A study of essential summary strategies for Japanese EFL students with lower-intermediate English proficiency

Kana Ozaki

Abstract

This current study is a part of a larger project which explores university students' needs of summary strategies and appropriate instructions for teachers. This study focuses on two aspects of summary writing: to what extent students can understand the main idea of the reading text (Main Idea Coverage); and what reading strategies may encourage the performance in MIC. Total 31 university students are asked to write a summary in Japanese, and questionnaire is also conducted after the summary performance. The results show that there is significant difference in MIC and integgation (INT) between good MIC performers and poor ones, however, the frequency of strategy usage in every stage of summary performance has no difference between the groups. In detail, understanding of the title before reading and planning of writing summary during reading may be keys that boost the MIC performance for beginners of summary writing.

Keywords: summary writing, main idea coverage, reading strategy, Japanese students, lower-intermediate English proficiency

Introduction

What English skills are necessary for university students who learn English as second or foreign language? One of the answers to this question may be 'global literate English,' introduced by Wallace (2002). Global literate English refers to written English used in a formal situation such as a public speech rather than in a casual conversation. Furthermore, we are required to respond to the given context with our own opinion (Butler, 2013). To use this kind of official English, we need to have skills to grasp main points of written or spoken English. For these reasons, summarizing skills seem to overlap what we have to learn at the first stage of learning global literate English.

However, summarizing written English is widely recognized as one of the most difficult skills to learn because it requires good level of both reading and writing (Shi, 2012). This is why teaching summary to students with lower-intermediate English proficiency is a huge challenge for teachers (Kato, 2018a). In case of Japan, students have far less opportunity to learn skills of summary in their first or second/foreign language at any stages from elementary education to University one, compared with students in the western

countries. This may cause the less development of summary skills of Japanese university students. (Kato, 2021).

Literature review

Many researchers have examined how students with different level of English proficiency perform in summarizing a text. In general, the higher proficiency students have, the more range of summarizing strategies they use (Phakiti, 2003). As Li (2014) compared the effect of reading and writing skills on writing summary, he concluded writing skills have more impact on summary performance than reading strategies do.

Regarding of the way of rating summary, wholistic scoring and analytic scoring rubric have been widely utilized. The latter is now recognized as helpful for teachers and better for learners, for it can show the writer's strength and weakness, which turned a helpful feedback to the learners (Kato, 2022). However, judging their summary with rubric score scales is said difficult because they have a large number of linguistic errors and copying from the original text. It can thus be said that teaching and rating methods of summary writing are neither constructed nor completed yet.

Research questions

This current study pays attention to one of the summary performance: main idea coverage (MIC). Then it presents following two questions: (1) To what extent do all students perform in the main idea coverage?; (2) Is there any signficant difference in the strategy usage between students with higher and lower scores in the main idea coverage?

Methodology

Total 31 university students took part in this study. Majoring in biological science, including biotechnology, bioproduction, agriculture, and bioenvironment, the students have one English class a week taught by the author. They didn't have almost any experience of writing summary either in English or in Japanese. Summary writing was conducted as a part of class activity on the first meaning. Then all the students attending the class wrote summary and got feedback from the author. On the other hand, they were completely free to decide whether they join the study with the author.

Two raters including the author have taught English at a university. The author and the other rater were corresponded to the rating scales on a working-sheet, particularly about the five main ideas of the English text, before beginning to rate students' summary. The five main ideas are; 1) taste cells are not only in a mouth but in a stomach and intestines; 2) taste cells have a function to take bad food out of the body; 3) taste cells are found in mice's nose; 4) the way taste cells work is still under study; 5) the next research may focus on human noses.

A reading material is prepared from an English textbook: *Science for Fun!* (Kinseido, 2017). The text consists of some 220 English words and Japanese glossaries. This is because previous studies have presented that L1 glossary is the most useful aid for summary writers (Kato, 2018b). The level of the text covers the range of 300-400 score points of TOEIC, developed by a Japanese English-test maker, iiBC, which is widely regarded as a credible assessment of English proficiency among universities

and companies in Japan. The text should be suitable for the participants in terms of the level of the English language; they can somehow read the text with Japanese glossaries.

The rubric used in this study is on a basis of Li's (2014) analytic rubric for EFL summary writing. However, Li's (2014) rubric may not be appropriate to evaluate the poorer writers with a large number of linguistic errors and copying (Kato, 2022). Then the author also examined whether paying attention to the text structures of the original text helped the summary writers. Moreover, the multiple rating scales were simplified by the author because Li's rating scales seem to be vague to some extent expressing with a lot of particular adjectives, adverbs, and phrases: excellent, good, moderate, basically, few, rare, consistent, probably, occasional, inconsistent, occasionally, noticeably, an accumulation of, serious, frequent, predominantly, mostly, some, accurate, appropriate, and adequate. Then the scales used in this study are corresponded to the number of main ideas, mis-ordering in integration, mis-use of language, and copying. As a result of this modification, the scales have only four multiples instead of Li's six ones.

Design and data collection procedure

Total 31 students were asked to write Japanese summary on English original text. Before starting the work, students had instruction about making summary which is based on Kato's (2022) instruction: (1) do not bullet your summary; (2) do not translate all the text; (3) make your summary within 200 Japanese letters, which equals making summary one third in length of the original one (Japanese translation of the whole original text holds almost 600 Japanese letters); (4) your summary would possibly make someone who doesn't read it understand the content. Then the students were given 30 minutes to read and write a summary. After completing the summary, students were asked to work on a questionnaire about what strategies they used before and after reading or writing. The results of both analytic scoring rubrics of written summary and multiple-questioning questionnaire were analyzed with descriptive statistics. Summary performance is evaluated in four aspects: main idea coverage (MIC); integration (INT); language use (LU); and source use (SU). Students' comments on their own summary performance were processed with qualitative analysis.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the summary performance of the all participants. The over all score ranges from 13.5 to 2 (Mean=8.13, S.D.=2.78) out of the total score, 14. Source use is the highest score among four realms; however, this might mean that most of the students did not copy the original text due to the lack of understanding of any whole English sentence with their poor English vocabulary. Indeed, many of the participants give a comment like the following: "I had many words which I don't know. That's why my summary ended up illogical" (participant 20).

TABLE 1				
Result of all 31 students' summary performances				
	Mean	S.D.	Max.	Min.
Main Idea Coverage (5.00)	1.89	1.26	5.00	0.00
Integration (3.00)	1.65	0.53	2.50	0.00
Language Use (3.00)	1.89	0.59	3.00	0.50
Source Use (3.00)	2.71	0.40	3.00	1.50
Overall (14.00)	8.13	2.78	13.5	2.00

Table 2 and 3 present the result of summary performance of 15 students with the higher MIC scores and that of 16 students

with the lower MIC scores, respectively. Significant difference between two groups can be seen in two kinds of performance: MIC, $t(29)=7.25$, p<.05; and INT, $t(29)=1.99$, p<.05. In other words, the factors which affects on MIC performance seem to be the skills of MIC and INT. However, INT shows only participants' Japanese skills in this study. Then the study will next explore what summary strategies distinguish the higher MIC performers from lower ones.

TABLE 2				
Result of summary performance of 15 students with higher MIC scores				
	Mean	S.D.	Max.	Min.
Main Idea Coverage (5.00)	2.93	0.59	5.00	2.00
Integration (3.00)	1.83	0.39	2.50	1.50
Language Use (3.00)	1.97	0.62	3.00	0.50
Source Use (3.00)	2.77	0.31	3.00	2.50
Overall (14.00)	9.50	1.91	13.5	6.50

TABLE 3				
Result of summary performances of 16 students with lower MIC scores				
	Mean	S.D.	Max.	Min.
Main Idea Coverage (5.00)	0.91	0.54	2.00	0.00
Integration (3.00)	1.47	0.57	2.00	0.00
Language Use (3.00)	1.81	0.56	2.50	0.50
Source Use (3.00)	2.66	0.46	3.00	1.50
Overall (14.00)	6.84	2.12	9.50	2.00

Table 4 describes how often the participants used summary strategies in four stages in their performance. They most frequently used strategies before reading (Mean=2.05, S.D.=0.54), but there cannot be recognized any significant difference in strategy usage among four stages. Overall, it can be said that the students use quite a few strategies and more strategy instructions may have possibility to encourage students' summary performance. Then this study examine what strategy may affect on the better performance of the MIC.

TABLE 4				
Frequency of strategy usage by all summary writers in the four stages				
	all students (n=31)			
	Mean	S.D.	Max.	Min.
Before-reading (3 items)	2.05	0.54	3.00	0.00
While-reading (16 items)	1.67	0.37	3.00	0.00
Before-writing (5 items)	0.9	0.60	3.00	0.00
While-writing (9 items)	1.56	0.32	3.00	0.00

Table 5 shows the frequency of strategy usage by students in two groups. In both groups, the students tended to use more strategies before and while reading, on the other hand, less strategies before and while writing. However, there cannot be seen any significant difference in frequency of strategy usage between two groups in any stages. Then the study examined the difference in each strategies which they used before and while reading.

TABLE 5								
Frequency of strategy usage by students with higher and lower MIC scores in the four stages								
	Students with higher MIC (n=15)				Students with lower MIC (n=16)			
	Mean	S.D.	Max.	Min.	Mean	S.D.	Max.	Min.
Before-reading (3 items)	2.22	0.62	3.00	0.00	1.90	0.40	3.00	0.00
While-reading (16 items)	1.75	0.26	3.00	0.00	1.60	0.44	3.00	0.00
Before-writing (5 items)	0.93	0.64	3.00	0.00	0.859	0.57	3.00	0.00
While-writing (9 items)	1.53	0.28	3.00	0.00	1.586	1.59	3.00	0.00

Between two groups of students, the significant differences are recognized only in the two strategies: whether they understand the title before reading, $t(29)=3.24$, p<.05; and whether they plan how to write a summary while reading, $t(29)=3.19$, p<.05. This describes that higher performer in MIC understand what the title of the text means more deeply than the other group, and they more frequently think about how they write their summary during reading comprehension. Checking the title is a fundamental skill of reading comprehension, but lower performers in MIC show little understanding of title (Mean=1.25, S.D.=0.75), while better writers present more frequency of reading the title (Mean=2.15, S.D.=0.72). As for the planning of summary during reading is used more frequently by the better performers (Mean=2.27, S.D.=1.00) than poorer writers (Mean=1.13, S.D.=1.00). Organizing of their own summary during reading may encourage the students to pay attention to the compositions of the original text. The understanding of the structure of the reading text will probably boost their comprehension of the main idea of the text.

Conclusion and limitation

Main idea coverage is one of the fundamental skills in summary writing, however, it is still difficult for many students in this study. This result corresponds to previous research. At the very first stage of summary learning, students tend to use less strategies. For the lower-intermediate students, teachers may need to give basic instructions such as paying attention to the title before reading, and recognizing the structure of the reading material along with its paragraphs. Some previous studies suggest that reading strategies are less important than writing ones, however, reading skills seem to be essential to the primary level of summary learners with lower English proficiency. Further study will explore how the participants develop their performance in writing summary after a series of trainings of reading strategies in class.

This study has many limitations. First, the size of sample is smaller than usual to adapt a statistic research. Further research will need a larger number of participants. The two groups separated in this study depend on their performance in MIC. However, the grouping should be done with their total score of their reading and writing performance if they write their summary in English. This study, on the other hand, is distinguished from previous ones in terms of simply examining the summary learners' MIC apart from their writing skills in English. Though this current research has showed only a small part of what summary writing requires writers, it may suggest that fundamental reading strategies are significantly helpful for the beginners of summary writing.

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