

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“The ability to write an effective summary might be the most important writing skill a college student can possess.”

(Jamieson, 1999:1)

Summary writing, undeniably, is an essential skill usually learnt at school; (especially at upper secondary level in the case of Malaysia) which then becomes an indispensable writing skill at tertiary level. At undergraduate level, students across the disciplines are required to condense information from lectures, various genres and other bibliographical sources in their respective disciplines in order to fulfill certain assignments. This summary writing skill is a fundamental skill for every language learner as research shows that it helps students develop vocabulary, promotes critical thinking and comprehension, improves learning in general (Broomley & McKeveny, 1986), is a method of monitoring comprehension and recall (Taylor and Beach, 1986), facilitates learning and helps clarify meaning and significance of discourse (Brown, Campione & Day, 1981; Hidi & Anderson, 1986) and encourages students to apply their metacognitive skills (Haller, Child & Walberg, 1988; cited in Hill, 1991). Therefore, summary writing not only aids in processing information and enhances knowledge acquisition but also, according to Hill (1991), promotes thinking and learning across the curriculum.

Apart from that, Johns (1985) believes that a summary provides insights into students' comprehension abilities (Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978; Johnston, 1981) in the broadest sense by indicating whether they are able to grasp the main ideas, focus and viewpoint of the author, while avoiding subjective comments and interpretations. In relation to that

Johns (1985) also asserts that the summary task requires the use of higher order reading skills, identification of main ideas and condensation of text while maintaining the focus of the original. This very clearly indicates that summary writing is a linguistically and cognitively demanding task whereby one needs to have sufficient repertoire of vocabulary, language learning strategies, appropriate instruction, ample exercise and background knowledge in order to write an effective summary. Therefore, this explains why students, both L1 and L2, may find summary writing a more difficult task than other writing tasks.

Despite its crucial role in academic activities, researchers, teachers and lecturers alike lament at the inability of students to write effective summaries which in turn impedes their progress academically. This inability is evident in the statistics from the Analysis of MUET 2000 Results by the Malaysian Examination Council whereby 62.32% candidates obtained Band 1 (the lowest band) which means “extremely limited user” in Paper 800/4: Writing, the writing component of the MUET. This paper basically consists of one summary question and one essay question on continuous writing (effective from 1999 to 2008).

Poor summary skills besides being problematic in themselves assume greater proportion when they are coupled with poor reading skills. Razak (1989:2 cited in Ramaiah, 2001:96) observed that:

... a vast majority of our university students are not adequately prepared with the necessary knowledge, skills and reading strategies particularly in reading comprehension activities, while they are in secondary school.

This is a worrisome phenomenon especially to academicians as this inability has the potential to manifest as plagiarism when students fail to condense and extract the gist

from their academic readings. Therefore, the summarizing skill is an essential tool for undergraduates to have acquired at secondary school level, without which they may struggle to process information related to their academic assignments and presumably often fringe upon plagiarism.

1.1 Background to the Study

In the Malaysian national education system, English is taught and tested as a second language from the first year of an individual's primary education (6 years) to the end of his/her secondary education (5 years) in Form Five. However, prior to 1999, English was not taught or tested at the sixth form (another two years at secondary school) or pre-university level. Ironically, upon entry into the local public tertiary institutions, these students are required to undergo courses in English language proficiency. It was with the dual purpose of filling the gap with respect to the training and learning of English and that of consolidating and enhancing the language literacy of the sixth form and pre-university students, that the Malaysian University English Test (MUET) was first introduced in 1999 (cited in [www.studyinmalaysia](http://www.studyinmalaysia.com) website).

The MUET is a test of English language proficiency, largely for university admissions. The test is set and administered by the Malaysian Examinations Council and largely recognized only in Malaysia and Singapore (wikipedia). Most candidates who sit for MUET do so to apply for admissions to public and private universities and colleges. MUET is largely optional, if considered at all, in applying for admissions to other universities and colleges in Malaysia as well as in neighbouring Singapore, a popular place for tertiary education (cited in [www.studyinmalaysia](http://www.studyinmalaysia.com) website). As Malaysia is trying to evolve towards world class education, the researcher believes that efforts are

being taken to improve upon MUET as a recognizable English language test without reservations so that it is on par with international English language tests such as IELTS, TOEFL and etcetera.

There are four components in MUET: Listening (800/1), Speaking (800/2), Reading Comprehension (800/3) and Writing (800/4). The maximum scores for each component is 45 for Listening and Speaking, 120 for Reading Comprehension and 90 for Writing, with an aggregate score of 300. The scores are then graded in 6 bands, with Band 6, the highest and Band 1, the lowest. The band descriptions are available in Appendix B1.

Recognizing the critical role it plays in information processing, text interaction and in paving the way to facilitate learning, summary writing was made a compulsory question to be answered in the writing component of the MUET until 2008 after which it was replaced by another task. (This will be discussed later in Section 1.3). However, it is a common complaint amongst Malaysian upper secondary English language teachers and MUET examiners that many students fare badly in the summary task which obviously has a strong reading-writing connection.

According to evaluation reports given by MUET examiners who are also English language teachers, it is common practice amongst Malaysian students to “lift” or copy verbatim whole sentences or parts of sentences to produce a “cut-and-paste” type of summary which impairs comprehension and the display of their writing prowess.

1.2 Reading-Writing Connection

To understand poor performance in writing summaries, one has to consider the reading-writing connection which is an important aspect of summary writing as it has an impact

on the quality of the summary production because it is the reading input that brings about the writing output – the summary.

It is an undeniable fact that the reading-writing connection is supposed to be strongest in summary writing or to put it analogically, there is no child called summary if there is no marriage between reading and writing. Smith (1998) looks at the reading-writing connection as:

Metaphorically, the reader and the writer meet at the text. Each brings his or her experiences to the text ... When the reader's and the writer's strategies, skills, and knowledge are sufficient, communication takes place. This is satisfying to the writer who knows that ideas and information are being transmitted, and it is equally satisfying to the reader who absorbs, analyzes, interprets, synthesizes, and evaluates these ideas and information.

(Source : <http://www.umkc.edu/cad/nade/nadedocs/98conpap/lscpap98.htm>)

From the extract above, it is evident that, the text acts as a platform for the reader and writer to interact or communicate without physically being there.

“It is, in fact, a powerful way for students to understand the reading and the writing processes and to develop skills and strategies in order to become effective readers and writers. Surely the connected aspects of the reading and writing processes give strong support to integrating instruction.” (Smith, 1998)

(Source : <http://www.umkc.edu/cad/nade/nadedocs/98conpap/lscpap98.htm>)

According to Smith (1998), it is clear that if students can get started on the reading habit and the reading makes sense to them, there are many aspects of reading and writing processes that they can learn by themselves and apply in their own writing. This will also make class instruction more meaningful to them.

The concept that writing is a multi-step process involving preparation and reflection, and not just the act of putting words down on paper, can be reinforced by learning about the multi-step process of reading, which also involves preparation and reflection and is not simply the act of decoding words and hoping their meaning becomes clear. The connection between reading and writing enables the student to adapt skills learned in one area to the other. (Smith; 1998)

(Source : <http://www.umkc.edu/cad/nade/nadedocs/98conpap/lscpap98.htm>)

Hence, the concept of reading–writing connection purported clearly shows that it is a symbiotic connection whereby one cannot flourish without the other. When a breakdown takes place in one area, for example in reading, it is reflected in the writing and what better way to test this if not via summary-writing. If ‘the proof of the pudding is in the eating’ then the proof of reading must be reflected, to a large extent, in summary writing.

This dilemma is further confirmed by the Malaysian Examination Council’s report on “The Analysis of MUET 2000 Results –Writing Component” (mentioned earlier), that only 0.03% of the total candidates (44,355) obtained Band 6 (the highest band) which means “very good user” while 62.32% of the candidates obtained Band 1 (the lowest band) which means “extremely limited user” in Paper 800/4: Writing. This proves that there is a serious problem in the teaching and learning of writing skills that needs to be addressed. It also gives rise to a whole range of pertinent questions regarding which summarizing skills are taught to students and what strategies students employ or fail to employ in their summaries that deem those summaries ineffective. The low performance in writing is most likely a direct reflection of low comprehension in reading which implies that there is a dire need to address this weak reading-writing connection.

1.3 Statement of Problem

Results of a study by Rinehart, Stahl and Erikson (1986) on the effects of summarization training, indicated that summarization training is an effective tool for improving reading and studying skills. However, in spite of the significant role played by summarization training on reading and studying skills, more time is being spent on essay-writing, school-based oral English testing and reading comprehension exercises than on summary-writing in many secondary schools in Malaysia. Based on the

researcher's observation as a trained language teacher, the teaching of summary-writing skills is often done on an ad-hoc basis, more so just before a term examination, probably to ensure that the particular language item, summary-writing, as stipulated in the syllabus has been covered. The summary-writing question in the MUET writing component (Paper 4) is allocated a total of 40 marks and it is imperative that more attention should be given to the teaching of summary-writing skills. Therefore some of the issues that need to be addressed include the reasons for students to perform badly in the writing component, whether the teachers themselves are adequately trained to impart summary writing skills to their students, and whether there is sufficient importance given to summary writing in the secondary school English language syllabus and if students are using appropriate strategies to write effective summaries. If that is so, why is it that 62.32% of the MUET candidates fared as low as Band 1 in the Writing Component? Therefore, with reference to the issues raised above, this study will focus on the issue of students' poor performance in writing by investigating their strategy use in summary-writing.

The latest update on the MUET is that there has been a change of format. It is saddening to know that despite its crucial role in language testing, the summary-writing test item has been removed from the MUET Writing Component effective from 2008 for some known or unknown reasons. Based on the researcher's knowledge as teacher and examiner, many students have a great tendency to lift points from text and mainly employ the copying strategy, thus producing ineffective summaries. Apart from that, the poor performance of students in this writing section affects their overall performance in MUET, thus placing the majority of candidates in the lower bands especially bands 1 and 2. This could have been a reason to consider summary-writing as an ineffective test item at MUET level. This removal of the summary-writing test item from MUET is all

the more reason for the need to continue this study (which was carried out before the removal of summary writing as a test item in the MUET Writing paper) to find out if this action is justified or can it be equated to throwing the baby out with the bathwater. This study will look into the strategy use of ESL learners in summary-writing, both productive and unproductive, in order to derive a better understanding of why students produce ineffective summaries.

The following tables show the changes in the new MUET format in comparison to the old MUET format:

Table 1.1: New MUET Format (Applicable from October/November 2008 onwards)

Paper Code	Test	Duration (Minutes)	Aggregated Score (Total: 300)	Weight (%)
800/1	Listening	30	45	15
800/2	Speaking	30	45	15
800/3	Reading	90	120	40
800/4	Writing	90	90	30

Table 1.2: Old MUET Format (Applicable until April/May MUET 2008)

Paper Code	Test	Duration (Minutes)	Aggregated Score (Total: 300)	Weight (%)
800/1	Listening	30	45	15
800/2	Speaking	30	45	15
800/3	Reading	120	135	45
800/4	Writing	90	75	25

(source:<http://goodessays.blogspot.com/2008/10/websites-for-free-spm-and-stpm2008.html>)

Compared to the old format (Table 1.2), the new format (Table 1.1) sees an increase of weightage in the writing component whereas a decrease in the reading component.

Meanwhile the importance of the listening component and speaking component remains the same.

Following the change in the MUET format whereby the summary question is totally removed and replaced by an information transfer task, there has been mixed responses from teachers, parents and members of the public. According to reader Goh Cheng Fai (a member of the public), the summary question has always been regarded as one of the tougher components in MUET. Even though he is appalled at the removal of the summary question, he agrees that it looks more like a reading rather than a writing question, as candidates spend a lot of time reading the text. However, he still thinks that the skill of summarizing is an important skill in life. (cited in Good English Essays :<http://goodessays.blogspot.com/2008/10/websites-for-free-spm-and-stpm2008.html>)

Summary-writing skill is an integral part of English Language literacy and it should not be done away with or given low priority. The inadequacy to master summary-writing skills at secondary level is evident at tertiary level and could be one of the main contributory causes for the practice of plagiarism at higher learning institutions. The lack of summarization skills could also be a factor in the falling standard of literacy amongst students in higher learning institutions as many students struggle to become independent readers, what more to be able to express their thoughts clearly and critically. This is very aptly put across by Ramaiah, (2001: p 93);

“...What seemed an adequate level of literacy in the 1980s seems marginal now. Hence, it is essential that tertiary-level students attain a reasonable if not an excellent standard of literacy – literacy in English in particular, to meet the demands of the information era.”

1.3.1 Summary Writing and Proficiency

We cannot dismiss the fact that a certain acceptable level of proficiency is required for the learner to write a summary even though summary writing itself is used as a yardstick to measure the learner's proficiency. A number of studies based on the Kintsch and van Dijk model have compared the summary protocols of different groups of native English speakers (see Brown, Campione, and Day 1981; Day 1980; Winograd 1984 cited in Johns and Mayes 1990). Most of these involved text comparisons of elementary and secondary students, or comparisons of good and poor readers. Researchers have found that poor readers have difficulty in understanding the summary task (Baker and Brown 1984); they have difficulty in selection of salient points (Meyer, Brandt, and Bluth 1980); and they have problems condensing text (Day 1980; Winograd 1984). Another study by Johns (1985) revealed that academically adept students tend to produce protocols closer to those of experts in terms of idea unit inclusion. Underprepared students, on the other hand, include fewer of the idea units found in the expert protocols.

Although the above studies were done in the L1 context, the findings do have a bearing on the L2 learners because all the studies deal with one common variable – degree of comprehension which directly depends on degree of proficiency. Considering the possible impact of language proficiency on summary writing, the present study has included proficiency as a variable especially because this study is situated in an ESL context. Ellis (1985:302) defines proficiency as the learner's knowledge of the target language; it can be considered synonymous with 'competence'. 'Proficiency' can be viewed as linguistic competence or communicative competence. L2 proficiency is usually measured in relation to native speaker proficiency. It is believed that the study

would be able to shed light on proficiency- related problems encountered and strategies used in summary writing from the students' perspective.

1.4 Objectives and Purpose of the Study

The current study is carried out to empirically investigate the problems ESL students encounter during summary writing process, to explore the strategies they use to overcome the problems and to find out if proficiency plays a role in the selection of productive and unproductive strategies.

The low performance in the writing component as revealed in the Malaysian Exam Council's Report on Analysis of MUET 2000 Results leads us to the broad problem of Malaysian students' inability to write effective summaries. There is a proliferation of studies and research conducted by researchers and others on summarization and related issues, particularly on strategy instruction (Friend,2001), direct instruction (Garner et.al.,1985), cognitive and metacognitive strategies (O'Malley and Chamot,1987,1990; Oxford,1990), summary protocols by mature and immature students (Johns,1985) in the L1 context as it is a core subject in EAP (English For Academic Purposes) courses as well as the role of language proficiency in summarization (Johns and Mayes,1990; Campbell,1990; Cumming,1989). However, such studies are still wanting in the L2 context, as the linguistic and cultural factors are not the same. (Some of these outstanding studies in summarization will be critically reviewed in Chapter 2.) In response to the scarcity of related research in ESL writing, particularly where MUET is concerned (a relatively new area) and the urgent need to address the weaknesses of ESL learners in order to improve significantly students' writing ability, this exploratory study has been conducted.

In order to gain an insight into the strategies used in summary writing by MUET candidates or pre-university students, this study analyses their summaries to identify the type of protocols that they have used; to ascertain if production of idea-units are correct, partly correct or distorted; to gauge their ability to paraphrase; and to explore what goes on in their minds in terms of strategy use during the three stages of summary-writing process which Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) refer to in their text processing model, as the comprehension, condensation and production stages. Therefore, this study is about strategy use in summary writing by sixth formers in an urban secondary school taking the MUET test. This study also looks at the role of students' proficiency in strategy use or strategy choice. The reason for choosing to study this group of students and not others such as undergraduates or diploma level students who also take MUET is to ensure there is homogeneity of sampling as far as proficiency and educational background is concerned.

This study would help to scrutinize the problems faced by high and low proficiency students during the summarization process. To overcome those problems, there is a need to examine what are both the productive and unproductive strategies used by students in summary writing during the three stages of summarization and whether these strategies are successful or unsuccessful in the production of effective summaries. By exploring the strategies students use to overcome problems, this study would also help us to understand what goes on in the minds of learners during the summarization process mainly during the comprehension, condensation and production stages as identified by Kintsch and van Dijk (1978). Apart from that, this study would also investigate the role of language proficiency in the choice of productive and unproductive strategy use during summarization.

Hence, this study would not only contribute to the existing knowledge on ESL writing but also would assist in diagnosing the strategy-related summarization problems particularly comprehension breakdowns amongst L2 pre-university students. The intended audience for this research would be English language teachers and examiners, pre-university students, undergraduates from any discipline, educational policy makers and of course present and future researchers in ESL.

1.5 Research Questions

In light of the objectives and purpose of study outlined in the above section, the researcher has compressed the ideas mentioned above and translated them into three research questions which will act as the guiding principle of this entire study. This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the problems encountered during the summarization process by high and low proficiency pre-university students?
- (2) What are the productive and unproductive strategies used by pre-university students in summary-writing, namely during the comprehension, condensation and production stages?
- (3) Are there differences in the selected productive and unproductive strategies used by high and low proficiency pre-university students?

1.6 Significance of Study

This study aims to find out what summary-writing strategies students use in addressing their summary-writing problems and whether they are able to apply them successfully in

related task. Why are students not doing well in this task? Are they using the right strategies? Why are the strategies that they use ineffective? What are the hindrances and inhibitions that students face during the summary writing process? This study intends to examine not so much the number of summarizing strategies used but rather the effectiveness of strategies used by evaluating all strategies identified as productive or unproductive. Apart from that, this study would also find out the frequency of students paraphrasing and to what extent of accuracy, if the production of idea units is correct, partly correct or incorrect; and to explore what goes on in the minds of students during the 3 stages of the summary writing process namely comprehension, condensation and production.

The significance of this study is that it would help to identify actual problems faced by L2 students in summary writing so that appropriate remedies can be sought. By identifying productive (successful) and unproductive (unsuccessful) strategies employed by L2 students, pedagogical adaptations can be made to reduce comprehension breakdowns during reading. This might also help L2 students to indulge in more serious reading which can enhance and initiate critical and creative thinking amongst pre-university students and undergraduates. This study will provide an overview of the weaknesses and strengths in the employment of summary writing strategies and may lead to reformations in the teaching and learning of reading comprehension skills and summary writing skills in the ESL context. It would also prompt serious measures to be taken at the upper secondary level in order to ensure that students have acquired this essential skill before stepping foot into tertiary institutions. It would certainly help to reduce the practice of plagiarism amongst undergraduates and open doors to more quality and authentic or original assignments in the English language, all of which would surely help to raise the quality of literacy amongst local university students.

1.7 Limitations and Delimitations

In a study of this nature, the analysis of data is always problematic not only because of the volume of data but also because written work and oral data do not lend themselves to being easily categorized. Furthermore, this data is very subjective in nature because it is about the explorations of the students' minds. Therefore, the data always remains open to different interpretations.

MUET is the English test not only taken by sixth formers but also by undergraduates in both public and private institutions of higher learning. It is also used as a pre-requisite to gain entrance into some of the courses offered at these institutions. However, the subjects of this study are limited to sixth formers in schools, who are preparing to sit for the November MUET paper.

1.8 Definitions of Common Terms Used in This Study

This section provides a quick reference to the definitions of certain terms used in relevance to this study.

Summary Writing

Summary writing in this study refers to the student's ability to read, understand and extract the salient points in a text and able to rewrite it in own words without distorting the original meaning. It is a higher order thinking skill which requires both reading and writing competence. According to the MUET Writing Assessment Guide for summary (refer to Appendix B3), the ability to summarise is assessed based on two important aspects which are task fulfillment and language. A competent student should be able to

synthesize relevant information effectively and convey most of the required information accurately for task fulfillment while maintaining accuracy in language, cohesion (concise and effective presentation of information) and coherence (information successfully linked with no problems in linkages and transitions) besides displaying excellent ability to use own words and sentences.

Strategies

According to Oxford (1990, p.8) learning strategies are actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. In this particular study strategy is referred to the step or procedure taken by the student to overcome the impeding problem the student faces during the process of summary writing. There could be numerous strategies employed at any one point and the strategy may be successful in solving the impeding problem or may not.

Productive Strategy

As the name suggests, a productive strategy contributes productively in the identification of main ideas in a summary writing task. Some of the characteristics that can apply to this strategy are: it helps to reduce words and simplify sentences; time-saving; may cause lexical and syntactical change but not semantic distortion.

Unproductive Strategy

As implied by the name, an unproductive strategy can cause confusion, semantic distortion, is time wasting and may not contribute to task fulfillment in a summary writing task. It can also generate more errors.

Paraphrase

In this study, paraphrase refers to the student's ability to rewrite the ideas in a source material using own words without changing the original meaning of the ideas. Paraphrases avoid excessive reliance on quotations and demonstrate that one understands the source author's argument. A paraphrase always has a different sentence structure and word choice from the original structure. .

Plagiarism

In the light of this study, plagiarism is referred to the use of chunks of ideas, language, written words of others within one's own writing or assignments without acknowledging the source. According to the researcher, this problem of plagiarizing occurs because students do not possess the summary-writing skills to read and extract salient information from the source text, to paraphrase in their own words and to discard the irrelevant material.