

Improving summarizing skills with TED talks: an account of a teaching lesson using explicit instruction

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Abstract. This paper reports on a study which investigated the effectiveness of an explicit instruction approach in a Japanese university setting with third-year science and technology students in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course. The two aims of this study were: 1) to explore changes in students' attitudes and understanding of summary writing, and 2) to observe changes in the ability of students to incorporate specific ideas of summary writing. First, students were given a short questionnaire about their current knowledge and background related to summary writing to provide a base measure. Next, the instructor presented information about specific features of summary writing. Then, students were introduced to a short TED Talk on a technical topic as the content material. Using this content, students were put into groups to discuss and identify the main points of the talk. For homework, they were assigned to write individual summaries. In the next class, students shared their individual summaries with their group members and produced a second draft to be evaluated. Finally, a post-questionnaire about summary writing was given to students. In the future, the researchers aim to make lessons like the above part of an on-line Learning Management System (LMS) that they are currently developing.

Keywords: summary writing, TED Talk, explicit instruction, ESP, LMS.

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1. Introduction

In the past decade, the advancement of technology and online services has been remarkable, and language education has benefited from this development. For example, Youtube, MOOCs, and various language learning web applications offer a tremendous amount of authentic learning material and inspire instructors to develop classes utilizing these services, especially in the field of ESP.

Hutchinson (1987) explains, “ESP is [...] an approach to language learning, which is based on learner needs. The foundation of all ESP is this simple question: Why does this learner need to learn a foreign language?” (p. 19). Due to the international nature of current technological cooperation and research, students majoring in science and technology are often required to have aptitude in academic English writing and presentation skills. In order to write academic papers in English, the learning of content in English is essential to acquire the technical knowledge and terminology to communicate effectively. To prepare ESP students for this multi-media reality, teaching methods and materials should support literacy skills. This study is based on the use of a TED Talk (www.ted.com) for such an approach.

TED Talks are one of the aforementioned online services that are now widely available. These talks are of high educational value for many reasons (Carlo, 2014; Denskus & Esser, 2015; Rubenstein, 2012; Sugimoto & Thelwall, 2013; Taibi et al., 2015). One being the availability of linguistic support, another being the innovative and engaging content, and yet another being the clarity of the presentation structure. The full subtitles and transcripts in a multitude of languages which are available in TED Talks enable the incorporation of content into language instruction with ease for both teachers and students. TED Talk presenters share the latest innovations in a variety of fields including science and technology, which makes this website highly suitable for ESP courses. These talks are inherently interesting for students, thereby increasing enthusiasm for study. The clarity of the structure of the presentations lend themselves easily to teaching summary writing skills.

The process of summary writing was chosen as a focus for this study as many English learners find this task highly complex and difficult. One reason for this perception may be the fact that students have not had many opportunities to explicitly learn an approach to summary writing. This study aimed to make the process of summary writing clearer so that students could become more aware of specific points that should and should not be included in a summary, and to provide a chance for them to think about and discuss what summary writing entails

(Baumann, 1984; Guido & Colwell, 1987; Johns & Mayes, 1990; Kim, 2001; Li, 2014).

2. Method

2.1. Criteria for video selection

The following criteria were taken into consideration for selecting an appropriate video. First of all, the topic had to be science-technology related, as the class was an ESP course for engineering majors. Only videos under 8 minutes were considered, as this duration was thought to be optimal to retain students' concentration. Also, considering the students' English proficiency level, Japanese subtitles for L1 support was important, so the availability of Japanese subtitles was another criterion. Furthermore, it was important to select stimulating talks in terms of content, speaker's delivery, and proximity of the topic to students' interests. At the same time, in order not to discourage elementary level students, linguistic difficulty was addressed as well, including speech rate and vocabulary level. Finally, one additional advantage of TED Talks is the varied background of the speakers with regard to sex, age, ethnicity, and first language. Selecting talks delivered by different types of speakers creates a more exciting class and complemented class content by raising students' awareness of World Englishes.

2.2. Current study

The TED video which was chosen for this project was “The Shape-shifting Future of the Mobile Phone” by Fabian Hemmert filmed in Berlin, Germany in 2009⁴. It is a relatively short video – only four minutes in duration. The structure of the talk is laid out fairly clearly, with him talking about three possible new features of future mobile phones.

The first part of the current study involved gathering information about students' current knowledge and experiences with summary writing. A questionnaire was delivered to students via the university's LMS (WebClass UEC) and done as homework. The information gathered provided a base measure of students' concept of what summary writing entails. Generally speaking, it was gleaned from the responses that students did not have many opportunities to learn explicitly about summary writing prior to coming to university – either in Japanese or English.

4. http://www.ted.com/talks/fabian_hemmert_the_shape_shifting_future_of_the_mobile_phone

The second part of the current study was conducted in class. After asking students to discuss guiding questions about summarizing, the instructor presented some information about the specifics of summary writing. Next, the TED Talk by Hemmert was shown in class, and the subtitle and transcript functions for English and other languages on the TED website were demonstrated. Handouts of the English transcripts were given to the students.

For homework, students were to download the template for an outline and summary. Then, specifics about the outline format and content were conveyed. One guideline for making the summary was to condense the main idea from one paragraph of the text (transcript) into one sentence of the summary. Following this, the content of the summary sentences was explained in more detail. It was explained that after writing out a draft of the paragraph, sentences were to be reviewed for coherency and logical order. Examples of transition words were provided. Finally, students were asked to be conscious of the word limit (between 100 to 150 words), and the “word count” function on MS Word was demonstrated.

As a wrap up, the instructor reminded the students that a good summary is comprehensive, concise, coherent, shows understanding of the text, and is written in their own words. Students were told not to use more than 3 words in a row from the text in their summary, and that unique expressions from the text should be indicated with quotation marks. Furthermore, students were asked to omit their personal opinions, specific examples and raw data, and sections of the original text in their summaries.

The third part of the current study was also done in-class, requiring students to share their individually written summary outlines and paragraphs with a partner using a checklist to evaluate whether or not all the points were covered correctly. The checklists were used to revise their outline and summary. Face-to-face peer review was used in this part of the lesson to have students participate more actively in giving feedback on their peers’ writing and reduce writer apprehension as suggested by Chaudron (1984), and promote greater student-autonomy (Ho & Savignon, 2007; Hu & Lam, 2010; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Miao, Badger, & Zhen, 2006). Students were reminded to make their outlines with keywords and short phrases (not sentences), and to use their own words in the summary paragraph. Their second draft of the summary outline and paragraph were submitted in one week, by uploading it to WebClass UEC.

The fourth and last part of the current study was the collection of a post-questionnaire of the students. This questionnaire revealed that students felt

more confident about summarizing tasks, as they became more familiar with the specific components of a summary paragraph. They also found the outlining process a good way to focus on key points and to see the structure of a text. Some common difficulties were putting things into their own words, and figuring out the main points of the talk.

3. Discussion

There are so many approaches that could be taken in the presentation and implementation of a summary-writing activity. For example, [Baumann \(1984\)](#) presents data which supports a direct instruction paradigm, [Guido and Colwell \(1987\)](#) model a direct instruction approach of writing summaries, [Johns \(1988\)](#) argues for an approach that helps students recognize underlying text-types, and [Stever and Newman \(1997\)](#) promote writing summaries of student-written dialogue journals. The researchers of this study were most drawn to an explicit approach, as it seemed most practical in terms of ease of implementation.

Some of the positive features of the approach used in the current study is the fact that 1) multi-media content of a field-related topic with L1 support kept the interest-levels of the students high, 2) explicit step by step instructions on how to make a summary made the task manageable, 3) outlining the text helped promote deeper understanding of the structure and content of the material, and 4) the drafting process using a checklist gave students more opportunities to try out and reflect on the necessary elements of writing a summary.

4. Conclusions

Providing more explicit instruction concerning how to write a summary seemed to be very helpful for students, and many students expressed their appreciation for this opportunity. The responses from the questionnaires somewhat surprised the researchers concerning the lack of opportunities students have to learn about summarizing. Especially in a field such as science and technology where there are constantly many new developments, obtaining up-to-date information and sharing that with colleagues is no doubt a valued skill for both researchers and professionals alike. Introducing a more multi-format approach to teaching and teaching materials in English classes is one way to keep expanding skills as a teacher, while at the same time making learning more relevant for students.

As a future project, the researchers hope to incorporate lessons like summarizing as a component of an on-line LMS that is being developed. It is our hope that the

LMS will be a comprehensive program that can be used by teachers and learners to help manage English learning from a myriad of perspectives.

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