More than a "Basic Skill": Breaking Down the Complexities of Summarizing for ABE/ESL Learners

*By
Jennifer
Ouellette-Schramm*

Hamline University

Abstract

This article describes the complex cognitive and linguistic challenges of summarizing expository text at vocabulary, syntactic, and rhetorical levels. It then outlines activities to help ABE/ESL learners develop corresponding skills.

Introduction

Summary writing is often considered a "basic skill" learned early in the educational journey (Kissner, 2006; Van Duzer & Florez, 2003). As a result, many Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English as Second Language (ESL) educators may assume that summary writing is already or easily attained by their learners. Many common ABE/ESL summarizing tasks and texts could support this perception. Summarizing the narrative texts typical of many ABE/ESL classrooms (Johnson & Parrish, 2010) may only require recalling events in the sequence they occurred. Likewise, essays appearing in many ESL and developmental

writing textbooks are written with explicit main ideas, supporting ideas, and details that learners can, with practice, learn to summarize by searching for the main idea within the first sentences of the introduction and for the supporting ideas at the beginning of the following paragraphs. However, summarizing more linguistically complex expository texts, where main ideas may be implicit and supporting ideas can be interwoven, poses linguistic and cognitive complexities that can challenge ABE and adult ESL learners alike (Cummins, 1979; Zwiers, 2008).

While challenging, being able to summarize expository texts is increasingly important for ABE/ESL learners to succeed in their educational goals. Proficiency with summarizing underlies the evidence-based writing demands of the Graduate Education Development (GED) test (GED Testing Service, 2013). Summarizing academic texts is a common requirement in post-secondary education (Horowitz, 1986; Johnson & Parrish, 2010) and is foundational to essay writing, which requires condensing and synthesizing academic texts to support claims (Swales & Feak, 2012). Accordingly, summarizing informational texts appears prominently in the national College and Career Readiness Standards (Pimentel, 2013).

Just as developing competence with summarizing expository texts can challenge adult learners, teaching this skill can challenge adult educators. Educators can help learners by understanding the linguistic and cognitive demands of expository summarizing, and by scaffolding those challenges, or providing activity structures that support complex cognitive and language skills as learners develop them (Taylor, 2006).

The Linguistic and Cognitive Demands of Summarizing

Cummins (1979) describes skills such as summary-writing as Cognitive Academic Language Proficiencies (CALP), distinct from Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS). He describes BICS, which include day-to-day communication tasks such as reading signs in a supermarket or writing an informal note, as social, informal competencies that are easier to acquire than CALP, which he describes as "strongly related to overall cognitive and academic skills" (p.198). Zwiers (2008) likewise describes the academic language needed for many CALP skills as "a set of words, grammar, and organizational strategies used to describe complex ideas, higher-order thinking processes, and abstract concepts" (p. 20).

Cummins (1979) argues that ESL learners proficient in CALP in their first language can more quickly and successfully acquire CALP in a second language. Cumming's (1989) research supports this theory, finding that inexperienced English Language Learner (ELL) writers face challenges closer to inexperienced native English speakers than those of more experienced ELL writers. Inexperienced writers, whether writing in English as a first or second language, demonstrate difficulty conceptualizing their writing, and struggle to keep larger segments of meaning in mind during the writing process.

To write a successful summary, a learner must first understand the text being summarized (Swales & Feak, 2012). This requires unpacking the text at vocabulary, sentence, and text structure, or rhetorical, levels (Schleppegrell, 2004; Zwiers, 2008). On the vocabulary level, learners need to understand what Zwiers (2008) describes as *brick* words, or content-specific vocabulary, such as "enrollment" or "coverage." Brick words also include terms that take on a new or more specific meaning in a certain

context, such as "marketplace" in the context of healthcare. Learners also need to understand what Zwiers (2008) calls *mortar* words and phrases, which hold ideas together and show relationships between them such as "although" or "on the other hand." On the sentence level, learners need to unpack the long and dense structures frequently found in expository texts, such as compound and complex sentences with multiple clauses (Schleppegrell, 2004); dense noun phrases; and *nominalizations* or verb or adjective phrases utilized as single abstract nouns (Swierzbin, 2014). On the rhetorical level, comprehending a text requires understanding how that text is structured (Schleppegrell, 2004; Zwiers, 2008). In order to begin identifying the main ideas and key supporting information that comprise the essence of summary writing, learners must also distinguish key ideas from supporting ideas and construct logical connections among them (Jitendra & Gajria, 2011). This in turn requires recognizing how primary and subordinate ideas are organized within a text (Leki, 1998; Zwiers, 2008). Reading on a rhetorical level and identifying relationships between ideas is exactly what inexperienced readers of expository texts struggle with, as they tend to focus on concrete and surface-level details rather than how a work is constructed as a whole (Kintsch, 1989).

To write a summary of a text once it has been comprehended, learners need to be able to use academic language to articulate main ideas and relevant supporting information. On the individual word level, paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism demands carefully using synonyms (Swales & Feak, 2012). For example, if paraphrasing the sentence, "Mr. Obama also lashed out at repeated conservative efforts to repeal or defund the law," from the BBC news article, *Obama touts high healthcare enrolment* [sic] *after deadline* (April 1, 2014), learners may need

to identify synonyms to express the meaning of "lashed out," "repeated conservative efforts," "repeal," or "defund." Summarizing also requires being able to accurately use appropriate "reporting" verbs (Hinkel, 2004), such as "explains," "describes" or "argues," e.g., "The article explains/describes/argues that….". Syntactically, completing the sentence "The article explains that…" requires the ability to construct a complex sentence with one or more subordinate clauses, e.g., "This article explains *that President Obama believes (subordinate clause 1) [that] his healthcare law has been successful and is not going anywhere (subordinate clause 2).*

In writing a summary, learners need to apply the academic writing convention of using simple present tense verbs (Hinkel, 2004; Leki, 1998), rather than what to some learners appears to be the more intuitive strategy of using simple past verbs to describe an article written about a past event. To paraphrase, learners also need to be able to re-cast sentences with original grammatical structures (Kissner, 2006). On the rhetorical level, learners need to relate main ideas and supporting ideas in a logical way, which involves attending to cohesion (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Conceptualizing one's own writing on a rhetorical level and attending to how ideas are organized are among the most significant challenges for struggling ABE and ESL writers alike (Cumming, 1989; Flower & Hayes, 1981).

Summarizing Challenges and Activities

The following activities can help learners unpack complex language in expository text and begin using academic language to summarize it.

Vocabulary

To become familiar with new vocabulary in an expository text, Zwiers (2008) recommends "right

away" activities that offer immediate practice and repetition. He describes two activities from Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2002), the *Have you ever?* and the *Idea completion* activity. In the prior, the instructor inserts the target word or phrase in a question beginning with "Have you ever?" and learners ask and respond to the question. In the latter, the instructor provides sentence stems using the target word or phrase, prompting learners to finish the sentences. For example, to practice the brick verb "tout" in the title of the BBC news article, *Obama touts high healthcare enrolment* [sic] *after deadline* (April 1, 2014), learners could ask and answer, "Have you ever touted something you were proud of?" Later in that article, the sentence appears, "Though the reform had at times been 'contentious and confusing,' he said, 'that's part of what change looks like in a democracy.'" To practice the brick adjectives "contentious" and "confusing," learners might ask and respond to a question such as "Have you ever experienced a contentious or confusing issue in your community?" To practice the mortar word "though," learners might complete a sentence stems such as, "Though I went to bed early last night, I…" Learners can complete questions and sentence stems orally in learner-pairs, and instructors can elicit examples that provide clarification or learning opportunities for whole class review.

Sentences

One challenge with understanding long compound and complex sentences is recognizing distinct meaning units and the relationships among them. Relatedly, it can be cognitively challenging for learners to hold several ideas in mind at once (Cumming, 1989). The following complex sentence appears in the previously mentioned article: "An estimated 7.1 million Americans signed up for coverage to avoid penalties prior to Monday's deadline for doing so, exceeding initial projections." To understand this sentence, learners need to understand that the *adverbial subordinate purpose clause* (Cowan, 2008), "to avoid penalties prior to Monday's deadline for doing so" modifies and provides a reason for the main verb phrase, "signed up for coverage." A learner also needs to know that the *free adjunct* or *supplementive clause* (Cowan, 2008) "exceeding initial projections," loosely modifies the main clause, "An estimated 7.1 million Americans signed up for coverage." Finally, because the nominalization "projections" makes it unnecessary to state who did the initial projecting, a learner needs to deduce who might have made the projections that were exceeded.

One exercise for unpacking sentences such as the one above is for learners to reconstruct sentences that have been broken down into distinct meaning units on index cards. For lower level learners, or as a first step, the index cards might contain larger meaning units such as the subject phrase, "An estimated 7.1 million Americans;" the main verb phrase, "signed up for health care;" the clause with implied subordinator, "[in order] to avoid penalties prior to Monday's deadline for doing so;" and the final supplementive clause, "exceeding initial projections." For more advanced learners, or in a review activity, the subordinate clause could be broken down into further components, e.g., "to avoid / penalties / prior to/ Monday's deadline / for doing so."

After working with component parts of the sentence, learners might practice identifying an agent for the nominalized verb "projection" in the modifying clause, "exceeding initial projections." For example, they might choose appropriate nouns to place in the subject position of a sentence such as, _____ *initially projected that fewer people would sign up.*

Text Structure

Understanding how a text is constructed can help learners better summarize it (Kissner, 2006). To identify the components of a text, such as main ideas, and to distinguish relevant supporting ideas, learners can work in pairs to analyze sentences or sentence groups in an article, labeling them with phrases such as *background information*, *big idea* or *main idea*, and *supporting detail*. To further scaffold and limit the amount of text learners have to focus on, it can be helpful for the instructor to pre-identify text that serves those functions and place them in a graphic organizer. Using a graphic organizer, learners might also contrast important versus less important, or relevant versus irrelevant details.

Summary Composing

Once learners have identified key main ideas and supporting details in a text, they may be ready to draft a summary using a paragraph frame, which consists of pre-written sentence starters (Zwiers, 2008). On the vocabulary level, using a paragraph frame offers learners the opportunity to choose between reporting verbs rather than think of them on their own. On a syntactic level, a paragraph frame can provide partial complex sentences, which learners can complete rather than write from scratch. On a rhetorical level, a paragraph frame provides a skeletal structure that introduces text elements such as an introduction, main idea statement, and supporting details. A summary paragraph frame for the BBC Obamacare article mentioned above might look like:

> "In the article,[author's name] explains/
> describes/argues that _____
> _____. To illustrate
> this point, the author quotes _____ as
> saying _____.

As learners become more practiced with summary writing, they can gradually move away from using paragraph frames, and begin constructing their own summaries from outlines. Completing paragraph frames like the one above can be done individually or collaboratively.

As more ABE and adult ESL learners aspire to pass the GED test and transition into post-secondary education, and as more academic language skills, including summarizing, appear in ABE national standards (Pimentel, 2013), adult educators increasingly need to understand and address CALP including summarizing expository text. Thus, the use of scaffolding strategies can help ABE/ESL learners develop the complex linguistic and cognitive skills they will need to accomplish increasingly ambitious academic goals. ❖

Jennifer Ouellette-Schramm holds an MA ESL and Ed.D. from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She has worked with ABE and adult ESOL learners for eight years at the Minnesota Literacy Council, and also teaches college ESOL and developmental writing college writing courses along with MA ESL reading and writing pedagogy. Her research interests include the intersection of adult epistemological development and academic literacy learning.

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