Writing performance, strategy use and students' perceptions of Wiki-based collaborative summary writing in an EFL context

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Abstract

This paper examines a Wiki-based collaborative writing approach to summary writing for language learners. A five-stage computer-mediated collaborative writing process was implemented: comprehending the text, drafting the summary tasks, peer-revising, peer-editing, and individual publishing in an English composition course. Seventy-two L2 learners at a university in southern Taiwan participated in this study. Instructor's procedural and collective scaffolding foster students' writing summary skills. A mixed-method approach was utilized with text analysis, survey, and interview used for triangulation. The results showed students' positive perceptions of the Wiki-based collaborative writing environment and the instructional design of implement Wiki-based collaborative writing summary tasks with a five-stage summary writing process facilitate students' writing skills and enhance their experiences of collaborative learning on Wikis. The findings also indicate that tasks designed for Wiki summary writing provide students constructive opportunities to communicate each other and improve their writing proficiencies.

Key words: summary writing, Wikis, collaborative writing, English as a foreign language, college students

1. Introduction

In a foreign language learning process, summary writing is a significant evaluation for teachers to assess students' understanding of main ideas and other supporting points in a text. Many scholars suggest summary writing develop students' vocabulary knowledge, critical thinking, and reading comprehension (Hidi and Anderson, 1986, Talor and Beach, 1984). The purpose of writing a summary is to convey important information of source texts for both readers and writers (Hidi and Anderson,1986). Students may summarize source texts for their assignments to integrate concepts to meet their course requirements. As

Bhatia (2002, p. 37) states, university students need to learn "specific norms, expectations, and conventions with respect to writing," so writing a summary from source texts is an indispensable task. In addition, writing a summary has to consider many aspects, for examples, the contents of source texts, organization, difficulty, length, and readers' language proficiencies. Keck's study (2006) speculates that students don't know how to paraphrase when they write a summary. Their language proficiencies might be a crucial factor that some students may copy from source texts when summarizing the texts. Many L1 (first language) studies claim that students lack of sufficient summarization skills even for university-level students (Brown & Day, 1983; Hidi& Anderson,1986; Garner, 1985; Winograd,1984).

However, there has been little research about how L2 (second langue) writers learn to write a summary collaboratively using a computer-mediated communication such as a Wiki. This lack of attention is probably related to difficulty of dealing with the complex cognitive writing process involved in summarization. Using this collaborative writing approach can enhance their summarization skills for L2 learners.

This study aims at investigating EFL students who studied English for one semester at a university (in a freshman English composition course) could summarize an English text appropriately. More specifically, the study focuses on the following questions:

1. To what extent did the students improve their English summarization skills after receiving summary writing instruction and collaborative writing practice through wikis in groups?

2. What strategies, among deletion, selection, and transformation, are most frequently used in students' L2 summaries?

3. What are students' perceptions of Wiki-based collaborative writing after receiving summary writing instruction?

2. Literature Review

2.1 The nature of L2 reading and writing

2.1.1 Introduction

The relationship between reading and writing is inseparable in a L2 learning setting. For instructors, the importance of English reading and writing instruction are valued the most important curriculum design. Sadden & Reid (1985) assert that reading and writing construct the similar process of cognitive knowledge and background knowledge. The "meaning" is constructed by readers when they read a text (Ken Goodman, 1996). Thus, summary writing plays a crucial role when L2 learners comprehend texts that they should identify the important points, separate them from the less important details, and omit some details.

2.1.2 Features of summary writing

There have been a variety of definitions of summary (Langan, 1993; Wohl,1978; Glendinning and Holmstrom,1992; Johnson,1983). Brown et al. (1983) define a good summary is the result of judgment,

knowledge, strategies, and effort. In addition, an effective summary requires reflection and decision making. However, Hidi and Anderson (1986) think that summarization involves operations based on already planned and generated discourse. In other words, they elaborate that writing requires careful planning of content and structure, generation of main ideas and related details and continuous shifting between these processes. Therefore, some scholars argue that the ability to plan and use important texts information in a summary cannot be solely a general writing practice (Head, Readence, and Buss,1989; Hidi& Anderson, 1986).

Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) first propose three basic operations of summarization: deletion (omission of irrelevant information), generalization (conflation of details into higher-level categories), and construction (integration of details into topic sentences). Further, Brown and Day (1983) identify six essential rules for producing adequate summaries of lengthy texts: (1) deletion of trivial material, (2) deletion of redundant material, (3) generalization, (4) integration, (5) selection, and (6) invention. These scholars provide a different terminology to elaborate the same summarization process. When learners employ selecting, planning, integrating, and monitoring (also called metacognitive strategies), they increase their awareness of evaluating their reading and more aware of the processes necessary to comprehend the text (Rinehardt et al., 1986).

Less effective learners who have difficulty summarizing a text are often considered to have difficulty understanding the text .On the contrary, more effective learners are believed to generate a mental summary of the important information in what they read (Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). Therefore, summarization has been employed both as means to improve reading comprehension (Brown & Day 1983) and as measures of reading comprehension (Carrell, 1990).

2.2 Using Wiki in EFL writing class

Wiki provides an open online platform for learners to practice writing and to engage peer review. Also, it is a useful interface for peer revising that requires students to develop their content and for peer editing that requires students to attend to linguistic forms and correct the errors. Therefore, collaboration is necessity as they have to learn from each other in this platform. A Wiki is a collaborative tool that allows users to contribute and modify one or more pages of course related materials, providing a means of sharing and collaboration. Blackboard wiki pages can be created and edited quickly, tracking changes and additions, allowing for dynamic collaboration among multiple writers. An instructor creates one or more Wikis for all course members to contribute to and/or wikis for specific groups to use to collaborate. A course wiki is also a fun way to increase social interaction with other members of the class. As users share and build knowledge, writers can see the history of how it happened over the duration of the class. To encourage participation, an instructor may assign a grade to his/her contributions. However, little research had focused on Blackboard wiki to improve L2 writing.

Many scholars advocate the advantages of wikis and promote peer interaction and facilitate the sharing

and distribution of knowledge and expertise (Lipponen,2002; Lamb, 2004; Farabaugh, 2007). On the other hand, researchers believe there are some drawbacks using wikis. First, students may not be comfortable or familiar with collaborative writing (Keith, 2006; Raitman, Augar, & Zhou, 2005). Second, online texts may increase challenges in learning (Cairo, 2003; Literacy Matters, 2006).

There are many studies with regard to how wikis help develop their students' cooperative skills and language proficiency. In Mark and Coniam's (2008) study, they examined ESL learners in a secondary school in Hong Kong. The wikis are used as a collaborative tool to produce their drafts and support from their teachers-wiki content. Other researches reveal the results of the wiki proved to be a useful tool for online collaboration learning (Chen, 2008; Colye,2007; Miyazoe & Andersons,2010).

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants:

The participants in the study were 70 freshmen in two English composition classes at a university in southern Taiwan. These participants had no summary writing experience in their secondary schools. The participants were Applied English major in 20 groups. They had no writing experience on Wiki in the learning management system (e.g., Blackboard). For this student-centered writing activity, they formed a group of two or three members, elected one to be the group leader, and completed several summaries.

3.2 Instruments

The impact on students' summary writing learning was observed by three instruments including two summary writing tests, a questionnaire toward their attitudes of instruction and a reflective journal on obstacles while learning through wikis. First, English summary tests designed as pre-test and post-test. Both tests required the students to read two articles and write a summary in about 8 sentences. Fifty minutes was allowed for both tests. The items of the tests were constructed, verified for content validity by three experts and did a pilot study before conducting this study. The second instrument was students' reflective journal on cooperative learning through wikis. All students were encouraged to post their experience of working with their writing to the Blackboard. The final instrument was five expository English summary writing tasks. These original reading texts were taken from the same college-level ESL reading texts, *BBC Learning English words in the News* (Dubin & Olshtain,1987) which were written by native speakers. These texts consisted of approximately 800 words and were written within 10 paragraphs. Participants would not have difficulty with these articles and were familiar with the topics.

3.3 Procedure

In the first four weeks, students learned how to summarize the articles in the classroom. Students would find out the important main ideas and supporting ideas. Next, students were divided into two or three

members and they had to construct their own summary tasks and then edit each other on the Wikis. In the following weeks, students were assigned to read five articles from BBC Learning English News. Each group discussed the texts and had to comprehend the texts before they compose their summary. The process started with a member's posting his/ her summary, followed by a revision by other members on the wikis. After every member posted his/her summary, one of assigned members ought to give suggestions to their group member through wikis section. The length of each summary was approximately one-fourth as long as the original passage. After that, each member had to correct their summary tasks. In the end of the semester, the instructor gave the feedback for writing improvement.

4. Data collection and analysis

Two reviewers evaluated the summary writing tests and used the same criteria. The Pearson Correlation pre-test and post-test was 0.92 and 0.94 respectively. Two scores form both reviewers were obtained and divided by two to find out the mean score of each participant. Participants' most frequently used strategy was determined by descriptive statistics data analysis. For students' reflective journal, the data were analyzed by content analysis.

5. Results and discussion

Research Question 1 – To what extent did the students improve their English summarization skills after receiving summary writing instruction and collaborative writing practice through wikis in groups? This research question explored the effects of using wikis by examining the students' English summary writing tests.

To find out whether the students improved significantly in their summarization skills, the pre-test($M=16.33,SD=4.65$) and post-test mean scores($M=22.74,SD=3.59,,t(69)=11.83,p<.01$) were compared by using a paired sample t-test ($M=22.74$).The results showed that post-test mean score was obviously higher than that obtained from the pre-test at a significant level (see Table 1).

Table 1 Mean Scores of the Pre-test and Post-test

	M	S.D	n	t	Sig
Pre-test	16.33	4.65	72		.000
Post-test	22.74	3.59	72	11.83	

Research Question 2- What strategies, among deletion, selection, and transformation, are most frequently used in students' L2 summaries? This study analyzed the effectiveness of strategy use for summaries. Three summarization strategies were focused on in this study: selection, deletion, and transformation. More specifically, 66 selections, 108 deletions, and 48 transformations were focused on the six summary tasks. A

selection involves selection of an important idea. A deletion involves the deletion of redundant idea. A transformation was defined as combination of two or more idea units in the reading texts. After two scorers agreed on six occasions in each summary task, individual scores for each strategy use were calculated by dividing the number of actual strategy use in each summary.

The result of the analysis of the strategies used reveals that the participants in this study were more like inexperienced writer than experienced summary writers (Hidi &Anderson, 1986). Students most frequently relied on the deletion strategy use (85.6%) to achieve text reduction. They relied least frequently on the transformation strategy (23.2%). According to Hidi and Anderson (1986), the integration of information across sentences or paragraphs is an essential component of high-quality and synthesized summaries. It is assumed that participants' summaries were not very sophisticated. In addition, students used the least strategy—transformation because they were not sure that they comprehended the overall text very well and they just picked up some understandable sentences or paragraphs.

Research Question 3- What are students' perceptions of Wiki-based collaborative writing after receiving summary writing instruction? This research questions focused on the qualitative data from open-ended questionnaires that explored students' perceptions toward working with the group members on Wikis.

It was found that 15 out of 35 participants agreed that positive perception on Wiki-based summary writing; they saw this writing experience as a new learning experience for them. However, some (10 out of 35) participants said that they worked very hard to negotiate group members in the revision process. Some (5 out of 35) participants complained that problems of Internet access and the computer were the cause of their late posting on Wikis.

The following excerpts were from their reflection. Student's comments revealed that Blackboard Wiki is likely to be a useful platform to motivate them and to enhance interaction and communication for Wiki summary writing activities.

I think write summary on BB Wiki is convenient because I can edit and add my contents any time. Other people can edit my summary to let it be better. (AA3)

I think the Blackboard Wiki is a useful way to make us share our summary. And we also can see others summary to compare what the details he wrote is good or what the details he wrote is bad. (AB5)

Blackboard Wiki is a convenient platform for students nowadays. We can upload our assignments via the internet. This behavior not only is convenient to students but also to teacher. Besides, if we can upload our assignment via Blackboard Wiki, it not only saves the cost of printed paper but also the electricity for printer. (AA12)

We can share our summary with other classmates. (AB24)

I like Blackboard learning system because it enables me to share and compare my creations with my classmates, which at time gives me inspirations for new ways of approaching summary writing. (AA16)

I think it is beneficial for everyone to read different summary from the same article. (AB21)

However, there were few complains about inconvenient use of computer or the networking problem. Some students prefer the traditional method of paper-based writing tasks.

Sometimes, BB Wiki breaks down I feel angry because it wastes my time. I must use it by computer but it is not convenient for I can't carry my computer all the time.(AA23)

I think that sometime many students forgot upload the summary on WIKI because it was not a custom for them, but it will be a problem for guys who correct their summary. (AB09)

I don't like the speed of this software. Sometimes I can't post my summary on it. (AA11)

Actually I prefer doing assignment on paper, so I will sometimes forget to do the assignments online. I think it is realer to write my summary by using a pen in hand.(AB22)

We can't take notes on the passage. (AB21)

I don't like when we write the summary on Wiki then meet the network problem on Blackboard. (AA09)

6. Conclusion and implications

This study explored the effects of using Wikis in a summary writing instruction setting for EFL learners. In conclusion, Wiki-based summary writing instruction does lead to assist EFL writers to accomplish a collaborative writing task on the Internet. The high percentage of students had positive perception on Wiki-based collaborative writing environment when they write summaries. Also, they mentioned the Wiki was a convenient tool for them to share summary tasks with peers and then edit their errors for their summary tasks. Generally, they praised its convenience and collaboration even if some students commented that some problems about computer networking. The significant improvement on the participants' summary writing scores after receiving summary writing instruction and wiki-based collaborative learning. They raised their awareness of organizing their ideas and condensing the major ideas in their summary tasks. Moreover, they had opportunities of revising their works with peers in a Wiki-based collaborative writing environment. Concerning participants' summarization strategy use, they used deletion strategy the most. For selection and transformation strategies, students may not know how to apply to their summary tasks. It is suggested that instructors should provide more training in summarization skills.   These finding indicated that the use of Wikis provided students a different collaborative writing experience than they had new experience in traditional classroom writing, and it was a friendly learning environment for students to engage and explore in a summary written work collaboratively.

We teachers are responsible for the development of students' summarization skills because they rarely have the opportunity to develop summary writing skills in a traditional writing instruction. Teachers should understand that summarization skills do not develop naturally with age; however, students need to practice more for a long period of time. Additionally, teachers should design activities that enhance students'

summary writing skills. Technology would be beneficial for both students and teachers. Employing of Wikis learning environment would facilitate students' learning when working with their peers collaboratively. Indeed, teachers' summarization skills instruction and online learning environment should be used to extend pedagogical application of collaborating writing work in L2 learning context.

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