

Teaching Note

Using Collaborative Summary Writing

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Introduction

In the student-centered classroom, collaborative interaction is an expected part of every class. Traditionally, this interaction is done verbally through topical discussions, interviews with classmates, and project work in groups. While teachers might use collaboration for pre-writing or to follow up a writing task, they do not often think of using a collaborative approach to the writing itself; however, research has shown that collaborative writing is beneficial for L2 development by aiding student engagement with the task, increasing their confidence, and enhancing student responsibility (Sajedi, 2014).

Summary writing is an important and useful academic skill that is used frequently in the university setting. For most students, it is a cognitively demanding task, and lack of instruction and practice in doing it properly can lead to copying rather than accurately paraphrasing. For second language learners, this task is exponentially more difficult due to limited L2 proficiency, but writing collaboratively can help students learn to more clearly communicate meaning and improve their linguistic knowledge (Lin and Maarof, 2013).

Process

Collaborative summary writing can be used effectively to help students develop both reading and writing skills in an academic English class at the university level, and the task can be adapted for other levels and types of classes while the main process remains the same. In two 50-minute class periods, the following steps can be used as extended practice for academic summary writing. Please note that, prior to this lesson, students should have had experience with the basic skills associated with writing summaries:

- Discerning main ideas and important details from articles using reading guides and group discussions.
- Paraphrasing and organizing the main points

In addition, the structure should have been explained, and all parts of the academic summary should have been modeled and practiced in previous lessons and as homework.

From that point, the process is as follows:

- (1) **Skimming, scanning:** Students are given an article or reading of appropriate level and length. They

can familiarize themselves with the text either as homework or as part of the class. Students skim the text and determine the number of main ideas. This can be guided by the teacher or determined by the students. Then they scan for important details related to each main idea.

- (2) **Careful reading:** Students count off to the number of determined main idea groups and sit together to study and more carefully read the main idea they have been assigned. If there are four main ideas, for example, there would be four groups, each studying one of the main ideas in the reading. In these first groups, students are negotiating meaning and checking for understanding of the reading. They are naturally paraphrasing as they discuss the ideas and developing their linguistic knowledge as they work together.
- (3) **Summarizing verbally:** Students then sit in mixed groups with each of the main ideas represented to discuss all of the main ideas in order. Student number one would summarize the first main idea for the new group verbally. The other students in the group can and should ask questions to clarify and make sure that all of the important information is included. The guiding question is whether someone who did not read the article would have enough information to be able to understand it.
- (4) **Collaborative summary writing:** Students work together to write an

academic summary of the article. They work collaboratively, each contributing one or two sentences to the summary. The other group members can check for clarity of ideas, vocabulary use, and grammatical structures.

- (5) **Editing and checking:** All of the students work together to check the summary for clarity and completeness of the information. They write the first sentence of the summary together, identifying the article, author and thesis. Finally, they check their grammatical accuracy, vocabulary choices, and add the necessary guiding language.

Conclusion

Collaborative learning in general has many positive gains for student achievement, but the use of collaboration for writing tasks has particular benefits for the improvement of language skills in a way that students are likely to remember. Having students work together to accomplish the goal of writing an academic summary not only relieves some of the cognitive burden of this complex task, but also allows students to improve various aspects of their writing (Lin and Maarof, 2013; Shehadeh, 2011). Aside from the linguistic benefits and academic gains, having students interactively compose their summaries is an interesting and enjoyable use of class time.

References

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