



**INVESTIGATING THE EFFECTS OF MEDIATING TASKS UPON  
A SUMMARY WRITING ACTIVITY**

by

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ESL	=	English as a Second Language
FI	=	Fog Index
SM	=	Sekolah Menengah (Secondary School)
SMK	=	Sekolah Menengah Kerajaan (Government Secondary School)
PMR	=	Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah (Lower Secondary School Examination)
SPM	=	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (Malaysia Certificate Examination)
SPSS	=	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Investigating the effects of mediating tasks upon a summary writing activity**

**Ho Soon Tet**

The purpose of this experiment is to investigate the effects of mediating tasks upon a summary writing activity. The study also aims to find out how students' summaries would differ under the mediating task in terms of targeted points, length of words and choice of words. The mediating task chosen is group discussion.

This study involved 40 Form Four students of Sekolah Menengah Kerajaan St Joseph, Kuching. The 40 students were divided into the experimental group and the control group. There were 20 students in the experimental group and 20 students in the control group. A reading text was administered to both groups of students before the summary writing activity. The experimental group was allowed to discuss the text before the writing activity. The control group wrote their summaries after reading the text. The time given for the summary writing task is 80 minutes.

The two groups' summaries were analyzed using content analysis. The content analysis examined the number of targeted points, the number of words and the choice of words in the summaries. The t-test for Independent Samples reveals that there were no significant differences in the overall ratings of the summaries.

The discussion of implication for teaching assesses the use of mediating tasks on language teaching. There are also a few recommendations for further studies of using mediating tasks in the teaching of summary writing.

## **ABSTRAK**

### **“Investigating the effects of mediating tasks upon a summary writing activity”**

**Ho Soon Tet**

Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kesan “mediating tasks” apabila ia dijalankan ke atas aktiviti ringkasan. Kajian ini juga bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana ringkasan pelajar itu berbeza dari segi isi kandungan, jumlah perkataan dan penggunaan perkataan sendiri. “Mediating task’ yang dijalankan secara perbincangan berkumpulan.

Kajian ini melibatkan 40 orang pelajar Tingkatan Empat dari Sekolah Menengah Kerajaan St Joseph, Kuching. 40 pelajar tersebut dibahagikan kepada kumpulan ujikaji dan kumpulan terkawal. Satu petikan telah diedar kepada kedua-dua kumpulan. Sebelum aktiviti ringkasan dijalankan, kumpulan ujikaji dibenarkan untuk berbincang dalam kumpulan sebelum menulis ringkasan mereka. Kumpulan terkawal menulis ringkasan selepas membaca petikan. Masa untuk aktiviti menulis ringkasan ialah 80 minit.

Ringkasan kedua-dua kumpulan dianalisa dengan menggunakan “content analysis”. “Content analysis” memeriksa jumlah isi kandungan, bilangan perkataan dan penggunaan perkataan sendiri dalam ringkasan. Data-data telah dianalisa dengan menggunakan “SPSS T-test for Independent Samples”. Analisa telah menunjukkan tiada perbezaan dari segi isi kandungan, jumlah perkataan dan penggunaan perkataan sendiri dalam ringkasan kedua-dua kumpulan.

Perbincangan mengimplikasikan pengajaran untuk menilai kegunaan “mediating tasks” pada pengajaran ringkasan. Akhir sekali dikemukakan beberapa cadangan untuk menjalankan kajian ini pada masa akan datang.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.0 Background to the Study

In the Malaysian ESL school syllabus, summary writing is one of the sub-skills in the writing components which should be taught in Form 3, 4 and 5. The skill of summarizing is important to students as it enables them to develop reading and writing skills. Summary writing involves the students to be able to think critically to extract the main points of a piece of writing text. Students would need to decide which points are the main ideas in the text and later plan and decide how to reorganize the main ideas into a coherent piece of writing text.

Summary writing is also an evaluative tool because it requires the reader to thoroughly understand the material that they are reading and to comprehend before writing the summary. According to Miller (1992: 61), summarizing a piece of work is one of the best ways to demonstrate that you have understood it. Summarizing stimulates students to use their linguistic and analytical abilities to communicate their ideas. Students' reaction to the text is assessed by how relevant their summaries are to the main points of the text and their ability to write to express themselves.

In an ESL classroom, students are often required to read about a subject in preparation for writing a summary. Based on the students' own understanding from reading the text and

their own interpretation of the text the students have to summarize the text. Like many other types of writing such as essays or reports writing, summary writing proves to be a difficult task to achieve for many ESL learners. In ESL classrooms, students are required to summarize a given text according to a predetermined length. In summarizing the reading text, students need to identify the important points in the text and to sum them up in their own words. Students who possessed limited knowledge and language ability are likely to face difficulty in summary writing.

Summary writing combines the skill of reading and writing. It tests not only the students' ability to write simply and clearly but also their ability to comprehend what they write. According to Strang (as cited in Alderson & Urquhart 1984), the product of reading will vary according to the reader. The reason why different readers will produce different products is because they start off from different positions. The product is the effect of what Bradsford, et al. (as cited in Alderson & Urquhart 1984) refer to as background knowledge. Students' background knowledge will create a difference in their interpretation of text. Students come from different background and therefore have different experiences in learning.

Determining what to write in a summary requires critical thinking by the students. Based on their own interpretation of the text, the students need to determine what is relevant in the text. Students need to make their choices. Different students will include different information based on what they consider to be the main idea in the text. As a result

students who are given the task of summarizing the same text is likely to come up with different summaries based on their understanding on their reading of the text.

The difference in their background knowledge calls for a need to bridge the connection between students' knowledge and writing ability by setting a mediating task to make the connection between reading and writing so that students would be able to understand the text and to write later. Mediating tasks are activities that act as a connecting link between two different tasks. A mediating task is set to achieve a particular outcome. Mediating tasks are used by learners for a goal or purpose in order to achieve an outcome. Mediating tasks can be in the form of information gap task, problem-solving task, role-play, simulations or discussion according to (Seedhouse, 1999).

To enable students to make the connections between reading and understanding the text, the summary writing tasks are designed to help them accomplish the later task successfully. According to Allison, Berry and Lewkowicz (1994) a mediating task in the form of an oral discussion is seen as a stepping stone for the students between the reading and final products. Getting students to discuss the text prior to using the information from it in another way that is in the form of writing can be seen as a mediating task.

Group discussions in our ESL classroom, which often comprises of mixed abilities students, will provide everyone with the opportunity to participate and contribute their ideas and their judgment. Besides that, students of very poor reading ability who have great difficulty in reading the text can follow the discussion in their own group to assist

them in understanding the text. In other words group discussions would give all students the opportunity to understand the text, formulate their own thoughts and express them in a way that in turn would help prepare them for their writing task.

The study “Reading-writing connections in E.A.P. classes: A content analysis of written summaries produced under three mediating conditions” conducted by Allison, Berry, and Lewkowicz (1994) provided the basis of the present experiment. In the study the researchers presented an analysis of the content of summaries written by students in advanced English language class under three mediating conditions. The first mediating condition in the study involved a group discussion, the second condition was a reading comprehension exercise and the third condition provided immediate access to the text and summary instructions with no mediating activity. The analysis formed part of an applied linguistic investigation into the nature and effects of tasks that mediate between written text and the readers. The researchers viewed that such study would provide an understanding of how mediating tasks affected text processing and subsequent written outcomes. Mediating tasks are seen by the researchers as a stepping stone for the students between the reading and final language product.

The present study aims to replicate the study of Allison, Berry and Lewkowicz’s (1994) study. In the present study the researcher is interested to find out whether mediating tasks would have any effect on students’ summary writing as suggested in the study by Allison, Berry, and Lewkowicz (1994).

The present study will focus only on two of the mediating tasks used by the researchers on two groups of students, namely, the experimental group and the control group. The second mediating task which required completing a written set of exercise was omitted as the researcher was only interested in finding out whether the oral mediating task would have any effect on students' summaries and how students' summaries would differ under the different mediating tasks as suggested in the original study. Further details of the original research will be reviewed in Chapter 2 of this study.

The following table shows the differences between the original study by Allison, Berry and Lewkowicz's (1994) study and the present study that the researcher intended to carry out.

**Table 1 Differences in Studies**  
**The differences between the original study and the present study**

<b>Study</b>	<b>Group</b>	<b>Mediating tasks</b>	<b>Outcome</b>
Allison, Berry and Lewkowicz's (1994) study	Group 1 (experimental)	oral discussion	written summary
	Group 2 (experimental)	reading exercise	written summary
	Group 3 (control)	none	written summary
Present study	Group 1 (experimental)	oral discussion	written summary
	Group 2 (control)	none	written summary



## 1.1 Research Objectives

This research aims:

- a. to find out whether mediating task has any effect on students' summaries.
- b. to find out how students' written summaries differ under two different mediating conditions, namely, group discussions as a mediating task for the experimental group and no mediating task for the control group.

## 1.2 Research Questions:

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of the mediating task on students' summary writing. The followings are the principal research questions on which the research is focusing on.

- a) Does mediating task have any effect on the content of the experimental groups' summaries compared to the control group?
- b) How would students' summaries differ in terms of the number of words between the experimental group and the control group?
- c) Can the mediating task assist students in using their choice of words for their summaries?

In the first research question the researcher aims to find out if the mediating task has any effect in the content of written summaries of the experimental group and the control group. The second research question aims to find out how the groups' summaries differ in terms

of the word length in the summary. The third research question aims to find out if the mediating task can assist students in using their own choice of words in their summaries.

### **1.3 Assumption:**

This research is based on the assumption that mediating tasks have an effect on students' summaries. The findings given in Allison, Berry and Lewkowicz suggest that mediating tasks would enhance the writing ability of students' summaries. There would be a difference in terms of content, length of words and choice of words in the summaries.

### **1.4 Significance of the Study**

It is hoped that the findings would provide an insight in the pedagogical aspects of teaching summary writing in schools. The information gathered in the research would provide more insight to teachers in determining performance in summary writing. It is also hoped that the findings would improve teachers' understanding of how mediating tasks can be used and of their subsequent outcomes.

It is through discussions that students are able to share each other's perspectives and also to think critically on their own views. The study would hopefully give teachers an alternative teaching strategy that is more communicative when students indulged in active discussions and negotiations among themselves in writing a summary.

## 1.5 Limitations of the Study

The subjects consist of only 40 Form Four students. Therefore, the number of chosen subjects involved will not be representative of the whole population of students in Sarawak. Thus, the result may not be very significant.

## 1.6 Definition of terms

The following terms are used in the present study:

- a) **Conceptual analysis** is a method used in content analysis in which examination and the concept is tallied for its presence. (Carley,1990) Conceptual analysis is used in this study in tallying the number of content points, the length of words and choice of words in students' summaries.
- b) **Content analysis** is a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts or sets of text. (Carley,1990) It involves counting concepts or words and presenting them in tabular form. The frequency of concepts or words in students' summaries are analyzed and interpreted to support the researcher's finding.
- c) **Content points** are the main ideas in the sentences. They are the most important ideas that the writer wants to convey to its readers. "All of the other information relate to the main ideas". (Skidel & Becker, 1994:61). In the study content points refer to the targeted points which are also the main points to be included in the content of the summary.

- d) **ESL classroom** is a formal setting of teaching and learning situations whereby English is taught in a second language. ESL classrooms are typical in Malaysian schools where students come from non-English speaking backgrounds. (Nesamalar Chitravelu, Saratha Sithamparam and Teh Soo Choon, 1995)
- e) **Fog Index** is a readability formula to measure the level of difficulty of a text. It is based upon counts of words and of sentence length. The fog index is used to measure the readability level in the reading text in the summary writing task.
- f) **Group discussion** refers to “two or more people interacting with one another in such a manner that each person influences and is influenced by every other person”. (Abrams, 1986:166). Group discussions provide students with opportunities to acquire knowledge and insight through face-to face exchange of information and ideas in the classroom.
- g) **Mediating task** refers to a language activity that is carried out in between two different activities. Mediating tasks act as a connection between two different tasks. In this study the mediating task refers to a group discussion.
- h) **Relational Analysis** is “a method in content analysis in which it seeks to go beyond presence by exploring the relationship between the concepts identified”. (Carley, 1990). The focus of relational analysis is to look for semantic or meaningful relationships’. In relational analysis individual concepts are viewed as having no inherent meaning as meaning is a product of the relationship among concepts in a text.
- i) **Summary** refers to a “series of brief, concise statements in the writer’s own words of the main ideas and significant supporting details”. (Smith, 2000:151) A

summary is a short version of a text. It seeks to give the reader a clear idea of the most important information in the text.

- j) *T-test* is a statistical test to determine whether there is a significant difference between the means of two groups.

This chapter introduces the background of the study, the research objectives, research questions, assumption, significance of the study, limitation of the study and the definition of terms. The following chapter will present the literature review related to this study. The chapter will be divided into four sub-topics namely: reading and writing connection, summary writing, mediating tasks and content analysis.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

This chapter will give a brief description of the original study by Allison, Berry and Lewkowicz (1994). Literature or the related concepts such as the reading and writing connection, mediating task and content analysis will be reviewed.

#### **2.1 Review of original study by Allison, Berry and Lewkowicz (1994)**

In the study the researchers attempt to investigate the effects of mediating tasks upon a summary writing activity for tertiary-level students using English as an educational medium. The rationale in finding out the nature and effects of tasks that 'mediate' between written texts and student readers was considered necessary for the researchers in order to enable them to understand how mediating tasks affects text processing and the subsequent written outcomes. The researchers viewed that mediating tasks would help or guide students to a better understanding of the text.

In a first language context as suggested by the researchers there was evidence which showed that the final written outcome would differ depending on whether the mediating process had been oral or written. The researchers were interested to know if such differences could also be observed in a second language context.

The purpose of their study was to determine in what respects, and to what extent, students' summaries would differ in the three different conditions. The first condition required the first group to read and discuss the given reading text before the summary writing activity. The second condition required the second group to attempt a set of comprehension exercise after reading the given reading text before the summary writing activity. The third condition required the third group to read the reading text and attempt the summary writing individually. The tasks in the study therefore involved a group discussion for the first group and a reading comprehension exercise for the second group and immediate access to the text and summary instruction for the third group. The first group and the second group were given mediating tasks before the summary writing activity whereas the third group wrote their summaries without any mediating task.

The sample consisted of 80 first year undergraduate students of Economics at the university of Hong Kong. Each treatment group was given the same reading text. After reading the text, students in Group 1 (treatment group) discussed it in small groups (the discussion were recorded). Students assigned to Group 2 (treatment group) completed a set of tailor-made reading comprehension exercise. Students in Group 3 (control group) were simply asked to read and summarize their text in writing. For Group 1 and Group 2 the time given was divided into 20 minutes of reading time, 20 minutes on the mediating task and 40 minutes for writing the summary. The third group was given the full 80 minutes for writing their summary.

The reading text was a journalist report entitled “Is there a gene for genius?” (McCrone (cited in Allison, Berry and Lewkowicz, 1994). It was an argumentative text. Students were to summarize the 2 main points which were the genetic factor and the environmental factor and how the two factors influenced human intelligence in the summary writing activity. Students’ discussions were recorded to determine how students discussed the two factors in the summary writing task.

A one-way analysis of variance was performed to compare the result between the three groups of students. Students’ summaries were analyzed and calculated according to the mean number of words in discussing the identified areas and also according to the content points (targeted points) in the summary. Initial results of the study indicated that there were no statistically significant differences in the overall ratings of the summaries across the three groups, with the observed trend ( $p=.08$ ). There were, however significant differences ( $p<.05$ ) across the groups in the mean length of the summaries, the degree of text dependent and the number of content points in the summaries. In light of the findings the researchers conducted a further analysis in an attempt to determine the relationship (if any) between the mediating tasks type and the final written outcome. The content analysis of the 80 summaries focused on the targeted points and length of words in the summaries.

From the evaluation on the content analysis of the summaries, the researchers found there were significant differences in the number of content / targeted points included, mean length of words and the degree of text dependent / independent of the summary between the three groups of respondents. It was found that the control group (Group 3) with no