

SUMMARY WRITING IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Abstract

The aim of English language teaching is to improve the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Very often, due to time constraints, it is a challenge to integrate the development of writing skills in the curriculum. A possible solution is the summary format as it is conveniently short but nevertheless it allows learners to demonstrate understanding of a text's main ideas and ability to present them in an organized way while using suitable style, appropriate vocabulary and correct grammar. Summary writing in the context of teaching English for specific purposes at the University of Forestry in Bulgaria is a learning task performed on the basis of reading and listening comprehension activities with texts or recordings related to the respective scientific area of interest (forestry, landscape architecture and etc.). Teaching summary writing involves a dynamic process in which the learners are encouraged to critically assess the information and think of logically constructed summaries. To achieve this, summary writing entails class discussions and comments of examples which are conducted in English with advance level students. Thus, the synergy approach to writing ensures the high motivation of both the learners and the teacher to successfully complete the writing tasks. Some of the teaching techniques for writing efficient summaries are, among others: studying the style of summary writing of scientific Bulgarian and English texts, writing a summary in English and another one in the native Bulgarian language of the same text/recording and writing summaries of texts/recordings with different lengths.

Key words: summary writing, ESP

Introduction: the practice of language training at the University of Forestry in Sofia

At present, the organization of the language training at the University of Forestry in Sofia is on the basis of the students' field of study. That means that the students are not grouped with regard to the level of their language skills. In this way it is common to have students at A2, B1, B2 and C1 levels in one group. The groups, on average, comprise of 15 students, and the teacher follows a curriculum which ensures that these mixed ability students will be able to pass the course requirements while at the same time they are motivated to study. In short, according to the curriculum, the students have to learn an obligatory list of specialized vocabulary and to make class presentations. The class tasks are focused on grammar exercises and translation of texts which often require assistance on the part of the teacher. There are also end-term grammar tests which, on the whole, show unsatisfactory results, sadly, bringing frustration to the diligent students. Therefore one important question facing me, as a teacher, is how to teach grammar effectively?

Though this question is *'eternal'* for language teaching, and solutions will only be true for a particular situation, the students at the University of Forestry seem *'happier'* when they are involved in practicing the productive skill of

speaking in the delivery of presentations. In my case, the presentations have demonstrated good acquisition of the language necessary for the description of tree species. At the same time when the students have chosen their own presentation topics, which often are very scientific in nature, they have been able to make good presentations from a lexical and grammatical points of view. The very fact of language production seems to motivate the reception of lexical and grammatical constructions. This has led to the idea of incorporating the other productive skill, writing, in the curriculum. Before presenting the learning task of summary writing, the practical significance of some types of summaries will be discussed.

1. Types of summaries for practical purposes

1.1. Abstracts

Abstracts are an academic piece of written text. In essence, they are a short summary of the completed research. The format of writing abstracts is of practical significance to those students who intend to conduct research. However, it should be noted that the graduate students (studying for a master's and PhD degree) at the University of Forestry present a thesis, and there have been opinions that these theses must contain an abstract in English. The final

part of this paper will attempt to show some basic guidelines for writing abstracts in English.

1.2. Executive summaries and other types of summaries for business purposes

Working in a business environment requires the preparation of executive summaries of reports. Many documents written to present policies and strategies also contain executive summaries. Though this is a longer form of summary, the general principles remain the same. Along with these, the future professionals in companies will have to be able to submit in writing various data and information in a concise form such as notes from meetings, information about products, suggestions for innovations and etc. The dynamic businesses favour short forms of writing.

1.3. Book reviews

Because of their popularity book reviews are excellent to illustrate the main feature of all types of summaries: their informative nature. In a book review, of course, the aim will be to give the reader a general idea of what a book is about, and to sell the book. Writing summaries in a learning environment is a task important for achieving teaching goals in the context of synergy approach to learning that will be discussed in the later parts of this paper.

2. Writing summaries

2.1. The summary as a learning task

The aim of this paper is to present an approach to developing the writing skills of mixed ability groups of students with the purpose of

developing their language performance, and, in particular, improving their grammar understanding and acquisition.

To do this the summary as a form of written text has been identified as useful and convenient. The reasons for this choice are the short length of a summary, and, therefore, the time required for writing a summary of a familiar text.

For students who have English once a week for 2 hours, it is possible to read a text and have the written summary for the time of the weekly classes. Moreover, re-writing and editing are also not a threatening task as the student summaries are usually about 100-250 words long.

To write effective summaries the students are told to concentrate only on the main ideas of the text. Thus, the focus of the learning task is content rather than form [1]. In this respect two strategies depending on the particular group of students can be adopted. With advance level groups the texts are discussed in English. Initially in the process of teaching summary writing, this usually takes place as a preparatory step; later, as the students acquire confidence and experience, this can be done as a post-writing and pre-writing exercise. The second strategy applies for students with unsatisfactory knowledge of English or below the threshold proficiency level for efficient writing [1]. The discussions in these groups are conducted in Bulgarian.

The table below shows the steps of the summary writing task in the context of language teaching.

Table 1. Steps of the summary writing task

N	Steps	Time of activity
1	Reading (and translating) the text to be summarized	varies by group and text
2	Discussion of text ideas	20 min
3	Writing the summary	20-30 min
4	Discussion of the effective summaries of the particular text	20 min

2.2. Common mistakes of students

It is very common for students to write a summary by just copying sentences from the original text. Although this might be somewhat acceptable for students at a pre-intermediate level as a first draft, students need to be encouraged to use their own words to summarize the texts. Besides, it is not uncommon for advanced level students to copy from the original text when writing a summary. To help students over-

come this problem, exercises on paraphrasing and linking ideas can be useful.

Another mistake is the focus on details. Usually, the students disproportionately organize their summaries by devoting 2/3 of them to the first 1/3 of the text, and then summarizing the greater part of the text in the final 1-2 sentences of the summary. The students often feel the urge to show they have understood the text and tend to give too many details. This problem is easy to solve: after the discussion of effective summa-

ries most students are able to identify only the main ideas.

A third mistake that some students make is to express an opinion on the summarized content. For example I had a group of students in Landscape Architecture who had the task to summarize an article on the garden preparations for winter. Several students concluded their summaries by saying their opinion for the techniques and activities for garden winterizing discussed in the text.

These three types of mistakes are related to the summary writing process which is not different in a learner's native or second language. Below are discussed some implications of the summary writing task directly related to the teaching of English.

2.3. Synergy approach to summary writing

A particularly difficult area of the English language teaching for the students at the University of Forestry is the grammar. It is believed that the receptive skill of reading practices and enhances the level of understanding of the grammatical structures of the English language. The second step in the process of developing grammar competence, the production of written summaries, enables the students to demonstrate the acquisition of the grammatical structures they have encountered in the texts. As the students at the University of Forestry write summaries on the specialized texts from the reading comprehension exercises, the development of grammar competence is observed in the course of time. Writing summaries builds up the stu-

dent's confidence in understanding and using correct grammar.

Another point to consider is blending the teaching of writing and speaking skills. As it has been pointed out above, the discussions of the original texts to be summarized, and, at a later stage, of the written summaries are conducted in English with advance level students. Planning speaking activities is never an easy task as adult students are reluctant to discuss hypothetical situations. However, motivated students are very willing to engage in discussions that are focused on solving an immediate task or expressing an opinion on a real issue. In this sense, writing summaries can be a good starting point for a speaking exercise.

2.4. Additional task for advanced students of English

This idea has been suggested by Ekaterini Nikolarea from Greece who teaches ESP at the University of the Aegean. The additional task involves writing two summaries of a text: one in the native language and one in English. Due to time constraints this task have not been applied in the language teaching at the University of Forestry; however, it makes sense to require students to write a text summary both in English and Bulgarian, and to draw conclusion about the development of their native and second language.

3. Comparison of the principles for writing abstracts in Bulgarian and English

Below are 4 examples of abstracts: two in Bulgarian and two in English:

Example 1:

В настоящата разработка са формулирани и класифицирани проблемите на управление на устойчивото развитие на производствените системи от дискретен тип. Въведени са основни понятия и определения, въз основа на които е представена постановката на задачата и информационния модел. Показани са някои от по-важните тенденции при управлението на устойчивото развитие на производствените системи в глобална среда. Представени са възможностите за автоматизация на дискретните производствени системи и тяхното управление. В резултат на това са направени изводи и заключения за приложимостта на разработката.

Example 2:

Представени са принципните постановки на базата, на които е разработена Система от балансирани показатели за оценка усъвършенстването на управлението и организацията на производство в мебелните предприятия чрез приложение на ИТ. Представени и анализирани са резултатите от апробацията на системата в мебелни предприятия в България. Аргументирана е приложимостта на системата като механизъм за мониторинг, оценка и управление на ИТ като активи.

Example 3:

Replicated circular openings ranging in size from 0.1 to 1 ha were cleared on a Sierran mixed conifer forest in 1996 at the Blodgett Forest Research Station, California and planted with seedlings of six native species. After 3 years of growth, heights of all trees were measured and analyzed according to species, opening size, and location within the opening. "... However there were important differences between species in the nature of the co-limitation. Giant sequoia growth was most sensitive to light and water availability. Together they explained more than 47% of the observed variation in giant sequoia height. In contrast, only light was a significant predictor of ponderosa pine performance. Douglas-fir heights were significantly related to both light and water but there was more unexplained variability in the Douglas-fir model compared to the other species. These highly controlled experimental group openings provide a standard reference for silviculturalists using the group selection method of regeneration.

Examples 1 and 2 show some of the typical phrases used in the abstracts in Bulgarian. It should be noted that these underlined phrases consist of a verb and noun phrase (sentence subject) following it. The verb is usually in the past indefinite tense (минало неопределено време). Examples 3 and 4 of abstracts in English have the opposite syntax: a noun phrase (sentence subject) followed by a verb phrase as is the normal word order in English. The verbs in Example 3 are all in the past simple tense with the exception of the verb in the last sentence which draws the study's conclusion. This use of the past simple tense must be considered when writing scientific papers in English as the results are often discussed in the present tense in the papers in Bulgarian. The phrase "this paper considers" in Example 4 requires special attention. Similar phrases are very common in the abstracts in Bulgarian; however, the abstracts in natural sciences in English (as Example 3 shows) often do not contain such introductory phrases.

The following guidelines for writing abstracts can be given (Dodd, e-resource).

The abstracts of research papers include:

- problem statement or statement of the purpose of the research;
- methods/procedure/approach used;
- principal findings;
- major conclusions.

The abstracts of review papers include:

Example 4:

Non-industrial private forests (NIPFs) and public forests in the United States generate many non-market benefits for landholders and society generally. These values can be both enhanced and diminished by wildfire management. This paper considers the challenges of supporting economically efficient allocation of wildfire suppression resources in a social cost-benefit analysis framework when non-market values are important. "... These challenges present serious impediments to adapting price-based decision-support tools to accommodate non-market values and support decision-making consistent with contemporary federal wildfire policy. Departure from the historic range and variability of ecological conditions is proposed as a complementary framework to support wildfire management decisions when non-market values are important on NIPF and public forestland.

- statement of the topic and the scope;
- the sources reviewed;
- major conclusions .

The length of abstracts may vary (as journals have different requirements) but between 80 and 300 words is usually considered adequate. Typically, abstracts consist of one paragraph.

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn are as follows:

1. Writing summaries is a useful activity which can successfully be integrated in teaching English for specific purposes.
2. Writing summaries can be a good way to teach grammar understanding and competence as well as a starting point for speaking activities.

References

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