



**INVESTIGATING THE REAL SITUATION OF READING
COMPREHENSION AND SUMMARY WRITING AND PROPOSING
SOME SUMMARIZATION STRATEGIES FOR EFL STUDENTS
AT A UNIVERSITY IN DELTA, VIETNAM**

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Abstract:

Reading comprehension is considered one of the four most important and essential skills for learning a language. Writing summaries is one type of task that helps students read successfully. Therefore, the study aimed to find out the situation of reading comprehension and summary writing skills of 90 second-year EFL students at a university in Mekong Delta, Vietnam, and propose some summarization strategies that students can apply to improve their reading comprehension and summary writing performances. In this paper, the questionnaire was used to design 4 points (excellent, good, average, poor) to exploit students' proficiency in reading and summary writing and (never, sometimes, often, always) to collect data on students' awareness about the importance as well as difficulties in reading and writing summary. The survey results showed that students' proficiency in reading and writing summaries is poor. Additionally, the majority of students are aware of the importance of reading and writing summary; however, they do not have the experience and background knowledge of reading and writing summary; accordingly, teachers had better recommend some summarization strategies to their students.

Keywords: EFL student, reading comprehension, summary writing, real situation, summarization strategy

1. Introduction

According to Abdi *et al.* (2016), reading skills are necessary for our success in society. Reading influences other aspects of life, particularly in school. The purpose of reading is to elicit meaning from written text. A lack of competence in this area may influence comprehension ability. Comprehension involves inferential and evaluative thinking, not

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just a reproduction of the author's words. It is likely to be taught and improved through teaching students during their learning process. The results of some recent researches have indicated that summarization can be a significant key for reading comprehension. Summarization is the process of automatically producing a compressed version of a given text that provides useful information for the users (Hosseinpour, 2016; Kate, 2018; Abdi *et al.*, 2018).

Summarization is an integrated reading and writing skill, and it is known as one of the most difficult skills for learners (Hirvela & Du, 2013). Summarization is also considered a complicated activity related to great cognitive constraints for students, thus exploring is disadvantages (Kirkland & Saunders, 1991). Moreover, summary writing has been a part of the English curriculum for many years (Hosseinpour, 2016). It equips students with the essential summary skills in higher education after graduation. Although skills can be developed naturally, most students need a lot of help to make a suitable summary. Previous researches have also shown that suitable summary writing teaching will positively affect the use of summarization strategies and the quality of the summary of learners (Hosseinpour, 2016). On the other hand, many teachers reduce the number of summary writing tasks for students. Thus, students do not have adequate practice which may affect their ability to write summaries (Abdi *et al.*, 2016). As a result, several students who learn to read and write summary writing want to practice a lot to enhance their ability to read and write summaries, which is useful for learning and working in the future. However, Vietnamese students in general, students at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam in particular, still face many difficulties in reading and writing summaries.

This paper analyzes the real situation of reading and writing summaries of EFL students at a university in Mekong Delta, Vietnam, and proposes some summarization strategies for students' reading and writing summaries.

2. Literature review

2.1 Definition of reading comprehension

There are many definitions of reading comprehension in the text. According to Johnson (1990), reading is a complex process to overcome the meaning of a text. Therefore, to comprehend that process appropriately, it involves extracting and constructing the meaning of specific texts (Grabe, 1991; Koda, 2007; Bernhardt, 2011, Brevik *et al.*, 2016). In other words, reading comprehension is a positive process of comprehending texts that expect learners to utilize diverse strategies in the reading process. Anderson (1999) emphasizes that the more students are exposed to the language through reading, the more language proficiency is increased generally. From a cognitive perspective, reading refers to a process of connecting information from text with prior knowledge of readers (Nunan, 2003; Grabe, 2009).

2.2 Definition of summary

Summary is considered as one of the most significant academic skills for university-level students. Students are required to summarize complicated concepts and information in all subject areas. Moreover, teachers frequently utilize this complex task to evaluate students' comprehension of concepts and materials. In second language studies, the summary process becomes a valuable assessment instrument to monitor students' progress toward the acquisition of second language reading comprehension skills.

According to (McAnulty, 1981, p.50, cited in Johns & Mayes, 1990) summary is defined as follows: *"a summary is a condensed version, in your own words, of the writing of someone else, a condensation that reproduces the thought, emphasis, and tone of the original. It abstracts all the significant facts of the original – overall thesis, main points, and important supporting details—, but, unlike a paraphrase, it omits and/or condenses amplifications such as descriptive."*

2.3 The relationship between reading and writing

Many studies proved that reading involves writing. Rosenblatt (1988) stated that the relationship between the writer and the reader is a transactional model. It is the writer who explores and builds meaning, interprets and reinterprets information for the reader, while the reader re-structures and rediscover that meaning by providing prior knowledge and experience for the text. Therefore, both the reader and writer perceive the same. That is, both the reader and writer must construct and interpret the meaning of the text. When the writer becomes his or her own text reader, the writer must read and reread their writing. Readers summarize their work. So, the writer must understand what they have written to write and rewrite while the reader must have some background knowledge to explain the meaning in the text. Summary writing has become a useful method to teach both reading and writing. Summary is a recursive process similar to the reading and writing process (Kirkland & Saunders, 1991).

2.4 Related studies

Most of the studies on the effect of summary writing on reading comprehension have proved that students who receive summary writing instruction are better able to read. In this paper, the researcher mentioned three prior studies that are related to summary writing improving reading comprehension.

The current research of Karbalaei *et al.* (2010) aimed to study the effectiveness of summarization instruction on reading comprehension at the undergraduate level. A sample of sixty-three English-majored students, aged seventeen to twenty-five, were selected from four classes in three various colleges in India. The effects of summarization instruction were measured by their performance on two reading comprehension texts. Students' performance on a proficiency test was utilized to group students into high and low levels and functioned as another independent variable in addition to gender. The findings indicated that the instruction was effective in enhancing the reading

comprehension ability of Indian students. There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups after instruction. The results clearly showed that university students can be instructed to develop summaries that promote reading by considering gender as an effective variable.

Shokrpour's research (2013) on the effect of summarization strategy on reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. In the study, sixty-one students were selected and randomly divided into two control and experimental groups. Their homogeneity of proficiency was established by the TOEFL proficiency test. Students in two groups participated in a reading comprehension test as the pretest. The experimental group utilized summarization strategy three times a week typically 45 minutes duration for ten weeks. After two weeks of instruction, students took the test immediately afterward. At the end of the treatment, a post-test was administered to both groups. The findings of the research revealed that summarization strategy has an important effect on learners' reading comprehension.

The research of Zafarani *et al.* (2014) studied the effect of the summarization strategy and the explicitness of the training on improving comprehension of English textual materials of Iranian ESP learners. In total, seventy university ESP students in Iran participated in this study and were assigned to two homogeneous groups of experimental and control. Data was collected in a pretest and post-test design. The pretest indicated that the control and experimental groups were not different regarding their reading comprehension. However statistical results demonstrate a significant difference between the pre - post tests in that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-reading comprehension test. Findings showed that clear instruction on summarization strategy can effectively contribute to enhancing the ability and aptitude of learners in understanding reading and can help them build up a constructive attitude towards English reading in the Iranian context.

3. Methodology

3.1 The real situation of reading and summary writing of ELF students at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam

3.1.1 Research design

The researcher used a quantitative research method to collect data through a questionnaire to study the reading and writing summaries of EFL students at a university in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam. In this research, the questionnaire was used to design 4 points (excellent, good, average, poor) to exploit students' proficiency in reading and summary writing and (never, sometimes, often, always) to collect data on students' perception of the importance as well as difficulties in reading and writing summary.

3.1.2 Research site

The study was carried out at a university which is a public university located in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The university was established in 2006. Currently, the university has more than 20.000 students enrolled each year and focuses on providing learners with the 21st century skills to meet the region's specific workforce needs. All data collection will take place at campus 1 of this university.

3.1.3 Participants

The study was conducted as a random survey of ninety second-year English-majored students from three classes at the School of Foreign Languages in the first semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. All participants consisted of sixty females and thirty males who had learned English for seven to ten years. Their ages range from nineteen to twenty and most of them live in Mekong Delta.

3.1.4 Research instruments

The questionnaire was the main instrument of this study. The instrument was selected to provide adequate evidence to clarify the three sections as follows (1) students' proficiency in reading and summary writing (never, sometimes, often, always); (2) students' perception of the importance (disagree, strongly disagree, agree, strongly agree) and (3) students' perception of difficulties in reading and writing summary (disagree, strongly disagree, agree, strongly agree).

The content of the survey questions helps to clearly and accurately understand the real situation of reading and writing summaries of EFL students. The questions are designed in detail and easy to understand to help students give accurate responses about their awareness level in reading and writing summaries, and the difficulties that students encounter when reading and writing summaries; at the same time, propose solutions to improve reading and writing summary performance for EFL students through teaching summarization strategies.

The questionnaire consists of thirteen items and each item is rated on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 for excellent, 2 for good, 3 for average and 4 for poor as well as 1 for strongly disagree, 2 for disagree, 3 for agree and 4. for strongly agree. The questionnaire was designed into 3 parts. Part 1 has one item on reading and writing proficiency. Part 2 has seven items on the importance of reading and writing a summary. Difficulties in reading and writing summaries were mentioned in five items of part 3.

3.1.5 Data processing method

The questionnaire was sent to EFL students in December 2023, after participating in reading course 2 in the first semester of the 2023-2024 academic year. After students answered, the questionnaire was collected and SPSS Version 20 was used to calculate the percentages of each item.

3.1.6 Findings

In the first item of the questionnaire, the students were required to evaluate their proficiency levels in reading and writing summaries. In which 62.6% of the students rated themselves as “poor”. Only 3.3% of the students think that their reading and writing summary is “good” whereas the other students (33%) think their reading and writing performance is “average”.

Table 3.1: Students’ self-rating to their reading and writing summary proficiency

Statement	Excellent %	Good %	Average %	Poor %
How do you rate your reading and writing summary performance?		3.3	33.0	62.6

This might be a reflection of their frustration caused by their previous failures or unhappy experiences in dealing with reading and writing summaries because they had not received sufficient training.

Table 3.2: Students' perception of the importance of reading and writing summary

Item no.	Statements	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
2	I am more aware of the perceived importance of reading and writing summaries.	4.4	22.0	15.4	57.1
3	I find that reading and writing summaries is difficult.	15.4	11.0	27.5	45.1
4	I find that reading and writing summaries is boring and not interesting.	14.3	8.8	18.7	57.1
5	I learned to read and write summaries according to the instructions in the main course book.			11.0	87.9
6	I find that teachers are reduced. the amount of reading and writing tasks for students.	3.3	5.5	24.2	65.9
7	I find that plagiarism is the result of a lack of clear summary writing strategy instruction.	11.0	11.0	35.2	52.7
8	I find that reading and writing a summary properly will positively affect the quality of the writing.	4.4	6.6	31.9	56.0

When students were questioned on their own perceptions of reading and writing summaries taught, they responded in a variety of ways. Table 3.2 shows that most of the students (57.1% strongly agree, 15.4% agree) were aware of the importance of reading and writing summaries. However, there were still a number (14.3% disagree & 12.1% strongly disagree) of students who did not highly evaluate the role of reading and writing summary.

When asked about the difficulty of reading and writing a summary, 66.7% of the learners remarked that reading and writing a summary is difficult. In addition to that, a large number of learners (73.3%) find reading and writing summaries boring and not interesting. This is in line with Hirvela and Du's research (2013).

As for items 5 and 6, we found out all of the students (100 %) did not receive sufficient summary strategies during their course except for tasks of reading and writing summaries in the main coursebook. Additionally, students answered that only 8.8% of teachers completed the number of reading and writing tasks for students in class. The results were consistent with the study of Abdi *et al.* (2016), many teachers reduced the number of writing summary tasks for students. Although reading and writing summaries is really difficult, students have not received any summary strategy instruction.

In the questionnaire, students were asked to identify the answer to the plagiarism result which is the reason for the lack of summary strategy. Table 3.2 shows the percentage of the answers given by students. More than three-quarters of students had answers (35.2% agree & 52.7% strongly agree). This can be concluded that students who make plagiarism errors lack summary strategy instruction when reading and writing summaries. However, 22% of students think that plagiarism is not the lack of summary strategy.

According to the data displayed above, students giving the answers to the item of reading and writing summary properly will positively affect the quality of the writing (31.9% agree & 56% strongly agree). However, only 11% of respondents strongly agree and disagree.

Table 3.3: Students' perception of difficulties in reading and writing summary

Item no.	Statements	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Agree %	Strongly agree %
9	I have difficulty identifying the main idea of the text to write a summary.	8.8	7.7	38.5	44.0
10	I have difficulty in identifying the main idea of the paragraphs in the text to write a summary.	7.7	7.7	16.5	67.0
11	I find that a lack of vocabulary knowledge affects reading and writing summaries.	5.5	7.7	44.0	41.8
12	I find that a lack of grammar knowledge hinders reading and writing summaries.	3.3	7.7	36.3	51.6
13	I find that teachers need to have clear summary strategies for teaching reading and writing summaries.			34.1	64.8

Factors that affect students' reading and writing summaries on issues related to determining the main idea of the text, determining the main idea of the paragraphs in the

text, vocabulary knowledge, grammar knowledge, and summary strategies are discussed in detail below.

From the above results, Table 3.3 indicates that many students lack the experience and background knowledge to recognize the main idea of the reading (38.5% agree, 44% strongly agree). On the other hand, there were 8.8% of students strongly disagreed and 7.7% disagreed. Furthermore, students also stated that their experience and background knowledge to recognize the main ideas of each paragraph is limited (16.5% agree, 67% strongly agree).

Item 11 was asked to know whether a lack of vocabulary knowledge affects the reading and writing summary of students. The vast majority of learners 77/90 (85.8%) answered lack of vocabulary knowledge (44% agree, 41.8% strongly agree) interfered with reading and writing summaries.

Item 12 was also asked to know whether a lack of grammar knowledge affects the reading and writing summary of students. The majority of students 80/90 (87.9%) answered a lack of grammatical knowledge (36.3% agree, 51.6% strongly agree) interfered with reading and writing summaries.

Based on the data collected in Table 3.3, 90/90 (100%) students had the answers (34.1% agree, 64.8% strongly agree) for item teachers should have clear summarization strategies for students when teaching reading and writing summary.

To sum up, the survey results displayed that the level of proficiency in reading and writing summaries of students is still low. Additionally, most students were aware of the importance of reading and writing summaries; however, learners did not have the experience and background knowledge of reading and writing summaries; accordingly, teachers had better introduce summarization strategies specifically identified in this study to students.

3.2 Proposing some solutions for improvement of reading and writing summaries for university EFL students through teaching summarization strategies

Summarization strategies are the core of the cognitive processes related to summary activities. These strategies include a set of cognitive tasks used to produce a summary (Abdi *et al.*, 2016). Different researchers use different terms to describe summarization strategies, which are basically a similar process. These authors (Kintsch *et al.*, 1978; Johnson, 1983; Brown & Day, 1983; Lemaire *et al.*, 2005; Idris *et al.* 2009) propose some summarization strategies related to producing appropriate summary such as (1) deletion of information, (2) sentence combination, (3) generalization, (4) paraphrasing, (5) topic sentence selection and (6) invention. For this paper, the researcher based on the survey results, proposed solutions to improve reading comprehension ability for students through summarization strategies of the authors mentioned above and explained the strategies in detail as follows:

3.2.1 Deletion of information

There are two deletion rules. One is to remove unimportant or trivial information and remove redundant information in the sentence of the source text. Unimportant or trivial information contains small details about the topic and redundant information including rewriting or repeating a number of important sentences.

3.2.2 Sentence combination

To generate a summary sentence, sentence combination is utilized to combine two or more sentences/phrases from the source text. In other words, phrases from more than one sentence are unified into a summary sentence. These sentences are frequently combined using conjunction words, such as for, but, and, after, since, and before, etc.

3.2.3 Generalization

In the generalization strategy, a general term is replaced for a list. There are 2 types of replacement. The first replacement is a general word that is replaced for a list of similar items, e.g. oranges, mangoes, plums, papayas, and durians can be replaced by "Fruit". Similarly, people can replace a general word for a list of similar actions, e.g: Mary eats a grape, Anna eats an orange, and Lili eats an apple that can be replaced by "The girls eat "Fruits".

3.2.4 Paraphrasing

In the paraphrasing strategy, a word in the source sentence is changed to a synonym (another word with the same meaning) in the summary sentence.

3.2.5 Topic sentence selection

To generate a summary sentence, the selection strategy of the topic sentence is utilized to extract an important sentence from the source text to represent the main idea of a paragraph. There are four methods to identify the important sentence: a) key method, b) location method, c) title method, and d) cue method.

a. Key method

The most frequent words in a text are the most representative of its content, therefore a segment of text containing them is more relevant (Alonso *et al.*, 2004). Word frequency is a method used to identify keywords that are non-stop-words, which appear frequently in a document (Xie & Liu, 2010). According to Gupta & Lehal (2010), sentences with keywords or content words have a greater chance of being included in the summary.

b. Location method

Important sentences are usually at the beginning and end of a document or paragraph, as well as just below the section heading (Kupiec *et al.*, 1995; Fattah *et al.*, 2009). The paragraphs at the beginning and end of a document are more likely to contain useful

material for a summary, especially the first and last sentences of paragraphs (Gupta & Lehal, 2010; Xie *et al.*, 2008).

c. Title method

Important sentences normally contain words that are presented in the title and major headings of a document (Kupiec *et al.*, 1995). Thus, words appearing in the title are good candidates for document-specific concepts (Teufel & Moens, 1997).

d. Cue method

Cue phrases are words and phrases that directly indicate the structure of a discourse. They are also known as discourse markers, discourse connectives, and discourse particles in computational linguistics (Hirschberg & Litman, 1993). Cue phrases, such as “conclusion” or “in particular” are identifying summarizing strategies often followed by important information. Therefore, sentences that include one or more of these cue phrases are considered more important than sentences without cue phrases (Zhang *et al.*, 2005). These cue words are dependent on the context. However, due to the existence of diverse kinds of text, such as scientific articles and newspapers, it is difficult to collect these cue words as a unique list. Thus, discourse markers can be used as an indicator of important content in a text and are more general (Fraser, 1999).

3.2.6 Invention

The invention rule is used when paragraphs do not have an explicit topic sentence. In these cases, people should create clear topic sentences using their own words to express the implicit main idea of the paragraphs. Therefore, the invention rule requires students to add information instead of just deleting, selecting, or manipulating the sentences provided for them.

4. Conclusion

To help students achieve high academic results as well as accumulate specialist knowledge for their jobs after graduation, teachers constantly study to find the best methods to help students as expected. This paper examines the real situation of reading and writing summaries and proposes a number of summarization strategies to help students improve their reading and writing summary performance. Reading is one of the four important and essential skills in the language learning process and is the base for other subjects in the English language training program. Research results of Zafarani and Kabgani (2014) showed that summarization strategies can be successfully applied to EFL classes. Research indicated that students' reading ability is significantly improved after training. We hope that from the real situation of reading and writing summaries, teachers can utilize some summarization strategies to improve reading comprehension for EFL students. When summarizing a text, the students participate in a process that involves

identifying the main idea in a paragraph, distinguishing the main and minor details, and restoring the main idea to express the main idea of the text. Therefore, students are more aware of their reading, and the results of reading comprehension tasks will be improved through summarization strategy instruction. The researcher hopes that the results of this study may also be useful for those who are interested in this area.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Vi Tuong Thi Hua is an instructor at the School of Foreign Languages, at Tra Vinh University, Vietnam. Her research interests include action research and language learning.

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