

## Effects of Summarization on Determining the Main Idea of a Literary Text

### **Introduction**

Acquiring literacy skills is one of the most important things needed in order to be successful in life. It involves learning how to decode words, to write, and to contribute effectively in discussions. However, one of the most important aspects of literacy is being able to comprehend those decoded words into meaning. Without comprehension, it is hard to move forward from the basics and on to the critical thinking that reading requires. The majority of literacy building is done in the adolescent years through the schooling that students experience. By the time students get to high school, there is often a misconception that they should be able to read a text and instantly comprehend it. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. For this reason, additional scaffolding must be put into place so that students who struggle with reading comprehension can begin to grow their literacy skills and have the opportunity to create meaning from words. Summary writing is an example of a scaffold that supports student comprehension and in turn supports students' ability to determine the main idea of a text. This literature review will touch on the importance of implementing summary writing into the classroom, how summary and main ideas are linked, and recommendations for teachers to take back to their own classrooms.

### **Why is Summarizing Important?**

Summarization is a strategy that can be used to grow students' reading comprehension and increase their ability to determine what the main idea of a text is. It requires students to determine what the most important information is, get rid of the unimportant information, and create a short piece of writing that states what the text was about in their own words (Asaro-Saddler, Muir-Knox, & Meredith, 2017; Dean, Hubbell, Pitler, Stone, 2012).

In “A Qualitative study on the use of Summarizing Strategies in Elementary Education,” Kirmizi and Akkaya write that summary writing is among one of the most important strategies that students do after they are done reading a text because it requires students to write to learn (2011). Writing to learn means that rather than focusing on the rules of writing, students are writing for comprehension. This changes the way that students interact with a text because they not only read the text but then continue to engage with it through their writing. In turn, it allows space for a deeper understanding of the materials that students are being presented with.

Furthermore, summarization gives students many different opportunities to create meaning from the text that they are reading. These opportunities include being able to retain the information that was being presented, clarify the information, question the text, and voice their questions and curiosities (Wallace, Pearman, Hail, & Hurst, 2007). It seems that the basis of all of these opportunities revolve around information retention due to that being imperative in order to think more critically about a text. By writing summaries after reading, students are working towards storing that information into their long-term memory (Kirmizi & Akkaya, 2011; Braxton & Dreher, 2013; Asaro-Saddler, et al., 2017). Once students are able to retain and comprehend what they have read, they will then be able to move on to higher-level thinking.

Alongside information retention comes the necessity to paraphrase information. This is one of the most important steps in the summarization process because it requires students to take what the author said and then put it in their own language (Wallace et al., 2007). This links back to the literacy element of making meaning out of words. When students practice summarization, they are able to work with the text at a deeper level by determining ways that they can transform what they are reading into their own language in order to make meaning (Khoshsima & Tiyar, 2014). Furthermore, summarization helps students’ comprehension because it requires them to

work through the language of a text. This is what makes summarizing “the most significant and encompassing of all reading strategies available to the learner for effective studying and comprehension” (Khoshsima & Tiyar, 2014).

### **Summarization and the Main Idea**

#### **Importance of Determining the Main Idea**

The main idea of a text is the big picture or main details that a reader should gather from the writing. In other words, the main idea is what the author wants to communicate to its readers. Determining the main idea of a text is an important skill to hold because if students are unable to identify it, then they will be unable to comprehend what a text is saying. Students struggle with this task because it requires them to critically think about the information that is being presented to them by breaking the information down between what is important and what is not important (Braxton & Dreher, 2013).

#### **Link Between Summarizing and the Main Idea**

When writing summaries, it is natural to look for the main idea of the text. This is due to needing to know which information is important and which information is not since only important information should be included in a summary (Braxton & Dreher, 2013; Gorgen, 2015; Asaro-Saddler et al., 2017). After students make this determination, the next step is to find the main idea. By practicing this process through writing summaries, students’ abilities in determining the main idea of a text will increase. This is important because a summary that does not identify the main idea of a text is incomplete (Kirmizi & Akkaya, 2011).

Additionally, as stated earlier, with summarizing comes the need to paraphrase. When students put information into their own words they better comprehend the text. Furthermore, it aids in their ability to determine the main idea because, as Asaro-Saddler et al. states, “putting

ideas into their own words also requires students to reflect on the content of the passage, thus increasing the likelihood that they will comprehend the main ideas of the text (as cited in Graham, Harris, & Santangelo, 2015). This shows the importance of practicing summarizing in order to help students understand a text and so that they can better identify the main idea of it.

### **Recommendations**

When it comes to the teaching of summary writing, there are many different strategies that have been found to improve student comprehension. These strategies are broken up into two main categories: rule-based instruction and non-rule based instruction. Rule-based instruction provides students with explicit directions to follow when writing their summaries. On the contrary, non-rule based instruction gives students more freedom in how they wish to write their summaries. It still provides them with some rules to follow; however, they are more of guidelines.

Braxton and Dreher propose a set of 5 rules for students to follow when writing a rule-based summary. Their rules are as follows:

- (1) delete information that is not important to the overall understanding of the selection;
- (2) delete redundant or repeated information; (3) identify a list of items or actions that can be replaced with a general term; (4) identify the topic sentence; and (5) invent a topic sentence, if one is not there (2013).

When using these rules it is important that each step is modeled for the students. Modeling ensures that they understand what each step means enabling them to write effective summaries on their own. Furthermore, Asaro-Saddler et al., used a rule-based approach as well; however, they created a mnemonic device in order to help students remember the steps that they were to take. The mnemonic device that they used was WINDOW. Beginning with the “W” students

were to write the main idea of the text. Moving on to the “I” students identified the important information. The important information included facts, reasons, and ideas (FRI.) They then went on to the “N” which was to number the FRI. Essentially meaning to put the details into an easy to understand order. The “D” and “O” were when students developed sentences in their own words and then organized them. Lastly, the “W” was when students read over what they wrote, wrote an end sentence, and made any revisions that were needed. Going through each letter led students to writing a complete summary after determining the main ideas of the text (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2017).

When it comes to non-rule based instruction, there are multiple avenues that teachers can choose to take. About/Point is a strategy that helps students break down the information before they begin to write a summary about what they have read. The first step is to find a text for students to read and break it into sections. Students are to then read each section, with a partner, and then discuss what they think the main idea of that section is. After they have come to a conclusion, they write it on a sticky note. They repeat this until they have finished the text. After they are done reading, students use sticky notes to write a summary of the entire passage (Wallace et al., 2007). One other strategy that is effective in teaching students how to write summaries is the GIST, which stands for Generating Interactions between Schemata and Text. This strategy asks students to summarize, but there is a word limit that they must keep in mind. The guidelines that students are to follow are the following: one or two sentences, no more than 20 words, and the summary gives the gist of the text rather than all of the details (Braxton & Dreher, 2013).

Regardless of there being many different ways to teach students how to write summaries, one thing is clear throughout all of the literature: how to write a summary must be explicitly

taught to students (Asaro-Saddler et al., 2017; Khoshima & Tiyar (2014); Kirmizi & Akkaya, 2011). This is important so that students are able to understand what a true summary looks like. For example, when students are not explicitly taught, chances are that they will have difficulty paraphrasing (Kirmizi & Akkaya, 2011). This is a problem because it gives no insight into if the students truly comprehend what they read. In order to avoid this and to ensure that teachers have an understanding of the comprehension abilities of students, modeling and direct instruction must be applied.

### **Conclusion**

Together, summary and the main idea of a text go hand in hand. In order to provide students with the opportunity to improve at determining the main idea, they need to practice through writing summaries over the texts that they read. Literacy is about creating meaning from the things that are read. However, it is a reality that there are high school students who are low in their comprehension abilities and meaning cannot be created without being able to comprehend. Summary writing provides a space for them to spend some time with a text, think critically about it in order to determine the main idea, and then write a summary in their own words. This gives them a sort of power in making the information theirs and thus retaining more of what they read. The skills that they learn from summarizing will then allow them to have a fuller understanding of the texts that they come across. Whether they move on to post-secondary schooling or the workforce, reading and comprehension are at the basis of whatever it is they wish to do with their lives. Thus, it is necessary for them to practice these skills now so that they will be better prepared for their future.

## References

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