

Summarizing as a Strategy to Enhance Grammar and Writing Skills: The Case of First Year LMD Learners at the Algerian University Dr. Tahar Moulay-Saida

Chahrazede MOURI

Department of English Language and Literature
Faculty of Letters, Languages, and Arts
Saida University, Dr. Moulay Tahar

Abstract

Writing is a major language skill that should be the concern of teachers and students. Some first-year English language students seem less interested in writing correct sentences and paragraphs because of the lack of grammar and writing practice in the classroom. They mostly encounter grammar use difficulties, which impede their written communication. The research question that arises in this respect is: does summarizing strategy help learners improve their grammar and writing skills? The aim is to raise teachers' awareness about the importance of summary as a strategy to help learners apply grammar rules correctly when writing. The participants were first-year students from the department of English, Dr. Tahar Mouley University- Saida. To achieve the work, the researcher applied the quantitative and qualitative research methods that resulted in excellent productions. Yet, findings displayed recurrent errors as tense verb agreement, articles misuse, and irregular verb past simple tense, in addition to mechanics and style problems. The purpose was precisely to cure these problems. Nevertheless, students showed interest and found it enjoyable to write summaries, for it offered them the opportunity not only to practice grammar rules but also to produce complete sentences, including mechanics. Subsequently, summarizing a movie, a book, an event, or a discussion could be recommended.

Keywords: 1st year English language students, difficulties, grammar use, strategy, summary, writing skills

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Introduction

English language in Algeria is present at every level in its respective educational systems (school and university) for decision-makers, and syllabus designers emphasize its importance regardless of streams (i.e., literary or scientific stream) to encourage students to learn it. It also helps them become aware of world development and challenge cultural obstacles. Thus, they prepare themselves to confront future life. Consequently, teaching English as a foreign language in Algeria has been subject to different views, research works, and studies. Writing skills that are acquired from the early stages of the learning process are of significant complexity owing to the cognitive and metacognitive process implied. According to Gilbert and Graham (2010), “writing is a skill which can be learned in the early stages of our study, starting from the primary schools up to universities” (as cited in Khazaal, 2019, p.414). To write effectively becomes prominent as learners need enough abilities in the foreign language mainly, non-native students. In his part, Leki (2001) “writing is a crucial component of language performances. English writing in both educational and professional settings is increasingly important in countries of non-native speakers of English” (as cited in Khazaal, 2019, p.414).

These abilities reside in general and intellectual skills to organize ideas into logical, meaningful, and correct sentences and paragraphs during their studies. Khazaal (2019) states that “most of our students need writing skills in their fields of research during their academic years of study” (p.414). However, weaknesses appear once the teacher assigns written activities. He notices grammar and writing problems. Subsequently, the researcher considers the following research questions:

- a) Why do learners have difficulties with grammar and writing skills?
 - b) What strategy can be introduced to nurture students’ grammar and writing competencies?
- The hypotheses underlying these questions may be:
- a) Some students lack interest and practice in grammar and writing activities.
 - b) Summary as a writing strategy should be implemented to enhance grammar and writing competencies.

On that account, the purpose of this study is to introduce summary writing as a teaching strategy to help learners apply grammar rules correctly when writing sentences and paragraphs.

Accordingly, students had to be committed to the assigned activity using their abilities as writing skills imply the use of thinking and reading skills, and attentiveness to overcome hindrances met.

Writing Skills

Writing is the productive skill that seems the most challenging, even for native speakers of a language since it includes coherence, grammar structures, and appropriate mechanics. Nunan (1999) claimed that “research on this issue indicates that creating a good piece of writing was considered a challenging skill, even in one’s native language” (as cited in Haggi & Pasand, 2012, p.77). Arapoff (1967) viewed that “writing is not only symbols and orthography. It is a matter of selecting and organizing ideas: thoughts, facts, opinions, whether acquired firsthand (through direct perceptions and/ or actions) or secondhand (through reading or hearsay)” (pp. 33-39). It is

for this reason that learners believe that they lack language background and firmly think that they must produce a correct piece of writing from the first draft.

Writing is a complex intellectual activity that comprises several necessary skills, some of which our learners may lack, some of which they may acquire partially. These skills include:

- Reading comprehension
- Writing mechanics: spelling, capitalization, and punctuation.
- grammar
- Analytical skills
- Organizing ideas effectively
- Communicating ideas concisely.

Accordingly, writing and grammar practice is fundamental to consolidate what students learn. Khazaal (2019) affirms that “without sufficient practice, students cannot develop their writing skills to a higher level” (p.416).

Furthermore, learners often have meta-cognitive skills deficiencies to understand the areas where they lack knowledge and thus competencies they have to enhance. As learners lack those skills, their writing may be sparse from grammar and syntax to an ambiguous organization to feeble argumentation and reasoning. According to Khazaal (2019), “students use their writing skills to help them to think through, clarify, and develop their new ideas about how they might respond to the title that been set” (p. 416). Learners may not become good provided that they use both their receptive and productive skills. Writing is not a skill that learners can acquire apart. What learners should learn, apart from the particular difficulties of speaking or writing, is a counterpart of what has to be determined for the mastery of listening comprehension, reading, and speaking the core of linguistic knowledge. The activity of writing allows learners to manipulate structures and combine lexical elements. It also allows them to consolidate learning for use in other areas.

Grammar Weaknesses

Writing improvement should be based on some rules and conventions. Besides, learners should internalize large amounts of language input that may allow them to enhance their linguistic proficiency through reading and writing. So, writing ability is not achieved, provided that the rules and conventions mentioned are respected and implemented. They include a good mastery of grammar and vocabulary structures as well as coherence to get correct and meaningful sentences and paragraphs. Right (2018) asserts, “In order to communicate, a learner should know the grammar of the language. It is important to be able to express yourself, but this should be done in a way that people find easy to understand”(para.1).

Grammar is often the most sensitive part of language learning that learners find bothering. However, mechanics and grammar are the devices for effective written and spoken communication, without which, the English language would just be a set of words put together meaninglessly. To learn grammar means to be able to construct sentences applying rules. Rules and examples describe how language should be used.

Grammar and written expression teachers generally observe weaknesses of tense verb agreement, present simple third-person singular conjugation, misuse of articles, etc. In this sense, the researcher thought of a writing strategy that could enable students to consolidate and practice grammar structures, including conjugation and mechanics. Thence, what could be this strategy?

Summary as a Strategy to Improve Grammar and Writing Skills

Seifert (1993) says, “A strategy is a mental experience done by the learner to achieve a purpose as remembering an event or a fact. Accordingly, students need to be active processors of information if learning is to occur”(para.1). Some parameters are to be present in this case. Seifert (1993) also sees that:

First, students must attend to information to be learned. Second, students must create an understanding of the material by creating or identifying relationships amongst to-be-learned ideas. Third, students need to relate new ideas to prior knowledge. Fourth, students need to understand that learning requires mental effort- good learners are strategic and poor learners are not, and that strategy use is the means by which learning occurs. (para.1)

Therefore, when learners are involved in a task relating information to prior knowledge, they are engaged in strategy use. Regarding our strategy, it consisted of *summarizing* short stories. A *summary* is a brief and precise text that relates the main points of the original story, event, report, or discussion without giving any detail.

This writing strategy is useful to both teachers and learners. It should be used in foreign language classrooms as it fits learners’ needs and teaches them how to distinguish the essential ideas of a text. The summary helps learners read a text many times and memorize what they read. “Writing a summary requires students to read more closely. Since they must read a text more than once to get a sense of the ideas presented, students will recognize and maintain more information than they would from just a single read” (provide the title since there is no author,para1-2). Summary writing implies a mental process that teaches them how to eliminate irrelevant ideas and keep those they need according to the text’s theme. “As students read the text more closely, they’ll also take notes and search for the important points needed to write a summary” (TITLE,para.1-2).

Summarizing is a double-edged sword as it allows learners to constantly read, write and improve their prior knowledge on writing rules and strengthen their grammar skills.

Methodology

The researcher thought of summarizing as a learning strategy after teaching some grammar lessons as articles, nouns, pronouns, adjectives, tense verb, and adverbs. She assigned practice activities where students sometimes failed in applying grammar rules, i.e., structuring sentences. Hence, the teacher required them to select short stories, read and summarize them. Some documents were well written, while the remaining ones were weak. Students failed in constructing sentences, besides punctuation, spelling, and conjugation problems.

Data Analysis and Discussion

A sampling population of 117 students divided into four groups; each group includes 30 students. During T.D. (Travaux Dirigés) session, the teacher involved students in the activity demanding them to read and discuss a story freely selected, then write a summary. They showed pleasure in achieving the task.

Nevertheless, the teacher noticed a considerable number of errors in students' documents. Despite some correct documents that were error-free, learners in the four groups did not focus on their work, which resulted in the following errors. *Spelling* errors gleaned from summaries were basic. The table below illustrates some examples:

Table 1. *Students' spelling errors*

Errors	Correction
Wase- untoll-refered- poisoned-husband- Were- the litel boy- wont to help you- verry- Aded- infortanly- familly-wich-diamons- marveles-Sindibad	Was- -referred-poisoned- husband- where- the little boy- very- added- unfortunately- family-which-diamond-Sindbad-marvelous

As students were writing, they did not concentrate properly on the summary. For instance, the word *familly* frequently appears with double *l*, yet they should write it with one *l* *family*. Further, they wrongly wrote the word *litel*, though, we usually use it. They must write it as follows: *little*. Besides, the spelling of the words *wont*, *verry*, *infortanly*, clearly shows that learners were not careful about what they wrote. It is important to emphasize that learners still confuse the orthography of the verb *want*, and the future negative auxiliary *won't*, which results in meaningless words. The other confusion that remains is the one of past simple third person plural *were* with the relative pronoun *where*: learners are reluctant when to use both *were* and *where*. As for *style* errors, some examples can be cited:

- *The dwarfs allows him to takes her.*
- *She was groning up.*

The above examples affirm that learners did not center their attention on the sentences. Students themselves admitted that they did not proofread what they wrote. Therefore, during the correction session, the teacher recommended her students to rewrite incorrect sentences. Thus, they could write:

- *The dwarfs allow him to take her.*
- *She was growing up.*

The most striking errors appear in grammar, where there was a mixture of present and past tense within the same text. Students are aware that it is a short story. This implies the use of the past tense. In addition to the major problem of conjugation, they still cannot discern irregular from regular verbs.

Table 2. *Students' grammar errors*

Errors	Correction
Becamed- she thought- she gived- to cooked- this story talk- a very loud sounds- on hot day- the spring- the winter-	Became- she thought- she gave- to cook this story talks- a very loud sound- on a hot day- spring- winter

Table two displays the recurrent errors the teacher observed in learners' written productions. Though they learned regular and irregular verbs with their different tenses and rules, there are still these types of errors that lessen summary value. The verbs become, think, and give are known to be *irregular* verbs; even though there is *ed* at the end. Besides, there is an infinitive with *ed*.

Because of these errors, English teachers have to care about the English language from its early learning process stages.

The teacher observed another weakness, article misuse. Learners studied rules of articles use, even though; they still fail to put definite and indefinite articles.

Ninety percent of students' documents contained *punctuation and capitalization* problems. The following examples explain that:

-*water on the ground. he continue*.....
- *there was a boy who*.....
- *In the first day he hammered*.....
-*his mouth wide open. the traveller ran away*.....

Almost all students started their paragraphs with a small letter. They still neglect capitalization at the beginning of sentences or paragraphs. The teacher asked about this problem, and students showed carelessness to start sentences with a capital letter.

After gleaning these errors, the teacher advised students to correct their piece of writing, focusing on grammar rules and sentence structure. They admitted that they would not enhance their skills if they did not use the target language effectively. Summary writing activity encouraged students to deploy more efforts for further activities.

The teacher continued to assign such tasks as she notices that learners showed great interest because the written expression teacher assigned the same activity. Thus, they may write with more care, motivation, and concentration because teachers could penalize them for the same mistakes.

Teachers have to encourage learners by introducing learning strategies as summary writing strategy that proved to be beneficial because they allow learners to write not only relevant information, but practice rules and conventions: mechanics, grammar, spelling, etc., in addition to other types of activities that enhance their thinking and writing competencies as all language aspects are inextricable.

English language teachers should familiarize learners with summary writing as a strategy to compel them to use their language skills accurately. They should also devote extra sessions to review grammar rules that connect with immediate written or spoken communication activities. Writing and rewriting allow learners to memorize words' spelling, sentence structures, and punctuation. Teachers should implement summary writing activity at every level of the learning process to help learners use the correct language, notably with the overuse of computers that hampered them from using language effectively. Accordingly, we may cite some recommendations that teachers can apply in their classrooms.

- 1) Summary of a *discussion* where learners may sum up the topic being discussed by first giving, for example, the definition of the debate, then saying whether the question was interesting, annoying, difficult to understand, controversial, etc. avoiding to express one's opinion.
- 2) Summary of a *movie*: after watching a movie, the student may speak about the event stating the most critical points and the characters without introducing his viewpoint in a well-structured and clear paragraph.
- 3) Summary of a *book*: learners need to read the book, understand it, and break it down into sections that should be bound. Each section has to contain the main ideas. Proofreading is the last step; hence they have to check mistakes and be careful about being subjective because what they do is to state what they have read.
- 4) Summary of an *event* where students highlight the most important facts about the event. For example, they could speak about the best presentation if the event is a conference. Besides, they may state what they learned from this event, etc. It is worth noting that students should be as concise and transparent as possible.

Conclusion

All in all, errors made by English language learners are due to lack of motivation and interest, first. If learners read without interest, they will probably meet difficulties in comprehension, which is noticed among learners. In this respect, the teacher has to work more to urge his learners to read with motivation and care to enable them to use their thinking skills and reflect them on their productions. Then, classroom practice lacks from the very first stages of the learning process until university, where learners do not have enough time to practice oral as well as written activities, considering syllabus length and time shortage. Still, the result is lived: learners experience various weaknesses to achieve their communication proficiency.

To conclude, foreign language students struggle for weak language skills, which impede comprehension and communication. Ergo, English teachers should organize study days, seminars, and conferences to discuss students' writing issues. For instance, they moot and search for beneficial strategies that may open the gate to further research to nurture learners' proficiency level. Furthermore, learners should be encouraged to integrate writing and reading clubs to improve their written and spoken performance.

About the Author

Dr. Chahrazede MOURI is a researcher in Didactics and a full-time teacher in the department of English language and literature, University Dr. Moulay Tahar-Saida, Algeria. She has taught for

twenty one years at secondary school and eight years at university. Her areas of interest include grammar, written expression, educational psychology and psychology. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0821-1051>

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