013) notes that there is no uniform definition of what a summary is, and as such, any summarizing task must be well-defined, which is achieved here by defining and exemplifying a working definition of a summary and clearly stating the goals and parameters for producing one within the curriculum. Through practice and examples, students have a clear understanding of what is expected of them in the assessment task: writing a coherent paragraph of a set fraction of the original length, identifying the main points and subpoints of the source text, avoiding plagiarism through paraphrasing, and leaving out extraneous details, outside information, and opinions.

Since there is a need for transparency regarding the marking scheme (Yu, 2013), the writing procedures and scoring rubric are clearly laid out for students. During assessment, test takers are given a set time in which to take notes on a selected text, which is based on themes practiced. After the allotted time, the text is collected, and students must write their summaries on a new paper provided, using only their notes. While the format and quality of the notes are not assessed, significant points may be deducted for copying the text in the notes or for writing the summary (i.e., complete sentences) in the notes. Thus, the washback effect is that students must attempt to paraphrase and produce original language that is distinguishable from the source material.

For assessing the quality of the summary content, a unique rubric is developed for each text (see the example in Appendix B). The rubric is derived from assessing sample summaries of the text from proficient writers to aggregate the main ideas and important supporting details of the text. A point value is given to these elements, which graders can check the students' summaries against to determine a score for content. To emphasize the need for students to demonstrate comprehension of the source text, the value of the content portion of the students' mark is set at 60% of the total grade. The remainder of the summary grade (40%) is based on standard language use elements including coherence, lexical resources, and grammatical range and accuracy.

The result is an assessment that accounts for the integration of reading and writing by providing the means to evaluate the degree to which test takers comprehend the given text for the stated

purpose of summarizing and produce comprehensible written work of an appropriate standard. Since students work through the entire task process from a heavily scaffolded foundation over a number of weeks in a collaborative and supportive environment that progresses towards independent production, there is ample opportunity to practice and hone the skills required to successfully complete the assessment task.

In producing this curriculum, great care was taken to establish the pedagogical reasoning behind the objectives, understand the challenges, and develop a model that supports the desired outcomes and reflects established language learning principles grounded in the literature. It is believed that the result is a product that both meets the desired goals and is enjoyable and meaningful to students and instructors alike.

References

Baleghizadeh, S., & Babapour, M. (2011). The effect of summary writing on reading comprehension and recall of EFL students. *New England Reading Association Journal*, *47*(1), 44.

Chamot, A. U., & O'Malley, J. M. (1994). *The CALLA handbook: Implementing the cognitive-academic language learning approach*. Addison Wesley.

Cumming, A. (2013). Assessing integrated writing tasks for academic purposes: Promises and perils. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *10*(1), 1–8.

Dobao, A. F. (2012). Collaborative writing tasks in the L2 classroom: Comparing group, pair, and individual work. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *21*(1), 40–58.

Gao, Y. (2013). The effect of summary writing on reading comprehension: The role of mediation in EFL classroom. *Reading Improvement*, *50*(2), 43–47.

Hood, S. (2008). Summary writing in academic contexts: Implicating meaning in processes of change. *Linguistics and Education*, *19*(4), 351–365. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2008.06.003

Kettel, R. P., & DeFauw, D. L. (2018). Paraphrase without plagiarism: Use RRLC (read, reread, list, compose). *The Reading Teacher*, *72*(2), 245–255.

Kim, S. A. (2001). Characteristics of EFL readers' summary writing: A study with Korean university students. *Foreign Language Annals*, *34*(6), 569–581.

Kirkland, M. R., & Saunders, M. A. P. (1991). Maximizing student performance in summary writing: Managing cognitive load. *TESOL Quarterly*, *25*(1), 105–121.

Knoch, U., & Sitajalabhorn, W. (2013). A closer look at integrated writing tasks: Towards a more focussed definition for assessment purposes. *Assessing Writing*, *18*(4), 300–308.

Lin, O. P., & Maarof, N. (2013). Collaborative writing in summary writing: Student perceptions and problems. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *90*, 599–606.

Nation, I. S. (2008). *Teaching ESL/EFL reading and writing*. Routledge.

Oxford, R. (2001). *Integrated skills in the ESL/EFL classroom*. ERIC Publications. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED456670

Sajedi, S. P. (2014). Collaborative summary writing and EFL students' L2 development. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *98*, 1650–1657.

Shih, M. (1992). Beyond comprehension exercises in the ESL academic reading class. *TESOL Quarterly*, *26*(2), 289–318.

Storch, N. (2005). Collaborative writing: Product, process, and students' reflections. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *14*(3), 153–173.

Yu, G. (2013). The use of summarization tasks: Some lexical and conceptual analyses. *Language Assessment Quarterly, 10*:1, 96–109. DOI: 10.1080/15434303.2012.750659