

# Teaching Basic Research Skills in an Introductory Writing Class

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## Abstract

The types of compositions that low-intermediate level student writers are asked to do usually involve personal essay topics. While useful for teaching basic composition skills, these rhetorical forms do not adequately prepare students for writing longer academic essays. This paper suggests some ways to teach basic writing skills in an introductory composition course which can help students produce academically oriented research essays. Through summary writing and paraphrase practice, low-intermediate level students can start to master skills which will help them later on in their academic careers.

Keywords : EFL composition, summary and paraphrase writing, content-based instruction (CBI)

## Introduction

University students who study English are given various types of writing tasks. The most basic type of writing skill starts with sentence writing, while the most advanced type of writing students are called upon to do is academic research. Typically, these skills are taught to correspond to the ability of the students and, subsequently, correspond to the amount of education they have already attained. Thus, in the beginning years (and lower levels), students are given much instruction in sentence writing and basic paragraph writing. At the other end of the spectrum, in their junior and senior years (and at the advanced levels), students are typically given instruction in more complicated rhetorical forms and asked to write multi-paragraph and even multi-page essays.

In many English programs writing instruction is required during the students' first and second years. So, like it or not, they are taught basic, but important writing skills such as how to write a topic sentence, different kinds of support, transitional devices, and concluding sentences. Along the way, various writing forms are also taught: narrative, opinion, process, comparison/contrast, etc. If the students are fortunate, they are actually given instruction in these basic composition skills, are given plenty of practice and feedback, and manage to acquire some level of competence at writing paragraphs or short essays. Some students, however, are unfortunate enough to be enrolled in a 'composition' class which is actually a grammar course in disguise. All too often, true composition skills are ignored or given short shrift by an instructor who sees the instruction of writing as an opportunity for teaching sentence-level grammar. While these students may improve their accuracy in the target language, they may not learn enough about how to compose in English to even write an effective topic sentence.

Perhaps due to the requirement of composition

instruction at the lower levels, there is a large selection of teaching materials for beginning to intermediate composition courses. Many of these textbooks, which use a process writing approach, appear quite similar. Example readings on various topics of high interest are used as models for a particular rhetorical form. Students are asked to identify organizational patterns and taught how to use these patterns in their own writing. From unit to unit, the typical EFL composition textbook changes topics, and focuses on a different type of writing output. In this way, learners receive instruction in a variety of basic compositional forms. In addition, at these lower levels, the types of writing that students are usually asked to do is that of personal topics which require little or no reading or data collection. The rationale behind this is that personal topics are more interesting for students to write about, easier for them to have something to say, and potentially more motivating due to the fact that they are writing about themselves and about their own ideas. However, Kröll (1979) found that, among teachers who taught freshman composition at American universities, the personal essay was rated lower in importance than other types of writing.

## Material Selection

Beyond textbooks which provide practice in these basic forms of composition, it is difficult to find many ESL instructional materials which teach longer essay writing and research skills to low-intermediate level learners. If an instructor wishes to teach first or second year university students how to collect information and use that information in a research report, in most cases, the instructor will have to develop his or her own materials because there just is not anything available which is applicable to an EFL university setting in Japan. While personal topics such as writing about their best friend, a frightening experience, or why living in the country is better (or not better) than living in the city may be 'interesting', there is no guarantee that the writing task is

any easier nor that the student will produce better writing. Not to mention the fact that the instructor might find such simple writing topics often lacking in depth and variation from one student to another. However, if students are given topics that are not personal, but rather require critical thinking, both learner and instructor may find the task and the product to be much more challenging and interesting. Rather than being an overly difficult task, lower-level EFL students can successfully do independent research and use the information they collect in a research essay when the task is broken down into finite 'do-able' parts. In this report, I will describe the types of skills which students need to write a research essay, and offer some ways to teach those skills so that students can successfully accomplish the task.

### Reading to Write

One useful skill which will help students on the way to producing expository, or "academic" writing is writing summaries. Researchers point out that this is one of the most useful skills that students can practice (Johns, 1981; Shih, 1986). Summary writing is the very essence of a reading-to-write activity. At the risk of sounding too obvious, summary writing is both a reading activity and a writing activity and, as such, it is an excellent way to teach and practice both skill areas.

As a reading activity,

- the text serves as a model for the target form of writing. In the case of the current paper, the goal was for students to produce expository academic writing, so newspaper articles which presented various points of view were used as the main input for text models.
- comprehension of the main ideas is key, so learners need to read for overall meaning of the text rather than focus closely on sentence-level lexical items. In classes which are referred to in the current paper, texts that were appropriate for the learners' level were used or, when not available, texts were edited to make them easier to comprehend. Effective summary writing naturally requires repeated readings of the text and, through doing this, students gain an even deeper understanding of the text.
- the text is input in the specific content area, so learners can increase their knowledge of a particular topic. In a content-based curriculum, various texts that are related to the same content area are used, so rather than introducing a different topic for each new text, the instructor can choose readings that allow learners to gain knowledge about various aspects of the same topic. In this way, the text serves as both a model for writing, and a source of knowledge about a specific content area (White, 1995: 59).
- students are exposed to vocabulary and sentence structures which they will need to use (or, more precisely, *adapt*) when writing their summary. The textual input is not only a rhetorical model, but also a knowledge base of content-related language that accrues as the learner reads texts related to the same

topic area. In a content-based curriculum, initially learners may confront difficult content-specific lexical items, however, if given the opportunity to continue reading about the same topic, they will gain more exposure to the same or similar vocabulary. In this way, learners are able to recycle and build up a corpus of words which are connected to a specific content area.

As a writing activity,

- writing summaries can serve as a way for instructors to evaluate how successful learners are at comprehending the overall meaning and the main points of information contained in a text. Rather than having students answer typical sorts of "comprehension" questions, students can demonstrate to what degree they have understood a text by producing an effectively written summary. (Here, "effective" does not equal "grammatically correct." Learners can show that they have managed to identify the main ideas in a reading even if their sentences are less than grammatically accurate.)
- the reading task is given purpose. When learners are asked to write a summary of an article, they immediately have a reason for reading it. Whether or not the topic is of personal interest to them, they are challenged to show that they can read, pick out the important information, then produce a summarized version of what they have read. Hence, the written product becomes the impetus for reading.
- learners must identify the underlying structure of ideas in the reading text and formulate their summaries along the same lines. This is similar to having learners write an outline of a reading text. An outline helps them see the ways ideas are organized. Through the process of writing summaries, learners discover how the writer puts the information together, and present the summarized information in the same order.
- summary writing in itself can teach students the need to filter out information that is not critical to understanding the whole. Teachers can tell students to "not worry" about the parts that are not important, but this is not as effective as when students find out for themselves which parts (or, "chunks" of information) are important and which are not as important. Summaries are, by their very nature, a compacted version of the original, so there is a built-in need for learners to extract the more important parts from the lesser ones. This requires students to interact with the text and determine, through reading and thinking, which parts to include in the written summary.
- making a plagiarism-free summary means that students also need to have good paraphrasing skills. As an adjunct to teaching summary skills, it is important that the instructor also spend some time showing students various methods for paraphrasing sentences.

Most of the benefits to learners are not made obvious when they are learning to write summaries. Many of these skills are an outcome of having learned to write summaries. In the next section, I will describe the process used to teach

my students summary and and paraphrase writing skills.

### **Writing Summaries of Films**

To introduce the concept of what a summary is, I chose to adapt an activity developed by Whyte (2010 & 2014) which summarizes a short film. By using a film, rather than a printed text, I was able to focus students' attention on what is involved in making a summary; primarily, it is an everyday activity that all of us do when telling someone about something we have seen, heard, or read. Additionally, the film has no spoken language in it, so students were left with only visual input. From this bare minimum, students were able to concentrate solely on what one does when making a summary.

Students were shown a 10-minute film entitled, *Momentos* (Nuno Rochas, dir.) They were told to make notes as they watched the film. Following this, students worked in small groups to compile and make their notes more complete. The film was shown once more to allow them to add more details. Working with the whole class, a list of events in the film was created on the whiteboard, and students were asked to fill in any missing details to their lists.

Students were next asked to find the main parts, or "chunks" (Whyte, 2010) of the film. They were also instructed to write down what the film was about – essentially, to find the main idea. Finding where one chunk of information begins and where it ends is an important ability for students to develop. Films are a good way to introduce this concept because one scene in the film is one chunk of information. It is related to the other parts of the film, but there is something about it that allows it to stand on its own. A chunk of information has coherence, thus there is a beginning and an end. By watching a film, the instructor may help students see where these chunks begin and end by pausing the film and briefly discussing what has happened in that scene.

In order to help students form their ideas, a list of about 30 descriptions of scenes from the movie was distributed, and the class was instructed to choose which sentences were most important. Ideas were compared in small groups, then the whole class discussed what the best answers were. A PowerPoint presentation was used to show screen shots from the film to represent the main events in the film. In this way, the students were able to recall important parts of the film, and with the help of the handout, begin to label what these parts were. Finally, students were instructed to write a summary of the film using what they remembered as well as the written descriptions of the main scenes. As this was their first time to write a summary, instruction was given in how to write an introductory sentence for a standard summary in which three necessary pieces of information are given: *what* are they summarizing (a film), *who* created it (the director), and what it is *about* (the main idea).

The above lessons were carried out over the course of three 90-minute class periods. The final summary of the film was given for homework. The main goal of the activities was to help students identify the main

parts (or "chunks") of the film. The most difficult thing was for students to distinguish which parts were necessary. Students were asked to imagine what they would say to a friend or a family member if they were to tell that person about the film. And, since this would be a summary, they were asked to imagine that they would not have a lot of time to tell the person about the film. In deciding which parts were necessary to relate to someone, they were also asked to think about the main idea, or theme of the film. Deciding how to describe the film in such a way so as to convey the main message helped students to decide which parts of the story were necessary to include and which were not so important. Much discussion was held among students in small groups, with students giving reasons based on what parts they thought were important to convey the plot line and other important parts of the film.

Throughout this process, it was made clear to the students that there was no "right" or "wrong" answer, *per se*, but it was important to decide how much information they wanted to give to the reader. As all of the discussion was content based, the emphasis was taken off lexical and grammatical items. This helped students realize the importance of message and content over accuracy.

### **Short Article Summaries**

The next step in the process was to continue to introduce summary writing skills by using a short newspaper article. This was treated as more of a standard reading activity in the beginning. Schema building and vocabulary building exercises were followed by two readings of the text: one quick reading to get the overall meaning of the article, followed by a slower, close reading (Kain, 1998) of the text to identify key ideas and information that would later be necessary when writing the summary. An online newspaper article (Hellmich, 2008) had been chosen for its potential interest to the students (how to lose weight) as well as its relatively low level of difficult vocabulary items. Even so, some editing was done in order to make the article shorter and slightly more easy to comprehend.

As with the film summary activity before, students were next asked to identify the main idea of the article, and the main chunks of information. Similar to the film summary activity, discussion of where the different parts was done. Differences of opinion did come up, so small group discussions were useful in helping students determine where to separate the main parts of the article.

One reason that this particular newspaper article was chosen was because it included excerpts from interviews with various experts in the exercise field (i.e., a trainer, an author, and a scientist). Newspaper reporters normally use information which they have gathered directly from firsthand sources. Typically, the experts are mentioned by name and qualification, then their information is quoted and/or paraphrased in the article. This feature of newspaper reporting is very similar to the way that academics quote sources from experts in their

field. Exposure to this type of citation device is important for students even at the beginning levels. By being made aware of who is saying what, and what type of expertise that person has, students are able to more easily identify the chunks of information in the article. Sometimes the information given by one expert took up only one paragraph, while, at other times, two or more paragraphs were used. Where once expert began, one chunk began. When that expert's section was finished, that chunk was brought to a close. By focusing on the information that was being presented in the text, students were able to look at the big picture, rather than doing sentence by sentence processing which often results in loss of the overall meaning.

The final task for students to do was to distill the information from the main parts of the article down into a final summary. The same format for writing an introductory sentence was used, adapting it for the title and author of the article. Rather than writing about parts of a story, this time students needed to summarize each section of the information that the experts had given. As before, there was some degree of variation from student to student as to which information was necessary to include. This nevertheless lent itself well to small group discussion which often resulted in 'agreeing to disagree' due to differences in personal choice about what was deemed necessary to put into the final product. A discussion was held about what kind of information should be put into a concluding sentence, and the final assignment was given to complete their summaries and hand them in the following week.

### **The Concept of Plagiarism**

Up to this point, students need not have been given any detailed instruction about what do with the words in the article. For many students, just reading and finding the main points of information is a challenging enough task. During the summary writing activities, it is useful if the instructor casually mentions that the students should "change the author's words" or that they should "use their own words." However, after having been introduced to and practiced the basics of summary writing, it was important that students be made aware of plagiarism and how to avoid it.

In the Western academic world, plagiarism is taken quite seriously and students are warned about not doing it from a very early age. However, in other cultures, this is not always the case. Some cultures may view the usage of another writer's prose as a way to compliment the writer or to show one's own knowledge by being able to quote verbatim the writings of a respected author. While this attitude is not unknown in the West, the way in which one writer borrows or uses another writer's words can differ quite a lot. Sometimes, when a student 'borrows' the words of another writer, he or she is simply not aware that the original author should be given credit. For this reason, when teaching students how to write summaries, it is suggested that the instructor introduce and explain the concept of plagiarism in a non-

threatening way. At the same time, instruction in how to avoid committing plagiarism is also recommended.

First students need to be made aware that when they write their name on an assignment, this means that they are the creator of that document. Students should be made aware that the instructor assumes that, because the student's name is on the assignment, he/she wrote everything in it. If students find information in some source and do not give credit to the writer of that information, then the teacher might think that the student is trying to pull one over on him. In this writer's experience, students are generally honest and want to avoid this type of confusion.

The most common way to give credit to a source is to quote what the writer wrote (or the speaker spoke) by writing it verbatim inside of quotation marks (e.g., *William S. Clark said, "Boys be ambitious!"*). Literature students are quite familiar with using quotes because this is the way spoken speech is written in novels. However, they should also be made aware that anytime they directly copy someone else's words – either spoken or written – they need to use quotes.

Another method for using another author's words that is generally more preferred in academic writing (but perhaps less well known by EFL students) is the paraphrase. While this is perhaps unfamiliar to many students is it nonetheless easy enough to explain and practice if done with clear and copious examples. The method is to simply change the writer's original words, but keep the basic message the same (e.g., *William S. Clark encouraged students to aim high*). In my beginning composition classes, I introduce nine basic methods for writing paraphrases:

- use a synonym
- use an antonym
- use a phrasal verb (e.g., *discarded* → *threw away*)
- use general verbs (e.g., *manufacture* → *make*)
- use phrases (e.g., *bilingual* → *speak two languages*)
- change the order of clauses
- change adjective into relative clauses (e.g., *a challenging task* → *a task which is challenging*)
- change parts of speech (e.g., *nouns* ↔ *verbs*)
- change the voice of verbs (i.e., *passive voice* ↔ *active voice*)

The caveat here is that none of these methods alone will produce an acceptable paraphrase. Using only one method will result in a 'change' from the original, however such a paraphrase would be overly simple and would in actuality be too close to the original.

Students are shown examples and given practice exercises for each of the methods above. As with summary writing, paraphrase writing involves making choices about what to change and how to change it. Small group discussions help in this instance also to see different ways of making paraphrases of the same sentences. After various alternative versions of the paraphrase are discussed in class, the instructor then shows

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how he paraphrased each sentence. It is important to make students aware that we are all writers, making choices about the best way to do things, and as such, the teacher is just one more writer.

One lesson in paraphrasing with explanation and practice will of course not be enough for students to become skillful in this important writing skill. After the concepts and methods are introduced, students need to be given frequent practice. However, with these new skills in their arsenal, students are now prepared to return to practicing summarizing skills.

### More Challenging Tasks

In the early stages of teaching summary and paraphrasing skills, students can benefit greatly from careful instruction, detailed examples, slow-paced lessons, and plenty of small group work. It is important to make sure that all students feel confident that they can accomplish these somewhat daunting tasks. I have overheard students express surprise at the fact that in their introductory composition class, they were being asked to read newspaper articles and write summaries of them. The students also voiced astonishment that they *were able to do* the tasks that their instructor had given them.

Subsequent lessons should review the basic skills that students have been introduced to: finding the main idea, determining where one “chunk” of information begins and ends, deciding which details from each part are necessary to include in the summary and which are not, and taking the filtered out information, paraphrasing it and creating a final summary of the whole article. While the same skills should continually be recycled, students should also be introduced to new topics. However, once a new content area is taken up, students should be given the opportunity to read a total of two or three articles which are all related to one central topic.

When summary writing tasks are included in a content-based curriculum, students are given many opportunities to increase their world knowledge and lexical recognition ability in a variety of topic areas. At the same time, they will be able to develop skills which will enable them to produce academic essays that combine information from various sources written by different authors. In subsequent reports in this series, I hope to focus on other skills that can be taught to low-intermediate level students to help them produce academic writing.

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