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The Effect of Summarizing Narrative Texts to Improve Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This study demonstrates the effect of summaries of narrative texts to improve reading comprehension. This study consisted of sixty elementary school students who had evident reading comprehension deficiencies, especially in narrative texts. This study is a pre-experimental study with a mixed design. Qualitative and quantitative instruments were applied to meet the purpose of this study. The instruments included pretest and post-test, rubric, learning log, survey, a checklist to measure the students' development and progress, and their perspectives towards this innovation. Results indicated an improvement in students' reading comprehension. Post-test means increased from 5.96 in the pretest to 9.10. The checklist also proved that students included the required elements in their summaries. Students indicated in the learning logs that they would extend this strategy to other subjects, and they had to reread and identify the most crucial information to summarize. The study has implications for teachers and learners since it can bring positive considerations about the importance of using summaries to improve reading comprehension.

Keywords: summaries; narrative texts; reading comprehension; elementary school; EFL

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Introduction

Memorization is the basis of learning in the traditional paradigm. Today, education conceives meaningful learning as models for acquiring knowledge within constructivism principles where students can be involved in their learning process (Olusegun, 2015). Reading was considered necessary in the traditional model as a mechanical process used to locate specific information. Teacher talk was dominant because teachers lectured, explained grammar points, set the materials, gave directions, and conducted drills (Taufiqur, 2017).

When learning another language, reading receives special attention (Rios & Valcarcel, 2005). Reading in mother language or L1 has become an essential skill for every learner to acquire due to the fundamental cognitive and linguistic component skills. These skills affect the development of literacy skills in the second language or L2 (Geva, 2006). The research highlighted that effective readers in L1 could transfer reading skills in L2 (Tomlinson, 2013). However, there is a problem with reading in L1. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2017) showed that 387 million children of primary schools worldwide did not achieve minimum levels in reading in L1, identified as a "learning crisis". In Latin America, 36% of primary students had low levels of reading comprehension. Data suggested that the new numbers were rooted in three common problems. First, children did not attend schools. Second, there was a failure to retain every child in school and keep them on track. The third was the issue of education quality and what was happening within the classroom.

Ecuador has a low index (43%) of readers in the total population, and each Ecuadorian reads half of a book per year (Centro Regional para el Fomento del Libro en América Latina y el Caribe [CERLALC], 2016). Some programs conducted by the Ministry of Education (Ministerio de Educación, 2016) were developed to make students read more in their L1. Furthermore, reading in English is a resource for learners and teachers to be proficient. Tomlinson (2013) highlighted that English as a second language (L2) is reinforced if students have successfully developed practical reading skills in their mother tongue (L1).

To improve proficiency in English, Ecuadorian authorities of education have been working for the last five years on updating the curriculum to promote better English practices. Since 2012, the Ministry of Education determined standards for English teachers (Ministerio de Educación, 2012). Two years later, a resolution from the Ministry of Education was issued, which

determined that English must be included in all the grades of primary school, with at least three periods of classes per grade (Ministerio de Educación, 2014). Reading comprehension has become an essential aspect of reaching the learning standards for schools. The Ministry of Education requires an A2 level of proficiency for elementary schools according to the Common European Framework in CEFR. Regarding reading, these descriptors determined that the students can understand short, simple stories and comic strips (Council of Europe, 2018).

This innovation was implemented in a private elementary school in Manta. This school has an international English program based on English Language Arts, Common Core Standards, and CEFR descriptors. During the first quarter of the school year, students were exposed to reading and comprehending stories. They had to demonstrate understanding through oral and written questions, quizzes, and summaries. The paper-based tests taken during the first term showed that students were facing difficulties in reading comprehension skills. The results of their scores in their midterm reading tests were not what was expected. They kept getting the lowest grades in the reading comprehension section. For this reason, in this pre-experimental study, the researchers posed summaries to improve reading comprehension.

Literature Review

Reading

Ministry of Education (2004) noted, "Reading is an interactive solving process of making meaning from written texts" (p. 61). Reading is a component of every educational curriculum. Furthermore, reading plays a crucial role in the language proficiency of any learner. It also constitutes a skill that must be taught and developed inside and outside classrooms. However, results of standardized tests indicate that students are not advancing in this skill.

The initial literary process for children includes all the elements of language such as phonemes, morphemes, syntax, grammar, and semantics. Moreover, reading acquisition must be taught and modelled. The sequence of this process starts at home and continues at school. Children become readers if parents, relatives, babysitters, and teachers read aloud to them (Tomlinson, 2013). Reading helps students gain knowledge to improve their academic performance and empowers them to become successful in this knowledge society (Bano, Jabeen, & Quitoshi, 2018). Thus, this study was implemented to teach, monitor, and provide feedback

to students during their reading lessons; so, students take advantage of this skill in their future endeavours.

Reading in L2

L2 reading demands that students control this process using the target language in a more authentic context (Agbatogun, 2014). If young learners cannot read or write in their mother tongue, they will not read or write in English (Tomlinson, 2013). L2 reading among young learners suggests that the L1 performs a considerable role in learning to read in a second language and focuses on transferring skills from one language to another to develop different skills (Tomlinson, 2013) successfully. In this study, a gap in reading in L1 was found to monitor students' readings through summaries.

Reading in Young Learners

Teaching English as a foreign language to young learners is not the same as training adults or adolescents (Hughes, 2010). Young learners are still developing cognitively, linguistically, psychologically, and socially (Tomlinson, 2013). For this reason, when teachers decide to teach to young learners related to any subject, it is necessary to scaffold their learning (Bruner, 1985). In this study, students also monitor their progress by using a checklist after summarising the texts.

Teachers must assist children when they think about what they are doing, why, and how they do it. Teachers become modellers to help students develop critical thinking skills. Vygotsky (as cited in Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000) considered that if children are assisted early, they will be capable of doing anything by themselves in the future. Teachers must be modellers of thinking and learning by generating meaningful learning environments and providing helpful tips and strategies. These suggestions were observed by the researcher in the development of this study.

When children learn to read, they also learn the meaning of written words as they correspond to spoken words. In other words, they encounter written words that may lead them to understand spoken words (Henning, 2016). In this way, as Atwell said, children learn to read by reading (as cited in Tomlinson, 2013). Students interacted with the text by rereading it to write their summaries.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is a process of interaction between the characteristics of the text, the reader, and the reading context. Several cognitive processes such as attention, reading, perception, memorization, and phonemic awareness support the reader (Pečjaka & Pircb, 2018). Comprehension is also considered a process in which readers make meaning by interacting with the text through the combination of prior knowledge and previous experience, information in the text, and the views of readers connected to the text (Gamboa-González, 2017).

Literacy learning initiates with foundational reading skills (phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, word recognition or vocabulary, and fluency). It leads to reading and writing to construct meaning from texts. The foundational reading skills are utilized to comprehend texts using reading strategies (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

Reading comprehension strategies can be classified under different dimensions or titles. They can be used during the whole reading process. Some of the most important are POSSE (Predict-Organize-Search-Summarize-Evaluate), PQRS (Preview-Question-Read-Summarize), Summarize, and, Questions (Asikcan & Pilten, 2018), among others. The purpose of reading is comprehension. The researcher measured understanding through the summaries.

Narrative Texts

Narrative texts express what readers feel about an event. This event or chain of events is transmitted from the narrator's perspective about the place, time, and people to provide information about a text (Ozdemir, 2018). The Program of International Student Assessment (PISA) determined narrative texts as the type of text where the content refers to properties of objects in time (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2015). Narrative texts respond to questions about time, events, sequence of the events, and why the characters perform specific roles in the story. The elements of narrative texts are:

- ✓ The topic mentions the name of the story.
- ✓ Characters are the people or animals that do the actions in a story.
- ✓ The setting is the place where and when the story happens.
- ✓ The sequence of events is the order in which the events or things happen. Sequencing words like *first, next, then*, and *last* is used to connect the events in order.

✓ Problem and solution tell the reader the essentials of the story and how it is solved.

✓ Main ideas tell more about the topic of a story; and, details give more information about the main idea (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

Summarizing

Summarizing is considered one of the reading strategies that permit students to understand the text more profoundly, and at the same time, it works as an indicator of understanding (Pečjaka & Pircb, 2018). Summarizing helps students to explain the meaning of information and to store the information in long-term memory.

Summarizing enables students to differentiate their significant thoughts from others and express the knowledge in their own words (Bıyıklı & Doğan, 2015). Critical aspects such as a sequence of events, main characters, and setting must be considered when you put together what is essential in narrative texts (Freedman, 2012). Summarizing also implies identifying main ideas, deleting irrelevant information, and reconstructing arguments from original texts (Ozdemir, 2018).

Before asking students to write a summary, it is necessary to teach students how to do it by giving them strategies (Sefer, Ören, & Konuk, 2016). These strategies include rereading the text carefully: underscoring critical words in each paragraph, identifying the story elements such as characters and setting, identifying main ideas and details, and the most important events. It also involves checking grammar and punctuation and using sequencing words, among others (Ozdemir, 2018).

When students write a summary of a narrative text, this text must be structured with an introduction, development, and conclusion paragraph. In the introduction, the characters, setting, and main ideas are incorporated. The most critical events, problems and solutions are included in the development. Lastly, the outcome, consequence, response from the main character, and resolution of the story's characters are inserted. In addition, students can include the theme, message, or lesson presented in the report (Chen & Su, 2012). These elements are found in the narrative texts that students have in their leading textbooks.

Perspectives

Students' perspectives are the powerful determiners of learning that occurs in the classrooms. These perspectives are related to students' thoughts, feelings, and reactions generated from a learning process (Gentilucci, 2004). Some inquiries were made to know the perspectives of young learners about studies related to this present investigation. These inquiries highlight some gaps to show that there are no studies done with young learners in primary schools about reading comprehension.

However, some studies (Pakzadian & Rasekh, 2012; Khoshsima & Rezaeian, 2014; Ozdemir, 2018) show that successful reading comprehension is also successful in summarizing. They have concluded that the teaching of outlining strategies improves reading comprehension. These studies were mostly done with high school and college students. In Ecuador, there are no studies about reading comprehension and summaries at the primary level.

Methodology

This study explored the link between summaries to improve reading comprehension and is a pre-experimental study with a pretest-posttest design. Thyer (2012) stated that these types of studies are the simplest and test the effect of a treatment in a group of participants. Thyer added that there are two types of design: post-treatment study and pretest-posttest design. This study used the second to determine the improvement of the independent variable (reading comprehension). It also integrated quantitative and qualitative instruments to triangulate data and raise reliability. Quantitative instruments were the pre and post-test, a rubric, checklist, and a survey; the qualitative tool was the learning log.

Participants

The participants in this study were 60 students from fifth grade at a bilingual private school in Manta. There were 31 boys and 29 girls in this study. Their learning styles and needs were varied. Their English proficiency was A1 according to the Cambridge Young Learners Test taken at the beginning of the innovation. This test determined whether students could understand concise, simple texts a single phrase at a time, picking up familiar names, words, basic phrases, rereading as required, and knowledge with illustrated stories. The images helped them guess many of the content (Council of Europe, 2018).

Instruments

To answer the first research question: *To what extent will students improve their reading comprehension through writing summaries?* a pretest was taken before the innovation. The test was a ten multiple-choice reading comprehension test based on a story from the textbook of students. It was given to detect if the students had the knowledge or the skill to summarize and identify the elements of narrative texts.

In addition, a post-test with a narrative story was given to prove if students had improved their reading comprehension. The post-test was also a ten multiple-choice reading test from a story in the textbook. This post-test included a part where students had to summarize the same tale to measure that competence after being instructed on how to do it. These tests provided quantitative data to the study.

The pretest and posttest were graded. The information was written in an Excel document and then exported to software SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to obtain the descriptive statistic data like mean, mode, median, and standard deviation. Once the descriptive statistics were collected, the effect size was calculated

To answer the second research question: *To what extent will students include narrative texts in a well-structured summary comprised of three paragraphs?* a checklist was used to verify if the students applied some steps and elements. Students used it to remember the details and the structure they included during the innovation or not in their summaries. Results of this instrument are presented in frequencies.

Additionally, this study implemented a rubric to assess specific components or indicators in the summaries to support the study results. This rubric had five indicators to answer this second research question. It was also used to improve the quality of the students' summaries. Students received constant feedback based on the results of the rubric.

Finally, to answer the third research question: *What are students' perspectives towards this innovation?* This study included learning logs. The learning logs were utilized at the end of some sessions. It provided students' perspectives about the sessions during the research and how useful it would be to apply the innovation in the future. It was a tool to reveal how the students reacted to the process and content. With the learning log, students expressed their feelings during the innovation. The data collected from the learning logs were organized and tabulated in Excel to

classify data according to patterns and main categories related to each question to support quantitative results.

In addition, a survey was given at the end of the innovation with six questions to gather quantitative data. These questions analyzed students' perspectives towards elements of narrative texts or stories, summary structure, and summary strategies. As the participants were children, the options had faced each question so students could understand before selecting the option. The survey had categories of totally disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and totally agree. Cronbach's Alpha was run to know the reliability of the study.

Findings

Regarding the first question of this study: *To what extent will students improve their reading comprehension through summaries?* The results obtained from the pretest and post-tests showed a meaningful difference in comprehension and summarization.

The results of the tests are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-test and post-test

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	60	2.00	10.00	5.96	.41
Post-test	60	6.00	10.00	9.10	.10

Table 1 demonstrates the minimum, maximum, means, and standard deviation obtained from the pretest and post-test. The mean from the pretest (5.96) showed a notable improvement in the post-test (9.10). Additionally, the results point out a Cohen's *d* (Mean of pretest, Mean of post-test/ pooled Standard Deviation) = 1.67, which means a large effect size. Bialo and Sivin-Kachala (1996) mentioned that represents a significant consideration about using summaries effectively as a strategy instruction applied in the English school program to improve reading comprehension in students.

To answer the second question: *To what extent students will include the elements of narrative texts in a well-structured summary comprised of three paragraphs?* A rubric was used to evaluate the

final summary. In this rubric, students demonstrated how much they achieved in each criterion. The rubric was included at the end of the innovation to assess the summary from a story.

In this case, 83% of students included the story elements in their summaries, 80% used sequencing words in their summaries, and 68.3% of students' summaries contained the most critical events, as indicated in Table 2.

Table 2. Results of the Rubric to assess summaries

Component	Excellent	Good	Below average	none
Important events	58.3	21.7	10	0
Sequencing words	80	11.7	8	0
Story elements	83.3	16.7	0	0
Main ideas	53.3	36.7	10	0

Table 3 shows that almost all the components reached the maximum grade that was 2. Students mainly included all the features in their summaries. Students have precisely the story elements with a similar mean in all the components.

Table 3. Comparison of Mean and Standard Deviation of the Rubric

Component	Mean	Standard Deviation
Important events	1.7	0.4
Sequencing words	1.8	0.3
Story elements	1.9	0.2
Main ideas	1.6	0.4

Besides the rubric, a checklist was applied to show students' self-assessment and worked as a reflection during the innovation. Students had to mark in "yes" or "no" the elements that their summaries contained. Table 4 compiles the results of the last checklist.

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Table 4. Checklist of the elements of summaries

	Yes	No
Topic	58	2
Main characters	58	2
Setting	58	2
Sequencing words (First, next, then, last)	57	3
Main ideas	55	5
Problem	58	2
Solution	59	1
Theme or lesson of the story	39	21

The checklist results show that more than fifty students included almost all the checklist elements in their summaries as a self-assessment. These results represent that students know to elaborate summaries. Most of them used sequencing words. Students included in their summaries most of the elements of a story, such as main characters, setting, problem, solution, and events in sequence. A significant number of students included a moral, message, or lesson they understood from the story.

Regarding the third question: *What are the student's perspectives towards this innovation?* A survey was applied to demonstrate which elements students included in the summaries and their perspectives towards the invention. The survey results evidenced that students strongly agreed that summaries helped them improve their reading comprehension of narrative texts.

Table 5. Students' perspectives towards summaries.

Questions	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I can identify the elements of a story.	47	11	1	0	1
I reread the story to identify the relationship between the characters and events to write a summary.	39	18	2	1	0
I included the elements of a text in my summary.	54	5	1	0	0
My summary helped me to understand the story.	54	6	0	0	0

Table 5 represents the students' opinions related to the components of the survey. They strongly agreed with each element. These results reveal the students consider that summaries are an excellent strategy to comprehend the stories better.

A learning log was included at the end of the innovation to support research question number 3. Learning logs allowed students to express their perspectives after employing summaries to improve their comprehension. Students remarked that summaries helped them to understand the stories better. They added that summaries could be used in other subjects such as Language, Science, and Social Studies. Students mentioned that summaries could comprehend descriptive and informational texts where strategies as rereading, identifying the elements of a story, and most important events are applied when reading.

Discussions

In this study, the results of using summaries to improve reading comprehension have been successful. Students demonstrated a meaningful improvement when writing their summaries as the study conducted by Hooshang and Forouzan (2014). In the beginning, students required a lot of monitoring and feedback. Students used a checklist to make sure they included the elements of the summary. The results indicated that students incorporated the aspects of the summaries.

According to the first research question: To what extent students will improve their reading comprehension through summaries? Summarizing helped students to understand the story as the study conducted by Pečjaka and Pircb (2018). Additionally, students incorporated the story elements in their summaries, as mentioned in the study of Freedman (2012). The story elements that students included the most in their summaries were: characters, problem, setting, and solution.

For the second question: To what extent will students include the elements of narrative texts in a well-structured summary comprised of three paragraphs? Few students could elaborate a well-structured summary with an introduction, development, and conclusion paragraph. As Chen and Su (2012) suggested in their study, the elements of a story were incorporated in the paragraphs. However, many students preferred to summarize using sequencing words (first, then, next, and last). These sequencing words facilitated the elaboration of summaries to improve the

comprehension of narrative texts. It was also evident that most students included in their summaries some critical aspects such as main characters and settings that belong to narrative texts (Freedman, 2012).

Finally, for the last research question: What are the students' perspectives towards this innovation? The students expressed that the summaries facilitated their reading comprehension based on the survey results and the learning logs. Students determined that if they were taught how to summarize the stories and strategies to make summaries, they could comprehend the stories better. Many students expressed their logs by rereading, underscoring keywords, identifying the story elements such as characters, setting, actual events, problem, and solution. These strategies were mentioned by Ozdemir (2018).

Conclusion and Implication

This study demonstrated that students who had efficient reading comprehension were also efficient in summarizing. They become conscious of the process implied to understand texts better. Students were more confident in summarizing by using the sequencing words than elaborating a well-structured summary of three paragraphs. Students showed to be mechanical in doing almost all their summaries with the sequencing words, even when they were told to choose either the summary with three paragraphs or the sequencing words.

Students expressed that summaries facilitated their comprehension and worked as a barometer of understanding. They could use the summary strategies in other subjects such as Science, Social Studies, and Math. They will transfer this strategy to other issues, as Tomlinson (2013) sustained. According to these findings, summaries could be considered an effective strategy to teach students to improve their reading comprehension of other texts and fields.

Additionally, students used a dictionary to find unknown words on their own. Students became autonomous to acquire new knowledge from tools such as a dictionary. Furthermore, as this study worked with primary students, it can be implemented in elementary schools.

Summaries to improve reading comprehension of narrative texts require teachers' preparation of extra materials that students usually do not have available. Teachers must be prepared about how to teach students to get acquainted with the reading comprehension skill. Teaching students how to summarize a story demands time and practice, and this strategy is one of the best ways to evidence the student's understanding in oral or written form. Lastly, teaching

summaries and the approach to improve comprehension should be included as part of an annual plan as a requisite for different subjects, especially from lower primary grades in English; summaries can be applied in other issues.

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