CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Study

The aim of this study was to understand the issues and factors that are involved in the Malaysian upper secondary school student's ability to write an effective summary in English. Interest in this area was sparked off during the researcher's experience as an examiner especially while marking the summary question and finding candidates to have a great tendency to lift or copy verbatim. In addition to that, the removal of the summary writing question from the MUET writing component (effective from 2008) adds importance to this study. The researcher, who is also a language teacher believes that summary writing being a daunting task, what more in the ESL context, cannot be brushed off and thrown out so easily. The students too cannot be deprived of the training in this summarizing skill because it is a basic writing skill to be mastered at secondary school before setting foot to pursue higher education. In fact there is a crucial need to study the causes of ineffective summary writing and related issues. With that in mind, the researcher has tried to address the problems faced by sixth form students and the strategies employed by them in summary writing.

This study was carried out in an urban secondary school involving 25 subjects. A number of research tools were used in this introspective study such as the Modified Think Aloud Protocol (MTAP) whereby students gave verbal reports on what was going on in their minds during a particular task performance (based on the summaries they wrote); the SILL Questionnaire to get an overview of students general language strategy use and examination of students' summary scripts for idea units to gather data. In order

to analyse the data, Johns Summary Protocol for analyzing idea units as correct, partly correct or incorrect was used while the Criteria Checklist to categorize strategies as productive and unproductive was produced by the researcher. Ten out of the initial 25 subjects (who participated in the summary writing task) were selected for the MTAP individual interview sessions based on their proficiency levels. The interview recordings of the 10 subjects were transcribed and strategies that students used at the three stages of summarization (i.e. comprehension, condensation and production) were inferred from the transcriptions. At this stage, the data analysis tool, the Criteria Checklist was used to categorize the inferred strategies as productive or unproductive. The rationale behind the selection of this particular research design is to gather and analyze intangible data such as mental activities or rather in this case strategy use during summarization, which is not easily observable. Based on the summary script examination, the MTAP interview sessions as well as other data analysis, the researcher has obtained some rather interesting findings.

5.2 Summary of Findings

From the data analysis and findings in Chapter 4, several important issues have emerged. This chapter will present a summary of these issues. For ease of presentation and organization, the issues will be presented firstly as the main findings, followed by the conclusions, implications, and finally, recommendations for future research.

In order to see this study in the right perspective, it is appropriate at this stage to recapitulate the research questions. The research questions presented in this study are:

(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?

The main findings from the study will be discussed in relation to the research questions mentioned above.

5.2.1 The Problems Encountered During the Summarization Process by High And Low Proficiency Students

In the researcher's opinion, this first research question is of utmost importance as it gives direction to the findings of the main issue in this study which is strategy use by students. Only when we know the kinds of problems students face from their perspective, can we understand their choice of strategies to counter those problems. Research that has highlighted problems seldom look at it from the student's perspective; it normally takes the teacher's perspective which may not give an accurate picture of the current scenario.

One of the main findings of this study is that ESL students face numerous problems in the process of writing a summary. A total of 43 problems were identified. The problems can be categorized into three main groups: text and task related, teacher related and learner related.

5.2.1.1 Text/Task Related

Under this category, the high proficiency subjects raised seven problems while the low group raised two. Difficult vocabulary, length of text, time constraint and unfamiliar content were some of the problems faced by both proficiency levels. Although the text related problems faced by both groups were of similar type but to a different degree. For instance, the high group cannot understand certain words in the text while the low group cannot understand parts of the text. The exposure of text and task related problems by subjects is indeed a loud cry for help especially with reading skills. Vocabulary building activities, instruction and training in reading strategies and familiarising students with different types of genre in the classroom would help to alleviate the above problems.

5.2.1.2 Teacher Related

The high group highlighted nine teacher related problems while the low group gave none. Although we can rationalise that the high group being more confident and expressive are able to articulate their grievances as opposed to the low group, we cannot assume that the low group did not have any teacher related problem. The low group's opinions did not emerge in this study. The subjects lamented that there were no instruction on summary writing, not taught how to paraphrase, insufficient guidance in reading skills, insufficient exercise and lack of follow up. The teacher related problems raised here, of which mainly by the high proficiency students, is an appeal to the teachers for greater and closer guidance. It is an eye-opener for the writing teacher on the students' expectations and how to make the lesson more effective and interesting.

5.2.1.3   Learner Related

Amongst the three, learner related problems is the highest for both high and low proficiency subjects thus concurring with the findings of other studies (Johns and Mayes 1990; Chimbganda: 2007) that student's proficiency is indeed a serious problem that interferes in the writing of effective summaries. The high group raised fourteen problems while the low group raised eleven. This proficiency related issues are not only realized by the low proficiency subjects but surprisingly the high proficiency subjects in this study too have highlighted it. This could be explained by the fact that the subjects from the high group are mainly from bands 4 and 5 of the MUET (see Section 3.5.2.1). Since none of them have a band 6 which is the highest band, the high group's proficiency is still of average level and have lots of room for improvement. It is also apparent from the findings that low proficiency students face more macro level problems (unable to identify thesis statement, topic statements, do not know how to do skimming and scanning) compared to high proficiency students who face more micro level problems such as grammar, sentence construction, paraphrasing and vocabulary-substitution. Low proficiency students have also expressed their inability to paraphrase.

However, the findings show that there are similarities in the type of problems and differences in the extent or degree of the problems that high and low proficiency students encounter during summary writing. For instance, both high and low groups face problem with paraphrasing but the high group find it the toughest activity while the low group is unable to paraphrase at all. Another example is that a high group member is not sure of suitable connectors while a low group member admits that she did not use any linker because she did not know how to use it.

It is also found in this study that many subjects, inclusive of high proficiency subjects, do not fully understand the terms paraphrase, thesis statement and topic statements. Some of the learner related problems that were raised include inability to differentiate main ideas from supporting details; small range of vocabulary, do not know what synonyms to use. Hence, the learner related problems mentioned is a disclosure of their awareness of their own inadequacies where proficiency is concerned.

Looking at each category of the problems raised by students separately, helps to narrow down the specific areas that need to be reviewed, revamped and rejuvenated so that the learning and teaching objectives are met in the long run.

5.2.2 Productive and Unproductive Strategies Used By Students During the Stages of Comprehension, Condensation and Production

This study has also found that students (both high and low proficiency) employ a high number of strategies during the three stages of summarization, both productive and unproductive. The findings show that subjects have used relatively more productive strategies than unproductive strategies. However, the number of unproductive strategies used by students is still very high. This could have contributed to the production of ineffective summaries. This study also points to the fact that subjects are not very familiar with paraphrasing (a productive strategy) and hence use copying (an unproductive strategy) profusely.

Although strategy use is looked at positively, according to Oxford (1990) not every strategy use promises success. This point had a bearing in the formation of the second research question on productive and unproductive strategies. This study has uncovered 81 strategies, most of which are not listed in other related studies and in reality are the

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'idiosyncratic preferences in summarizing strategies', as termed by Chimbganda (2007:255). This study has taken a step further to classify the strategies as "productive" and "unproductive" with the aid of a criteria checklist. The researcher finds this classification pertinent as it gives direction for pedagogical adaptations, apart from adding meaning to the term "strategy".

5.2.3 Differences in Selected Productive and Unproductive Strategies Used by High and Low Proficiency Students

The current study reveals that high proficiency students use more paraphrasing strategies in summary writing compared to low proficiency students who did not use paraphrasing correctly. The study also highlights that only low proficiency students have copied idea units incorrectly. Even though both high and low proficiency students have copied idea units, high proficiency students have only copied correctly, while low proficiency students have copied correctly, partly correct and incorrectly. This clearly shows that both high and low proficiency students have the metacognitive maturity to use strategies to resolve their summarizing problems. However they have not mastered the productive strategy – paraphrasing. The findings concur with Chimbganda's (2007:234) findings that students of various proficiency levels find paraphrasing difficult to handle. In this case, high proficiency students who know how to paraphrase have used it correctly or partly correct. Those who are not familiar have apparently not attempted to use paraphrasing; instead they have used copying, and copying correctly. On the other hand, low proficiency students have not attempted paraphrasing because they are not familiar but have instead attempted copying heavily (an unproductive strategy). Presumably they have resorted to copying because they knew that at least by copying they can secure the content points even though they will be penalized for

lifting. They are aware that if they paraphrase unsuccessfully, content points cannot be secured and they would also lose marks for linguistic errors.

This outcome proves that as subjects had mentioned earlier (in the first research question on problems encountered in summary writing), it is true that they are not able to paraphrase and probably they have not been taught this important skill in schools as they claim. If this is true, then it is unhealthy, because the students are not trained to summarize which is an important skill for all kinds of academic learning. This behaviour, if allowed to continue without being checked, would also condition students to plagiarize later on.

5.3 Conclusions and Recommendations

From the findings discussed above, several conclusions can be drawn that can contribute to improving summary writing for the sixth formers. This study has not only exposed many problems related to summary writing as experienced by students from their perspective but has also given a 'rough' demarcation of what are productive and unproductive strategies used by ESL students in their summary writing as perceived, inferred and categorized by the researcher. So what conclusions can be made from the above findings?

5.3.1 Recommendations to the Stakeholders

In this section, the researcher would like to make some recommendations to the stakeholders, in other words the people who are directly or indirectly responsible in ensuring that upper secondary school students are adequately trained in summary

writing and are able to write effective summaries before leaving school so that they are able to reap all the benefits of acquiring this essential information processing skill.

5.3.1.1 The English Language Teacher

The findings in Chapter 4, pertaining to teacher related problems, clearly shows that students do have a serious problem with the mastery of basic summarizing skills because according to the respondents of this study, teachers do not teach paraphrasing and other relevant skills. Since this study focused on the learner and learning and not on the teacher and teaching, we cannot dismiss the fact that it is only looking at one side of the issue. Nevertheless, it has serious implications for the language teacher.

The findings in this study, generally, would help the English language teacher to be more sensitive to the needs of the MUET student in terms of instruction, knowledge input, classroom activities, strategy and skills training during teaching and learning process, evaluation of students' writing and particularly in meeting the teaching and learning objectives of summary writing.

The findings from research question two would give the language teacher a clearer picture on what goes on in the minds of students during summarization and how the teacher can help to counter the unproductive strategies or replace them with more productive strategies. It would certainly help to plan better and effective lessons, because teachers now through this humble study have a small access to how the students try to resolve their summarization-related problems.

5.3.1.2 The School and Society at Large – Nurturing reading culture

As mentioned in Chapter 2 Literature Review, reading is an important activity which has to be nurtured from young and has to be continued consistently throughout a child's educational journey, and preferably throughout life if one wishes to enjoy the fruits of literacy. This study aptly points out the importance of reading at the first stage of summary writing, that is, the comprehension stage. It is pertinent that students are exposed to reading issues and reading strategies as the ability to comprehend reading has a direct, strong influence on summary writing.

School libraries, public libraries and libraries in educational institutions should develop more and upgrade existing reading programmes and reach out to more people so that a reading culture is cultivated in Malaysia. Suitable reading materials should be made available, at affordable price, in conducive environments and in a user-friendly manner. Students in secondary schools, especially, should have easy and immediate access to suitable reading materials without much red tape. Schools should encourage students to borrow books home especially during school holidays. The school reading programme "Nilam Programme" which has far reaching goals should be revived or activated and school principals should ensure that it is carried out successfully without hiccups, throughout the year.

To achieve mastery in English as a second language, conditions for learning and acquisition must be created. The conscious learning of selected language structures must be supported by exposure to authentic use of English. Learners learn language best when they use it in context as they learn, and will operate in the target language whenever the opportunity is provided. Therefore, the researcher would like to suggest to

schools to encourage and implement the newspaper in education (NiE) programme at school level on a consistent basis so that students gain wider exposure to the English language of which many are deprived at home and in peer group interaction. This would definitely help to improve students' proficiency level which would directly help in improving summary writing and other forms of writing skills.

5.3.1.3 The MUET Examination Board

At one point during the study, on hearing the news that summary writing would be replaced by another task in the Writing Component of the MUET, the researcher was very disturbed and was on the verge of giving up the research, under the misconception that it would be of no avail. However with careful considerations for the research fraternity and strong support from the researcher's supervisor that this is academic in nature, the study was successfully completed.

The point that the researcher would like to stress here is that summary writing should be advocated at the MUET level because it is an accumulative and consolidative test whereby it acts as a yardstick to the language proficiency a child has attained at the end of the secondary schooling. Summary writing tests understanding, text processing abilities, and many more language abilities of a child (see Chapter 1). It is one of the best ways to test reading comprehension which enhances students' language proficiency. What better test can replace summary writing? In our quest to raise the English language standard to be on par with other internationally recognized English proficiency tests, are we doing an injustice to the MUET by removing the summary writing component. Instead of 'throwing the baby with the bathwater', the MUET examination board should review, rethink and reconsider including summary writing as a test component in MUET.

5.4 Implications for Future Research

The findings of this study implies that students lack direction and sufficient instruction on how to go about carrying out the summary writing task to produce effective summaries. It also shows that students at the upper secondary school level are matured enough to employ their own strategies, using cognitive and metacognitive methods. However, many of the strategies that students try to use at the three stages of summary writing fail to yield the expected results, thus giving rise to ineffective summaries which have copied, distorted or excluded idea units. Although students of higher proficiency are able to employ more productive strategies and are able to produce more effective summaries compared to lower proficiency students who employ more unproductive strategies and produce ineffective summaries, this study points out that in order to enable students to write effective summaries, students' language proficiency alone is not sufficient. In fact, it has to be supported by appropriate and adequate instruction on summarization and training on the use of productive strategies.

This study is only the tip of an iceberg. There are not many studies done in this area especially in the ESL context. Therefore this study proposes that more related studies should be conducted on a wider scale with different focus. This study being a qualitative study, exploratory yet evaluative in nature and to the researcher's knowledge, one of its kind in the ESL context, proposes to shed light on misconceptions about summary writing, unlock many doors of knowledge, reinforce the idea of truth and hopefully provide the wisdom which will help to hone the summarizing skills of ESL writers and to make reading more discriminative yet beneficial to the literate world.