Effects of Teaching Summary Writing to English Majors

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Abstract

The research aimed at studying effects of summary writing instruction on 15 Thai university English majors. The experiment was done in the second semester of academic year 2003, lasted for twelve weeks. An analysis of the pre and post tests revealed that there were differences between summary writing in the pre and post tests in two regards. First the overall quality score of the post test was significantly higher than that of the pretest at the level of .01. Second, in terms of plagiarism, the students committed significantly less plagiarism in the post test at the level of .01. However, there were no differences in two regards. In reading comprehension, there was no difference between the two tests in terms of distortion of the original text. Finally, there was no difference between the numbers of error-free t-units found in both tests. Obviously, the students could write better summaries with less plagiarism in the posttest. However, their reading comprehension and syntactical ability did not improve in the post test.

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้ศึกษาผลการสอนรายวิชา Reading and Summary (การอ่านและสรุปความ) ภาคเรียนที่ 2 ปีการศึกษา 2548 ของนิสิตวิชาเอกภาษาอังกฤษ ชั้นปีที่ 3 จำนวน 15 คน ระยะเวลาในการทดลอง 12 สัปดาห์ จากการวิเคราะห์คะแนนสอบก่อนการสอนและหลังการสอนพบว่า นิสิตเขียนสรุปความมีความแตกต่างกันอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติในระดับที่ .01 นิสิตคัดลอกต้นฉบับน้อยกว่าในการสอบหลังการสอนอย่างมีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติในระดับที่ .01 ความเข้าใจในการอ่านของนิสิตบิดเบือนจากต้นฉบับอย่างไม่มีนัยสำคัญทางสถิติ นิสิตสามารถเขียนได้ถูกต้อง (errors-free t-units) ไม่แตกต่างกัน ทั้งก่อนการสอนและหลังการสอน สรุปได้ว่านิสิตสามารถเขียนสรุปความได้ดีขึ้นโดยไม่คัดลอกต้นฉบับ อย่างไรก็ตาม เมื่อเปรียบเทียบผลคะแนนก่อนการสอนและหลังการสอน พบว่านิสิตพัฒนาการอ่านเพื่อความเข้าใจและความสามารถด้านโครงสร้างประโยคได้ไม่สูงมากนัก ทั้งนี้เนื่องจากระยะเวลาในการทดลองมีจำกัด

Introduction

Summary skill is necessary for students because they are required to read long passages and relate what they have read concisely in their summary writing. Students have to go through the reading process, trying to understand the printed words, recapturing the main ideas and putting the ideas in their own words. Most students have to struggle to write by themselves without the influence of the words in the original texts. Some inexperienced students usually underline some important ideas and then join the underlined sentences together. Others may cut some unimportant details out and then copy the original. The practice cannot help the student write a good summary but encourages the students to commit plagiarism, which is a serious crime in academia. Most university curricula include summary writing as a required course. One of the aims of summary teaching is ridding the students' plagiarism. Besides, summary writing is believed to have some other positive effects: developing the students' reading comprehension (Hoye, 1989; Karnes, 1990; Vasupen, 1999) as well as enhancing their writing ability (Westbrooks, 1988). Therefore, it is the main objective of this study to see if summary writing instruction would have any positive effects on the informants, who were Thai university students.

Objectives

The research attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there any difference between the pretest and posttest in terms of overall summary writing quality?

2. Is there any difference between the pre and post tests regarding plagiarism?

3. Is there any difference between the pre and posttests regarding reading comprehension. In other words, is there any difference in terms of text distorted from the original between the pre and post tests?

4. Is there any difference between the pre and post tests regarding syntax?

Scope of the Study

The scope of the study was as follows:

1. Only 15 pre and post tests produced by English majors were included in the study.

2. Detailed grammatical errors were ignored. The syntactical development was reported in terms of error-free t-units.

3. The informants' reading comprehension was measured by the deviation, or any content distorted from the original found in the summaries written.

Definitions of terms

Plagiarism was defined as the informant's copying of at least four consecutive words from the original. However, exceptions were made for many words: technical terms such as *scurvy*, proper names such as *the Pacific* and *the Atlantic Oceans*, nationalities such as *Swedish- Finnish* and a verb such as *would have been*. These words did not need paraphrasing.

Distortion meant that the summary writer changed the original meaning of the text. It covered a word or a group of words that distorted the content of the passage.

An error free t-unit refers to a simple sentence or a subordinate clause without grammatical errors (Gaies, 1980: 53-60). However, errors with punctuation, vocabulary and spellings were allowed because they do not seriously impede communication.

Review of the Related Literature

This review includes reading and writing relation, summary writing to enhance reading and writing abilities, and error-free t-unit analysis.

1. Reading and Writing Relation

Several studies illustrate that reading is related to writing. Rosenblatt. (1988.) states that the relation between the writer and the reader is of a transaction paradigm. That is the writer discovers and constructs meaning, interprets and re-interprets information for a reader, whereas the reader reconstructs and rediscovers that meaning by bringing his/her prior knowledge and experience to the text; therefore, both reading and writing are cognitively similar. That is, both the reader and writer have to construct and interpret meaning from a text.

When the writer becomes a reader of his/her own writing, the writer has to read and reread his/her writing. The reader synthesized his writing. As such, the writer to understand what he has written has to write and rewrite while the reader must have some background knowledge to interpret the meaning in the text. Summary writing has become a useful method to teach both reading and writing. Summarizing is recursive process that is similar

to the reading and writing process. (Kirkland and Saunders. 1991)

2. Summary Writing to Enhance Reading and Writing Abilities

Most research on the effect of summarywriting on reading comprehension hasfound that students receiving summary writing instruction have better reading comprehension and writing ability.

In reading comprehension research, Hoye (1988) investigated the effect of summary writing on the first-year American and ESL university students' reading comprehension. The informants were two freshman composition classes: 24 Americans and 14 international students. Each class was divided into two groups. The first group received summary writing instruction while the other wrote short reaction tasks. The students' work was analyzed statistically and descriptively. The researcher found the positive correlation between the ability of summary writing and reading comprehension. The group that received instruction in writing summaries received higher reading comprehension scores than did the other group. The result revealed that summary writing was a powerful tool for reading.

Karnes (1990) studied the impact of summarization strategy with varied text patterns on the average readers' comprehension performance. The informants were 36 ninth graders. They were randomly assigned to the treatment or control group. Summarization strategies were taught to the first group, while question answering was taught to the second one. The results revealed that summary writing quality of the treatment group scored higher than the other group. The study showed the benefit of summary writing on reading comprehension.

Vasupen (1996) studied the effects of two reading instructions on Rajabhat Institute Chandrakasem first-year English majors. Forty students were presented in reading comprehension and they were divided by their scores into the experimental or control group. The first group was trained to summarize texts, while the other answered comprehension questions. The researcher found that there was no statistical difference between the two groups. Both groups received higher scores in the posttest, but the posttest score of the experimental group tended to be higher than that of the control group. It is important to point out that both two instructions had an influence on the students' reading comprehension; however, the instruction in summary writing seemed to be better.

In writing, Westbrooks (1987) investigated the impact of the instruction of summary writing on second graders. The experimental group received instruction on story summary writing, while the control group

on writing answers to questions in the workbook. It was reported that there was a significant writing improvement of the students in the experimental group.

So far research has indicated that summary writing has positive effects on reading comprehension and writing ability. However, Thai students manifest many problems in summary writing. In analyzing 44 Thai university students' summaries, the most serious problem found was that they could not recapture the main idea. Next, they could not present the reading content appropriately, and finally they committed plagiarism (Sriratampai, 1999).

3. Error-Free T-unit Analysis

One way to evaluate if the students receiving summary writing instruction would have better writing ability is to measure their syntactic development. Gaies (1980: 58) suggests using error-free t-unit as an index to measure ESL students' syntactic development. In English as the first language research, mostly the t-unit analysis is employed, but in ESL studies, error-free t-units are recommended because they can differentiate good and poor student writers. However, since errors are prominent in most Thais students' written works, some errors that may not impede communication should be allowed. These errors are, for example, wrong use of determiners, spellings and punctuation marks.

In short, the literature reviewed shows that students receiving summary writing instruction could better read and write. However, Thai students' summary writing manifests some problems such as the students' failing to capture the main idea, distorting the original and committing plagiarism. In writing measurement, the error t-unit analysis is recommended.

Methodology

1. Informants

The informants of the study were 15 Thai English majors who enrolled in the course EN 332: Reading and Summary in the second semester of academic year 2003. Most of them had studied English for over eight years in Thailand by the time of the data collection.

2. Data Collection

At the beginning of the semester, the informants were assigned to take a pretest summarizing a passage entitled, "Shortened trade route." (See the appendix). Then they were taught summary writing skills for twelve weeks. After the instruction, the same passage was used as the posttest.

3. The Teaching of Summary Writing

The steps of teaching summary writing were as follows:

First, the students were taught to find the outline of a text. In other words, they had to identify the thesis statement, supporting details and conclusion.

Second, they had to put the main idea, supporting details and conclusion in their words. After the text had been paraphrased appropriately, the students would have to check the cohesive devices and make some arrangements to make the summary read smoothly.

Overall, the students were required to write six summaries with at least two drafts for each. The first draft was corrected by the instructor, and then the students corrected errors and turned in the second draft. Each draft was graded. Usually there was a gain of score in the second draft.

4. Data Analysis

In order to answer the research questions, the following steps were taken.

First, to find out whether or not the students could do better summaries in the post test, three raters were asked to read both the pre and post tests. Then the scores given by the raters were calculated for reliability, using Pearson moment product. After that the pre and post test scores given by the three raters were compared using the t-test.

Second, to answer if there was any difference between the pre and post tests in terms of plagiarism, the amount of plagiarism in both tests were analyzed. To be precise, the rate of plagiarism was counted in words against the total words found in each summary. Then mean scores of the plagiarism in the pre and post tests were compared using the t-test.

Third, to see if there was any difference between the pre and post tests regarding the students' comprehension of the text, the amount of distortion in the pre and post tests were compared. The distortion was analyzed as follows:

If the whole sentence was wrong, all the words in such were counted as distortion. For example:

[The ship] company have to pay high premiums. (6 words) (The student's version)

[In fact, the ship company does not pay high premiums. The clients have to pay high premiums.]

If a word distorted the text, that particular word was counted. For example:

The ocean might not have <u>any</u> ice. (1 ord)

In fact, word should be <u>less</u> ice.

After that the mean scores of the distortion in the pre and post test were compared using the t-test.

Finally, to answer the last research question regarding syntax used by the students in the pre and post tests, the mean scores of error-free t-units in both tests were compared using the t-test. Any plagiarism committed in the summary was not counted as error-free t-units.

In all, in order to answer the four research questions, the overall quality in both tests was rated by three raters; the amounts of

plagiarism and of distortion were compared; and finally the numbers of error-free t-units were analyzed. The main statistics used were Pearson moment product and the t-test. The former was meant to find the reliability among the raters, and the latter was used to see if there were any differences between the pre- and post tests regarding plagiarism, distortion, and error-free t-units.

Findings

In order to answer the question which summary writing was better, the pre or the post test, the scores given by the three raters were calculated for reliability. The results indicated that there was a significant correlation among the three raters both in the pre and post tests as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Correlations of scores given by the three raters in the pretest

	Pre 1	Pre 2	Pre 3
Pre R1	1	.94	.79
Pre R2	.94	1	.70
Pre R3	.79	.70	1

*Correlations is significant at the level .01

Table 2. Correlations of scores given by the three raters in posttest

	Post 1	Post 2	Post 3
Post R1	1	.74	.88
Post R2	.74	1	.69
Post R3	.88	.69	1

*Correlations is significant at the level .01

The correlations indicate that the raters' scores both in the pre and post tests had positive relationships. Therefore, the scores given by the raters were reliable.

Table 3. Summary writing quality in the pre and post tests

	N	Mean	S.D.	
Total Pre	15	12.00	4.88.	t = -5.61
Total Post	15	17.20	5.37	

* Significant at .01 level

Table 3 shows that the mean score in the posttest was significantly higher than that in the pretest at the level of .01. Obviously, according to the raters, the post test summary quality was better than that in the pretest.

To answer the second research question if there was any difference between the pre and post test in terms of plagiarism, the amounts of plagiarism were compared between the pre and post tests, using the t-test. The results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Plagiarism in the pre and post tests

	N	Mean	S.D.	
Pretest	15	30.49	20.76	t = 3.50
Posttest	15	12.74	11.12	

* Significant at .01 level

Table 4 reveals that the amount of plagiarism in the pretest was significantly higher than that in the post test. The result shows that in the pretest, the students did not realize that plagiarism was not allowed in summary writing; therefore, they copied most of the original text in their summaries. In the posttest, the drastic decrease of plagiarism is an indication that the students were aware of the fact that plagiarism was not tolerated; therefore, they tried to avoid committing such.

In order to answer the next question if there was any difference between the pre and post tests in terms of distortion of the original text, the mean scores of the amounts of distortion in both tests were compared using the t-test. The results are presented in Table 5

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Table 5. Amount of distortion in the pre and post tests

	N	Mean	S.D.	
Pretest	15	4.34	4.62	t = -.98
Posttest	15	5.91	5.94	

Table 5 shows that there was no difference between the mean scores in the pre and post tests in terms of distortion of the original text. That is the students, trying to avoid plagiarism, had to put ideas in their own words. In the posttest, there was a slight increase of the amount of distortion, which can be interpreted that the students were trying harder to paraphrase the original.

With regard to the final research question if there was any improvement in terms of error-free t-units, the results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Numbers of error-free t-units in the pre and post tests

	N	Mean	S.D.	
Pretest	15	69.32	26.18.	t = .053
Posttest	15	68.91	17.17	

Table 6 shows that there was a slight decrease of the number of error-free t-units in the posttest. However, the difference was not significant. From the table, it can be said that the students in trying to paraphrase the original, they tended to make more errors than in the pretest.

In summary, the results revealed that the three raters' scores were statistically reliable. In the first regard, the overall quality of the summaries written in the posttest was significantly better than that in the pretest at the level of .01. In the second stance, the plagiarism committed in the posttest was significantly decreased from that in the pretest at the level of .01. Thirdly, , there was no difference between the pre and post tests in terms of distortion. It can be explained that the students in attempting to paraphrase the original distorted the original text slightly more in the posttest. Finally, the number of error-free t-units in the posttest was not

significantly different from that in the pretest. It means that the students could not syntactically do better in the posttest. Plausibly, the students were engaged in paraphrasing the original so much that they did not focus their attention on the syntax in the posttest as much as they should have.

Conclusion

This research studied effects of summary writing instruction to 15 university students in one semester. As analyzed by three raters with significantly high reliability, the difference between the pre and post tests revealed that there was a gain in the score of the summary overall quality in the posttest. Plagiarism was also found significantly less in the posttest. However, there were no differences in terms of reading comprehension and syntactic development between the two tests.

Discussion

The results of the study show that the teaching summary writing to English majors have positive effects in regards to overall quality and plagiarism: the overall quality rated by the three raters show high reliability and the students' much less use of plagiarism after the instruction confirm that summary writing is beneficial.

In regard to distortion and syntactic development, findings of the study reveal that there was no significant difference between the pretest and the posttest. It seems that students were highly occupied with paraphrasing--using their own words to substitute the original words. As a result, they paid less attention or ignored the other skills involved. If the practice of summary writing is prolonged, the students will gradually develop their reading and writing skills. Cognitively, they will be encouraged to integrate all the skills required to produce a good summary.

Application

Obviously, summary writing can raise the students' awareness to avoid plagiarism. Therefore, it should be a requirement for all students. Another application of summary writing is that it can be taught across the curriculum. It can be applied to other courses such as literature, critical reading, and writing.

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