

Development and Application of Content-Based Summarizing Technique in Reading Instruction

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Abstract: College students are expected to read a lot of information both in courses that they take and in their lives. They are also expected to be able to extract the ideas conveyed in their reading passages and textbooks. This study attempted to develop a technique of making a summary which was useful for helping students read for learning and to apply it in a reading class. The technique of summarizing resulted from the development was called *Content-Based Summarizing Technique (CBST)* and it was then applied in a reading classroom to know the applicability. I was found that CBST could be applied in a reading class and that the ability of the students in making summaries could be considered good.

Keywords: Content-based, summarizing technique, summary-making.

Skill in summarizing has been considered by experts in reading instruction as an important skill to be applied in reading instruction for more than a quarter of century. Finocchiaro (1964:73), for example, asserts that a reading teacher could help students develop skills they need in reading through, among others, asking them to make a summary of a paragraph. The summary should include important ideas in the sequence in which they appear in the paragraph. Chastain (1976:323) argues that summarizing the content of a passage may facilitate students to read for meaning. Bowen (1985:246) states that summarizing as a writing-related task may help continue to develop the standard comprehension and reading skills.

The summarizing technique demanded in this study was one which was relevant with theories underlying reading instruction and those underlying sum-

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marizing process. If the two requirements were fulfilled in a summarizing technique for content element, it then could be confirmed as an activity applicable for helping students learn the contents of a reading passage.

In this study a model of summary making which is called *Content Based Summarizing Technique (CBST)* is proposed. CBST is a technique of summarizing a passage on the basis of the essential contents of the passage. This model is based on two propositions: the first is that a good model is one that could summarize the past, represent the present, and predict the future (Rivers, 1987) and the second is that the summarizing activity that the students do should reflect their understanding of content of the reading passage (O'Dell, 1987: 111; Hennings, 1991).

Previous models of summarizing indicate that there are at least three stages of summarizing process. They are reading the text, making an outline, and making a summary. It is also suggested that in writing summaries, the summary be written in note form or outline before writing summary. Notes for a summary are derived from the text that the students have read. The process of writing summary, then may proceed as the following: text reading --> note-making --> summary making. This basic procedure of writing a summary is essentially a representation of the traditional approach of summarizing. The proposed model of summarizing, CBST, then is directly developed from the basic model. The method of writing notes in CBST can be done in two ways: by using outline and 'brain-pattern' (Cranmer, 1989), which is considered as an alternative note-taking system. The summary is then developed from the notes.

In summarizing process some information should be included in the summary and some information should be excluded. The question is what information should be summarized. According to O'Dell (1987:111), what is important in reading is to be able to understand the general meaning of what the readers read, and to be able to select the little bits of specific information that are important. Hennings (1991) argues that main idea invention is what reading is all about. Furthermore, it is argued that helping readers invent significant ideas should be a major focus of reading instruction. On the basis of these arguments, content-based summarizing technique emphasizes the main ideas of the text as the information (the contents) that should be summarized. CBST is thus developed on the assumption that the understanding of the text can be gained from the understanding of the main ideas.

To know the position of CBST among the former approaches of summarizing, CBST is compared with some of the forerunners. CBST which requires

the students to read the text thoroughly could be a guarantee of the readers' understanding of the contents. The procedures conducted provide a chance to catch the main idea directly through thorough reading and the product is a summary with unnumbered sentences (cf. Sheinkar and Sheinkar in Carnine, *et al.* 1990:389). Furthermore, CBST does not take into account the details of the text because the dependence on the details will reduce the ability to memorize the contents of the text because what could be memorized longer is the general element, not the specific one. When the main ideas have been understood and memorized, the details could be remembered for they could be subsumed in the main ideas (cf. Hayes, 1989).

Moreover, CBST does not require the students to name the person and to tell what the person does in all of the sentences because it is an obstacle of catching the main idea of a passage in accordance with the text type. This is because many texts could not be summarized by mentioning the agent and the activity one does (cf. Carnine, Silbert, and Kameenui, 1989). CBST, then, does not require the students to work in group or pairs and the produced summary is more flexible in that it is not patterned by a frame such as suggested by the *framed summaries* (Journal of Reading 34:5, 1990), but it could be in any form as the contents require.

Another specification of CBST is that it is simple as it does not require the students to proceed several steps in deleting details. Therefore, it leads to the determination of the main ideas immediately after thorough reading is conducted (cf. Chambers and Brigham, 1989). Finally, CBST provides a chance to make notes by using brain-pattern approach, as an alternative technique of outlining (Cranmer, 1989) because it could help students produce summaries of flexible in structure with ideas given the right weight and properly related to each other (cf. Cranmer, 1989).

To know the applicability of the proposed technique of summarizing, CBST was then applied in a reading class.

METHOD

The subjects of the study were students of English department of University of Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM) who took Reading V course at the time the study was conducted. There were 43 students involved in this study.

Reading V course was chosen because the study concerns with content area reading which required a higher level of reading skills in which the students, to a certain extent, were not troubled by linguistic factors. In addition, it could

be used to facilitate students to learn other textbooks from which they should learn information.

The textbook used in the reading class was *Reading by all Means* (Dubin and Ohlstein, 1981). It was considered an appropriate material because it was prepared for students of all language backgrounds who want to improve their ability to read English. This criteria matched the characteristics of the subjects of the study.

The treatment given to the students can be described as follows. In the semester during which the study was conducted, the students were assigned to make eight summaries from ten reading passages. The first reading passage was used as an example of how to summarize a reading passage given in the beginning of the semester. The next eight passages were assigned to the students. The last text was used as an instrument to collect data.

Through CBST, the summaries expected from the students were content-based summaries or summaries which were based on the main ideas of the text that they worked on. In order that they could produce summaries as expected, instruction was given. In this case, a text entitled "A Moral for Any Age" (Dubin and Olshstein, 1981:3-4) was used to teach the students to make a summary. The text was about a scientist named Louis Alexander Slotin getting an incident that took place in Los Alamos, New Mexico, the place where the first atomic weapon was developed.

The students were instructed to write a summary on the basis of the text. Then they were required to make notes. The notes were made in the form of outline and brain pattern. From the notes, they were asked to develop a summary.

The students' summaries which were collected in the upcoming session were evaluated, and the result of the evaluation was given in the next meeting. From the evaluation the students gained score and feedback. The score was given on the basis of the ideas correctly included in the summaries. The feedback included suggestion on inclusion of missing important ideas and exclusion of unimportant details and irrelevant information.

The evaluation of the students' summaries was conducted using *content analysis*. Content analysis was used to know the number of propositions contained in the summaries. Propositions are units of meaning (Schnotz, 1983). The result of the analysis was a list of propositions of the summarized reading text. The procedures were carried out as follows. First, the students' summaries were read. Second, the propositions conveyed in the students' summaries were num-

bered. Third, the propositions in the students' summaries were compared with the list of propositions derived from the main idea of the passage summarized. An evaluation checklist was used to carry out this task.

The text that the students summarized consists of six paragraphs. From the analysis of the text, 15 propositions were gained from six paragraphs. The list of ideas that should be included in the students' summaries is as follows.

Paragraph 1

- (1) Unclear extent and nature of the environmental crisis.
- (2) Global disaster in the future.
- (3) Faith in the future.

Paragraph 2

- (4) Many people are distressed.
- (5) Distressing condition of social and natural environment.

Paragraph 3

- (6) Environmental crisis threatens the future of humans.
- (7) The basic fear is the lost of cultural values.

Paragraph 4

- (8) Redefinition of human relationship.
- (9) Relationship between humans and humans.
- (10) Relationship between humans and nature.

Paragraph 5

- (11) Human controls their destiny.
- (12) Humans' power could lead them to extinction.
- (13) A new philosophical and ethical system is needed.

Paragraph 6

- (14) Humans continue in the way they are going now.
- (15) A new ethical stance toward the natural environment is needed.

The score of the students was counted on the basis of ideas included in their summaries. The ideas included in their summaries were matched with those derived from the original text, that is as listed in above. If a summary included all 15 ideas, it was scored 15.

RESULTS

By following the procedure of computing ideas included in the student summaries the results of the study can be derived. They are represented in the forms of the list of scores of the students in summarizing and the content elements included in their summaries.

The scores of the students in summarizing can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1 List of the Student Scores in Summarizing

N	X	N	X	N	X	N	X
1	12	12	12	23	12	34	12
2	12	13	13	24	11	35	7
3	12	14	12	25	12	36	11
4	12	15	11	26	11	37	12
5	13	16	12	27	12	38	11
6	9	17	12	28	11	39	10
7	11	18	13	29	12	40	8
8	12	19	13	30	11	41	13
9	12	20	12	31	9	42	13
10	14	21	8	32	6	43	12
11	13	22	12	33	11		

Notes: N = the subjects
X = the scores

The number of students who included each proposition in their summaries can be seen in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

It can be seen from Table 1 that the highest score is 14. This means that the student who gained the score missed (i.e. Student 10) missed one proposition that should have been included in his summary. On the other hand, the lowest score is 6. This means that the student who gained the score (Student 32) missed 9 propositions.

Table 2 The Number of Propositions Included in the Student Summaries

Proposition	Number of Students
1	43
2	42
3	38
4	42
5	40
6	38
7	28
8	39
9	36
10	36
11	32
12	13
13	18
14	1
15	42

It is interesting to mention that even though the student whose score was 6 missed 9 ideas, he in fact wrote a long summary. Student 10 who got the highest score made a six paragraph summary, while Student 32 who gained the lowest score also made a six paragraph summary. From this comparison it can be stated that the length of a summary does not indicate an adequate coverage of ideas from the text being summarized. The missing of correct ideas, may be caused by two reasons. First, the student included ideas which were not parts of the main ideas. Second, the student included irrelevant ideas.

It is found that the mean of scores is 11.37. This mean is interpreted by using the following criteria. If the mean reaches 13 to 15, it can be said 'excellent'. When it falls between 10 and 12 it can be said 'good', and if it falls between 7 to 9, 4 to 6, and 1 to 3, it can be said 'fair', 'poor', and 'very poor', respectively. By referring to the criteria, the mean value 11.37 falls under the 'good' category. It can be concluded then that students are good in making summaries.

From the computation of the number of propositions included in the student summaries, as can be seen in Figure 3, it was found that only Proposition 1 is included in all summaries. Propositions 2, 3, and 15 were included in the works of 42 students. Propositions 3 and 6 were included in the works of 38 students. Proposition 5 was included in the works of 40 students. Proposition 7 was included in the works of 28 students. Proposition 8 was included in the works of 39 students. Propositions 9 and 10 were included in the works of 36 students. Propositions 12, 13, and 14 were included in the works of 13 students, 18 students, and 1 student respectively. Based on the distribution, the fact that the last three mentioned proposition numbers were excluded from the summaries of more than a half number of the students will be explained.

Proposition 12, *Humans' power could lead them to extinction* and proposition 13, *A new philosophical and ethical system is needed* are parts of paragraph 5. These two related propositions might be considered as unrelated to the topic sentence. The topic sentence is *In acquiring the present position of dominance, humans have snatched the control of their destiny from the processes of nature to which they were once forced to submit*. Another possibility of neglecting the two was that the topic sentence was considered as the main idea of the paragraph. Therefore, the students only based their summaries on the topic sentence. In fact the main idea of paragraph 5 can be stated as *The power of control humans have snatched from the processes of nature could lead to their extinction unless a new philosophical and ethical system is held*.

Proposition 14, *Humans continue in the way they are going now* which is a part of paragraph 6 is included in the work of one student only. The main idea of paragraph 6 is *As we cannot reach a future for our kind if we continue in the way we are going now, a new ethical stance toward natural environment -- a future-oriented ethic which stresses the humanity of persons and community with nature -- is needed*. Proposition 14 is included by one student for most of the students might consider that the main idea was *a new ethical stance toward the natural environment is needed*, that is Proposition 15. This is proved by the fact that Proposition 15 was included in the works of 42 students.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Computation of scores of the students' summaries results in the mean score of 11.37. Based on the established criteria to examine the meaning, the mean score falls under 'good' category. It can be concluded then that the ability of the students in making summaries could be considered 'good'. In addition,

the success of the students in making summaries following the procedures of CBST is an indication of the applicability of the technique of summarizing.

Following the conclusion and the potential merits of CBST, the following suggestions might be useful. When the students have mastered skills required to read, they should be geared to use their reading skills to learn. In other words, the emphasis of reading instruction should be placed on reading to learn instead of learning to read. In this case, CBST could be a means of extracting, integrating, and retaining significant main ideas contained in the reading materials.

CBST, additionally, should not only be given to students of high level of linguistic knowledge, but also to those of the lower one. This is because the emphasis of CBST is on the content element of the passage. While they may not be able to summarize the content in a well-written expression, there is no reason why they cannot summarize the important ideas.

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