Vocabulary Knowledge: Malaysian Tertiary Level Learners' Major Problem in Summary Writing

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Abstract—The ability to summarize and paraphrase written pieces is one of the essential skills tertiary level students need in order to succeed in their academic endeavor. It involves the process of decoding a text, and then re-encoding it by making changes to the structure and vocabulary of the original text while maintaining its content. The present study analyzes a group of tertiary level students' written samples to diagnose their main areas of difficulty in writing business report summaries. For this purpose, a sample of 69 samples was collected from an intact group of learners. Two raters used an analytic writing scale to score the samples individually. Based on the results, majority of the students (about 70%) achieved 'excellent to very good' scores for the 'content' of their written samples. However, regarding the 'organization' and 'vocabulary' of their written pieces, respectively 75% and 97% of these students scored 'Fair to poor'. 'Good to average' results were achieved for a majority of the students' 'language use' and 'mechanics' skills. The findings of the present study accentuate the urgent need for remedy courses to help these students improve their organization and vocabulary skills in ESL writing. Further research is necessary to diagnose the learners' difficulty areas in other genres of writing such as argumentative and narrative modes.

Index Terms—summary writing, vocabulary knowledge, English as a second language writing, paraphrase, writing problems

I. INTRODUCTION

The crucial role of English in international business has been widely accepted by researchers (Shaohua, 2011). English is being used by over 80% international corporations as the language of business (Zhang, 2007). Scholars have recognized English as "the primary language for doing international business" (Estaban & Pérez Cañado, 2004, p. 137). The importance of English, as the language of business, has promoted its explicit instruction in universities. English as the language of business has long been regarded as a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). Many universities around the world teach English for Business Purposes (EBP) at tertiary level to prepare students for competition in the world of commerce and business. In Malaysia, teaching EBP begins from the tertiary level in Business schools and universities.

Among the skills related to EBP, summary writing has a special place and is considered as one of the most important components of teaching writing in business. Business students must be able to write business plan summaries besides being able to read them. According to Hirvela (2004), summarizing is widly used to select the most important knowledge or information allocated in a text, to prepare students for exams and for a larger writing assignment. The term *summary* has been defined differently by different researchers. For example, Wohl (1978) states "to summarize is to report information using a lot fewer words than were used in the original communication" (p. 127). For Hidi and Anderson (1986) "a summary is a brief statement that represents the condensation of information accessible to a subject and reflects the gist of the discourse" (p. 473). Langan (1993) defines summary writing as "the reduction of a large amount of information to its most important points" (Langan, 1993, p.120). According to Friend (2001), summarizing is "the process of determining what content in a passage is most important and transforming it into a succinct statement in one's own words" (p. 3).

What is evident from all these definitions is that in order to be able to summarize a written text, one must first read and comprehend it before one can reproduce it in one's own words. It is also obvious that in both stages of comprehension and production vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role. According to Yovanoff, Duesbery, Alonzo, and Tindal (2005), "vocabulary knowledge is a significant and constant predictor of overall reading comprehension irrespective of grade level" (p. 4). The importance of vocabulary knowledge has made language teachers consider the vocabulary instruction as a separate subject which usually involves students in the process of learning definitions of new words and using them to construct sentences. While understanding a word has a variety of levels, knowing it in-depth will provide many benefits to students (Donohue, 2000). The concept of words' knowing in-depth has been

argued by Jensen and Duffelmeyer (1996). Jensen and Duffelmeyer (1996) mention that "the meaning of a word can only be understood and learnt in terms of its relationship with other words in the language" (p. 22). Furthermore, Donohue (2000) argues that the deeper understanding of words will be created in the connection between new and known information. Additionally, Biemiller (2012) states that learning to read a written text does not warranty learning to understand the text. Biemiller (2012) contends that while vocabulary knowledge is not the main reason for comprehension of a written text, lack of this knowledge causes failure to comprehend the text. According to Bauman and Gravers (2010), it is the combination of words, reasons and understanding joined together, which makes the process of reading comprehension (Bauman & Gravers, 2010). While paraphrasing a text, the learner should think of the appropriate synonyms and/or different forms of words. Obviously, a wide vocabulary range provides student writers with "a multihued palette of colors with which to paint their experience" (Robinns, 1991). However, what most students should learn is that they should not neglect that "the writer's real pleasure comes not from using an exotic word but from using the right word" (Fletcher, 1993, p. 23).

Besides vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension skills, reducing a text to its main points is an ability which involves recognizing and deleting irrelavant and unneccessary information from a written text. It is indeed creating something new from the original text by focusing on its important points (Marzano, 1982), a process that can be difficult for tertiary level L2 learners. According to Cho (2012), the difficulty in writing an L2 summary returns to the readers' interpretation of a text through writing a new and summarized version, which is considered as "an act of composition" (Hirvela, 2004, p. 9). For students with difficulties in reading a text, summarizing is "the best reading gift" (Hirvela, 2004, p.91). On the other hand, for teachers and reserchers, examining the students' summaries could have "a diagnostic function" (Hirvela, 2004, p. 91) to achieve a deeper insight of their L2 students' writing abilities (Cho, 2012).

Choy and Lee (2013) argue that using English, as a medium of instruction in universities and colleges in Malysia has posed problems for students because of their lacking ability to paraphrase texts. Malaysian tertiary level students are regarded as a mixed group of students who have learned English in both ESL and EFL settings (Osman, Ismail, & Darus, 2014). Teaching academic writing, as an important skill, mainly starts at tertiary level in Malaysia. In business schools teaching Academic Writing for Business Purposes (AWBP) begins from the first semester. Tertiary level students of business have to pass the AWBP course, which especially aims to improve summarizing and paraphrasing skills. A study on Malaysian Form 4 students indicated 'fair to poor' levels of writing skill performance regarding their content, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics scores and 'very poor' levels regarding their language use scores (Mukundan, Mahvelati, Mohd Amin Din, and Nimehchisalem (2013). However, literature is limited on the problems faced by Malaysian tertiary level students in summary writing, which necessitates research in this area. The current study tries to diagnose the problems of tertiary level students of business in summary writing.

The objective of this study is to diagnose the specific areas of difficulty in tertiary level ESL students' summary writing. To meet the objective of this study the following research questions were addressed:

1. Based on the scores assigned to the content of the university students' written summaries, to what extent are they able to summarize the main ideas in the original texts?

2. To what extent are the students competent in organizing the ideas in their summaries?

3. To what extent are the students able to use their own words effectively in their summaries?

4. How competent are the students in using the language accurately in their summaries?

5. How competent are the students in spelling, punctuating, capitalizing, and paragraphing the summaries correctly?

II. METHOD

This cross-sectional study was conducted to find out an intact group of tertiary level students' specific areas of difficulty in summarizing business reports. Quantitative method was followed.

Task

The students were to choose a source from the Internet or newspapers on business reports and summarize the report in their own words. The summaries had to be 150 words in length. The students wrote the first draft in class for half an hour, but they were given one week to revise and submit the final draft.

Written samples

The participants of this study were an intact group of bachelor degree students (n = 70) of Business and Accounting from a semi-private university in Malaysia. They were all freshmen in their first semester. The students were aged between 18 and 20 and were mostly females (67%). The samples were collected during the first semester in November, 2013. The students were given a week to work on the task individually. They were free to use dictionaries and other references to improve their writing. After they were collected, one of the samples was discarded since it was merely a copy of the original text. This left the researchers with 69 samples to be analyzed.

Instrument

The rating scale that was used for scoring the samples was the ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel & Hughey, 1981). This scale is a generic instrument with five subscales of content, language use, organization, vocabulary and mechanics. The subscales carry different weights. Content is given the highest weight (30% of the total score). Language use, organization and vocabulary have moderate weights (25%, 20% and 20% of the total mark,

respectively), while mechanics receives the lowest (only 5% of the total mark). The total score can range from 34 (the lowest possible score) to 100 (the highest possible score).

Raters

Two experts scored the samples individually. The first rater was a female PhD candidate in English Language and the second held a PhD in Teaching English as a Second Language with 5 years of teaching experience. The second rater was a male lecturer with a PhD in Teaching English as a Second Language and with 18 years of teaching experience. Pearson Product Moment coefficients indicated high inter-rater reliability between the two raters: content ($r = 0.89$), organization ($r = 0.91$), vocabulary ($r = 0.85$), language use ($r = 0.82$), and mechanics ($r = 0.96$).

Data analysis

For data analysis IBM SPSS (Version 21) was used. Descriptive statistical tests like frequency, percentage and measures of central tendency; including mean, mode, and median were used in this study.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the results of the study will be presented and discussed. The first research question concerned the Malaysian students' performance level regarding the content of their summaries. Based on the results illustrated in Table 1, the majority of students (69.6%) showed 'Excellent to very good' performance levels regarding the content of their written works.

TABLE 1
CONTENT RESULTS

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very poor	0	0
Fair to poor	1	1.4
Good to average	20	29
Excellent to very good	48	69.6
Total	69	100
Measures of central tendency		
Mean	3.7	(Good to average)
Median	4	(Excellent to very good)
Mode	4	(Excellent to very good)

Such good results were expected since to write summaries students do not need to generate ideas. Rather, the content is provided for them, and they are only supposed to select the highlights and paraphrase them. The subscale of content becomes more important when writers are obliged to create their own ideas as is the case in timed-composition tasks that prompt students to create their own arguments. The high scores assigned to the sample with respect to content therefore could be attributed to the relative simplicity of the task.

The next research question focused on how well the students could organize the ideas throughout their written samples. Table 2 shows the students' organization scores.

TABLE 2
ORGANIZATION RESULTS

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very poor	0	0
Fair to poor	52	75.4
Good to average	17	24.6
Excellent to very good	0	0
Total	69	100
Measures of central tendency		
Mean	2.2	(Fair to poor)
Median	2	(Fair to poor)
Mode	2	(Fair to poor)

As the results show, only a quarter of the students (24.6%) were able to obtain 'Good to average' scores. The remaining samples (75.4%) were scored 'Fair to poor' by the two raters. This means that majority of the students failed to express the ideas fluently and clearly following a logical and cohesive sequence. English is a 'writer-responsible' language as opposed to some other languages, like German or Japanese, which is 'reader-responsible' (Hyland, 2002, p. 39). In writer-responsible languages clarity is of primary significance and the writer must make sure that the message is conveyed to the reader as clearly as possible. By contrast in reader-responsible languages, writers do not have to be concerned about the clarity and organization of their written work. One possible explanation for the relatively low organization scores obtained by the participants in this study could be attributed to the assumption that they came from a reader-responsible L1 background. Therefore, their L1 habits made them fail to realize the importance of cohesive and well-organized writing and what contributes to its cohesion and organization. Further research is required on the students' L1 before such an assumption can be verified.

Vocabulary was the next feature of the students' writing ability that was examined. The scores were assigned to the students' samples regarding their vocabulary range, choice, usage, form mastery, and register. Table 3 summarizes the vocabulary results.

TABLE 3
VOCABULARY RESULTS

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very poor	0	0
Fair to poor	67	97.1
Good to average	2	2.9
Excellent to very good	0	0
Total	69	100
Measures of central tendency		
Mean	2	(Fair to poor)
Median	2	(Fair to poor)
Mode	2	(Fair to poor)

The results indicated that almost all the students (over 97%) achieved 'fair to poor' vocabulary scores based on their performance in the summary writing task. One of the important skills in writing summaries is to re-write the selected content in one's own words. Replacing a word by its synonym may require changes to the overall structure of the entire sentence. Moreover, not all synonyms can be used interchangeably since they may have different registers. These results clearly show the importance of teaching paraphrasing skills to ESL students particularly when it concerns their mastery of word forms and vocabulary choice. Based on the related literature, vocabulary knowledge is considered as a need in reading fluency and text comprehension (Bryant et al., 1999). It is a need, because "students with poor vocabularies do not acquire the meaning of new words as quickly as students with richer vocabularies" (Bryant et al., 1999, p. 3). According to Laflamme (1997), "studies on vocabulary instruction unequivocally identify vocabulary knowledge as a major factor influencing reading ability where comprehension was improved as a result of pre teaching the vocabulary" (p. 374). Having both background knowledge of the subject matter and vocabulary, as the base of comprehending a text, is necessary for comprehension (Donohue, 2000). As Jensen and Duffelmeyer (1996) say, "pre-reading vocabulary instruction enhances students' ability to construct meaning from text" (p. 658). Increasing comprehension through vocabulary instruction points to the important role of vocabulary instruction in comprehension of written texts, and in turn, its role in writing summaries. The connection between vocabulary knowledge and academic success has been accepted widely (NICHD Report of the National Reading Panel, 2000); however, there are few studies to investigate the relationship between vocabulary instruction and writing (Duin & Graves, 1987). Among the few studies that examine the role of vocabulary instruction on writing, the projects conducted by Henry and colleagues (1999) and Scott (2004) have revealed the ways to improve the word consciousness and vocabulary knowledge to assist learners to transfer words encountered in text into their writing. In the projects, students faced with a rich literature by teachers and examined word use by authors. The result showed a significant improvement in the students' overall writing and attitudes which impressed teachers by increased awareness of students and appreciation for words.

The fourth research question was in relation to students' language use scores assigned by the two raters to their written samples (Table 4).

TABLE 4
LANGUAGE USE RESULTS

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very poor	0	0
Fair to poor	11	15.9
Good to average	57	82.6
Excellent to very good	1	1.4
Total	69	100
Measures of central tendency		
Mean	2.8	(Fair to poor)
Median	3	(Good to average)
Mode	3	(Good to average)

Only a minority of the students (about 16%) had major problems with both simple and complex structures, made frequent errors of agreement, tense, number, articles, pronouns, and propositions. Most students (over 82%) obtained 'good to average' language use scores. As these results show, on average, it is not necessary to spend a considerable period on these students' language use skills as it is the case in most language classes.

The final research question concerned the students' performance in mechanics of writing. Table 5 illustrates the results.

TABLE 5
MECHANICS RESULTS

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Very poor	0	0
Fair to poor	20	29
Good to average	49	71
Excellent to very good	0	0
Total	69	100
Measures of central tendency		
Mean	2.7	(Fair to poor)
Median	3	(Good to average)
Mode	3	(Good to average)

Like their language use scores, majority (over 70%) of the students' mechanics scores were 'good to average'. However, the remaining proportion of the students exhibited 'fair to poor' performance in their writing mechanics. This necessitates some instruction regarding skills like paragraphing and punctuation. Errors of this type can affect the clarity of the text and confuse the reader.

Overall, the results show what tertiary level students primarily need in courses of English for Business Purposes is paraphrasing skills. Based on the present findings, it seems logical to conclude that attention should be paid to summary writing which specifically enables students to rephrase the ideas in the source text using their own words.

IV. CONCLUSION

Summary writing involves choosing the main ideas of a text (Cho, 2012), reflecting on the ideas, decision making, and narrowing the information in a text (Rinehart & Thomas, 1993). Brown, Day, Roberta, and Jones (1983) contend that "the ability to work recursively on information to render it as succinctly as possible requires judgment and effort, knowledge, and strategies" (p. 977). Hence, it can be concluded that in order to develop summary writing skills students need to work hard and practice continuously.

Our results have lead us to conclude that tertiary level students of English for Business Purposes in Malaysia are in urgent need for summary writing skills in general and paraphrasing strategies in particular. ESL writing instructors who teach these students will be able to improve the efficiency of their courses by emphasizing paraphrasing strategies. An outstanding finding of the present study was that the students seemed to lack the necessary vocabulary knowledge and the skills to manipulate their vocabulary knowledge efficiently. As it was discussed, vocabulary knowledge plays a significant role in writing summaries. Our findings showed that the participants achieved the lowest scores for their use of vocabulary in their written samples. This indicates these learners' need for interventions that focus on their vocabulary knowledge and skills. Extensive research in the area of vocabulary instruction has shown that vocabulary development is a continuing process which gradually occurs in a broader learning context (Flood, Jensen, Lapp, & Squire, 1991), and across the curriculum (Ediger, 1999). Donohue (2000) insists on learning vocabulary in the context of subject matter, and maintains that learning vocabulary in this way will help the learner acquire a better comprehension of the subject matter and ability of using new words. According to Stahl (1986), "vocabulary instruction improves comprehension just when both definitions and context are given, and has the largest effect when a number of different activities or examples using the word in context are used" (p. 663). It can also be argued that having learners do guided summary writing activities provides a useful opportunity for them to look for, make use of, and consequently learn new vocabulary items in a purposeful manner.

This study followed a cross-sectional design to explore a group of ESL learners' difficulties when they deal with summary writing tasks. Further research is necessary to investigate more in-depth profile of these learners' problems while dealing with a wider range of genres, including argumentative mode of writing.

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