

EXPLORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF ABRIDGING SKILLS OF ESL STUDENTS AT THE OPEN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

In tertiary education, summarization is one of the essential skills since it involves many other skills including two basic skills of reading and writing. It is a well known fact that learners have to read, or listen, in order to gather relevant information to reproduce them; may be for their future reference, as well as to exhibit their knowledge to the outside world on many occasions in different forms. In such circumstances, learners are not in a position to reproduce all information they read or listened to due to extraneous factors such as time, memory, and length constraints. Thus, they should have a technique, or a method, to face this challenge in their academic environment and day to day situations. Summarization is one of the solutions to this challenge as it helps to reproduce the information gathered in a logical and coherent manner to convey the same meaning as in the original text.

Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) and van Dijk (1977) assert that during the process of comprehending, summarizing, and remembering source texts, we apply the following summarization rules which are referred to as macro-rules: *deletion* of unnecessary information; *generalization* of information; *integration* of information; and *construction* of information or summarization of a sequence of actions or events. Subsequently, Brown and Day (1983) expanded the Kintsch and van Dijk's (1978) model of summarization rules by adding the rule of *invention* where summary writers invent the topic sentence when it is not provided in the source text by the author. The current study follows this model of summarization rules as the theoretical background.

This is an exploratory study that examines thirty six Sri Lankan upper intermediate ESL university students' summary performance before and after they were provided instruction on summary writing. Objectives of it is to provide further information on upper intermediate level university ESL students' summary writing performance on applying summarizing rules and strategies, and the impact of instruction on summary writing.

METHODOLOGY

Two major research questions: 'what is the performance of upper intermediate ESL students in summary writing' and 'how does instruction affect L2 summary writing' and eight specific research questions are addressed in this study. The hypotheses formulated were based on one general hypothesis: 'there is no significant difference between the means for the pre-test and the post-test groups'. Further, this research is concerned with null hypotheses and other possible outcomes in the form of alternative hypotheses. The sample consisted of 36 first year Diploma in English students from the Open University of Sri Lanka. These students learn English as a second language (ESL) and the English proficiency level of them is upper intermediate. The participants completed a pre-test summary task before they were taught summary writing. This was followed by a post-test summary using the same source text after providing summarizing instruction. The pre-and post-test summaries were analyzed in terms of 1) quality of the summary: the number of main ideas presented in each summary and the appropriate length; 2) summarizing strategies

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used: copy verbatim, generalization of information in a single sentence, and combination of two main ideas in a single sentence; 3) the role of extra-textual information; and 4) the rhetorical structure followed by the students. These aspects were adapted from Palmer and Uso's (1998) study on text summarization. In addition to the textual analysis of the summaries, the impact of instruction on summary writing was also examined by comparing the performance of the pre-and the post-test summaries. The data obtained were scrutinized quantitatively. *T test* was applied as the main technique in the inferential statistics analysis while utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for the data processing. *Paired t-test* was applied to obtain *paired samples statistics* and *paired samples test*. Under *paired samples statistics*, value of *mean*; *standard deviation*; and *standard error mean* of the pre-test and the post-test were examined while *paired samples test* evaluated the *paired differences*. The outcome of *t test* was utilized to compare the *p-value* with the selected value of the *significance level*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results show an improvement in the quality of the summary in the post-test summaries as depicts in Table 1.

	<u>Pre-test</u>	<u>Post-test</u>
Mean of main ideas per summary	3.22	4.42
Mean of words per summary	68.75	64.78
Mean for level of quality (Mean of main ideas / Mean of words)	0.047	0.068

Table 1: Means for Level of Quality of the Pre-and Post-test Summaries

According to table 1, mean for the quality of the pre-test summary is 0.047, whereas for the post-test it is 0.068. The average number of words used in the pre-test (68.75) is more than the appropriate number (66), while it is lesser in the post-test summaries (64.78). However, 11.1% participants were able to include all six main points in their post-test summaries, whereas only 2.8% included all six main points in their pre-test summaries. Considering the application of summarizing strategies, the majority of the students had not employed the 'copy verbatim' strategy in the pre-test, and the post-test summaries as depicts in Table 2. Results indicate a decline in the usage of this strategy in the post-test summaries.

Summarizing Strategy	Total No. of Usage		Average of Usage	
	Pre-test	Post-test	Pre-test	Post-test
Copy Verbatim	5	1	0.14	0.03
Combination	39	50	1.08	1.39
Generalization	20	29	0.56	0.81

Table 2: Use of Summarizing Strategies in the Pre-test Summaries

More than 63% of the pre-test summaries included the 'combination' strategy, whereas more than 91% of the post-test summaries comprised of this strategy once or twice. Greater than 52% of the pre-test summaries were produced by exploiting the 'generalization' strategy, while over 69% of the post-test summaries were included this strategy, once or twice. Thus, there is a progress in application of the 'combination' and 'generalization' strategies after students were provided summarizing instruction.

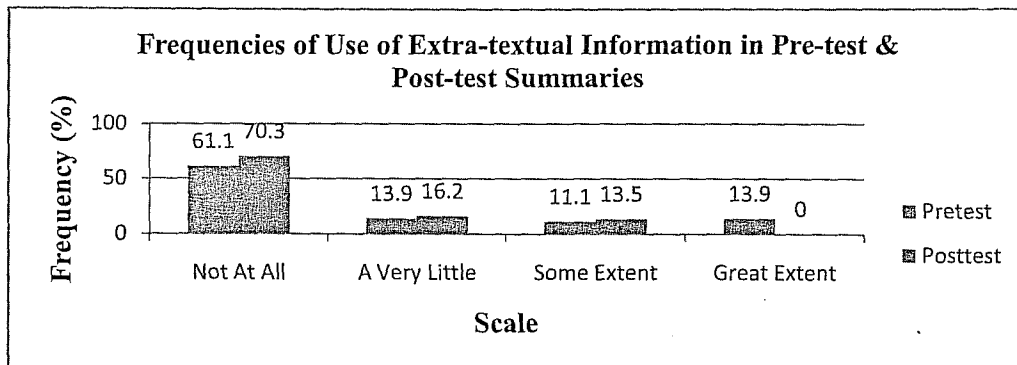


Figure 1: Frequencies of Use of Extra-textual Information in the Pre-and Post-test Summaries

According to Figure 1, most of the participants had not incorporated 'extra-textual information' in their pre-test and post-test summaries. Furthermore, none of the students had included 'extra-textual information' to 'a great extent' in their post-test summaries although 13.9% of them utilized it in their pre-test summaries.

As demonstrates in Figure 2, there is a significant divergence between the 'rhetorical structure' followed by the students in their pre-test and post-test summaries. The majority of the students in the pre-test summaries had not followed the original structure or had followed it to 'a very little extent', whereas the greater part of post-test summaries had followed the rhetorical structure to 'some extent'. The majority of the students in the pre-test summaries had not followed the original structure or had followed it to 'a very little extent', whereas the greater part of post-test summaries had followed the 'rhetorical structure' to 'some extent'.

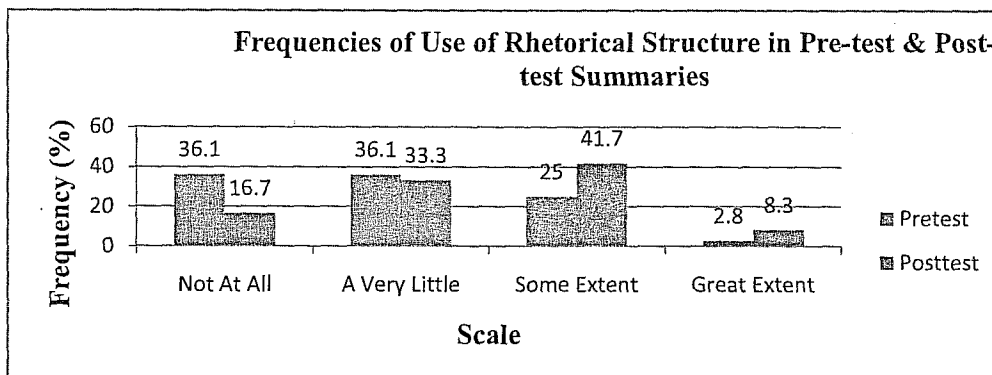


Figure 2: Frequencies of Use of Rhetorical Structure in the Pre-and Post-test Summaries

Accordingly, most of the null hypotheses were rejected and majority of the alternative hypotheses were accepted. Except for the use of 'copy verbatim' strategy and incorporation of 'extra-textual information', all the other aspects of summary performance were directly affected by the instruction.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

A marked improvement was noticed in the post-test summary performance in all four major aspects considered for the current study. Therefore, these results stress the need for the proper instructions for ESL summary writers. Thus, the outcome of this study facilitates to understand the nature of upper intermediate ESL students' performance of summary writing and it may help

the ESL practitioners to gain a better understanding of the difficulties that ESL students face in summary writing. Moreover, as there is a lack of research on summary writing in Sri Lanka, outcome of this study may help Sri Lankan ESL practitioners to adapt their teaching techniques, as well as evaluation criteria, more effectively and efficiently.

This study of course has its limitations particularly in terms of the sample size and the number of tests utilized. However, this study provides substantial grounds for further research to investigate the nature of ESL students' summary performance, as well the impact of summarizing instruction on the performance of summary writing.

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