

Graphic Organiser as a Strategic Tool for Enhancing Summary Writing

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ABSTRACT

Summary writing can be used to bridge success in both the English language and content area reading and writing classroom. The ability to summarise a lengthy text or article into its essential ideas is a mark of a proficient reader and writer, thus, making it a critical study skill. Research has shown that summary writing helps improve students' comprehension. Hence, it is considered an effective learning strategy because students must make decisions about the relative importance of elements in a text in order to summarise it and they also need to comprehend a text at a higher level than when they are simply reading it. Students would be able to increase their comprehension of a text if they are well trained in summary writing skills. Summary writing is an essential aspect of the Malaysian upper secondary school curriculum. However, the writers' observations reveal that students are not given adequate practice in summary writing although it is a critical skill. Furthermore, the textbooks in use do not provide appropriate techniques for practice in summary writing. Hence, this paper describes an action research that explores the application of graphic organisers along side other strategies in the teaching of summary writing.

Keywords: *graphic organiser, reading comprehension, summary writing*

Introduction

A summary is a shortened or condensed version, in the students' own words, of something they have read. It is not only an important writing skill but also a valuable learning tool. The most common kind of summary writing in higher learning institution requires students to read the work of someone else, to be able to pick out the most essential idea, and to put these ideas into their own words. The summary, therefore, becomes a tool for understanding what they have read. It forces them to read critically to differentiate between main ideas and minor points. Summary writing also forces students to write clearly and concisely because they cannot waste any words.

The ability to summarise a lengthy text or article into its essential ideas is a mark of a proficient reader and writer, thus, making it a critical study skill. Research has shown that summary writing helps improve students' comprehension (Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978; Winograd, 1984). Hence, it is considered an effective learning strategy because students must make decisions about the relative importance of elements in a text in order to summarise it. Besides, they also need to comprehend a text at a higher level than when they are simply reading it. Students would be able to increase their comprehension of a text if they are well trained in summary writing skills (Kirkland and Saunders, 1991; Hare, 1992).

However, the question that arises here is: are students mastering the actual skill of summarising or are they merely catering to the requirements for examination purposes? Current techniques used in teaching summarising skills do not provide students with the opportunity to develop summary writing skills and to visualize the content of the text. In summarising a text, students need to visualize the content in order to make sense of what is important, the gist of the information, the core of the text, leaving out elaborations and examples. The choice of words and the effective use of conjunctions determine the construction of a good summary. The writers believe that students need to be taught to be good visual thinkers in order to summarise a text well. Students should be trained to be strong visual thinkers in order to understand the content of a text. This is because students with high visual ability but low expertise in summary writing may produce the kind of writing that makes them sound unintelligent and unfocused.

Thus, this paper describes an action research that explores how graphic organisers may aid students to visualize the content of the text in

a systematic way when doing summary writing while at the same time remain clearly focused on the subject matter. The research also shows that the choice of graphic organisers used depends on the type of texts used in the summarising activity.

Summary Writing: The Current Classroom Practice

The first aim of the summary is brevity as the task of summarising a text is to convey in as few words as possible the information contained in the piece of writing. Because the summary is concerned with stating the ideas of someone else, the second aim of the summary is objectivity. This is not the place to respond to a writer's ideas but to demonstrate the understanding of them. The third aim of the summary is completeness which is the most crucial aspect. Both objectivity and brevity will follow from students' ability to isolate and concentrate on the main idea contained in the selection they are summarising.

Summary writing is taught and tested in the Malaysian upper secondary school curriculum and examinations. Although summary writing is an essential component of the syllabus, observations and interviews with teachers reveal that summary writing is taught in isolation. Yet, it is an essential component of the Malaysian English language public examination. Discussions with teachers indicate that, there is a lack of understanding of how to go about teaching summary writing effectively in the English language classroom.

The conventional method currently used in the teaching of summary writing involves the discussion of the text in detail, followed by the underlining of main ideas and important facts. The main ideas and important facts are then strung together into a paragraph and then transferred into a series of boxes where students fill in each box with one word. The objective here is to help students stay within the required number of words. Such practices do not develop critical summary writing skills and makes summary writing a rigid and unexciting activity.

Graphic Organisers for Summary Writing

Graphic organisers are valuable instructional tools. Unlike many tools that just have one purpose, graphic organisers are flexible and endless in application. One common trait found among graphic organisers is that

they show the order and completeness of a student's thought process – strengths and weaknesses of understanding becomes clearly evident. Many graphic organisers show different aspects of an issue or problem – in close and also the big picture. Since many graphic organisers use short words or phrases, they are ideal for many types of learners.

Graphic organisers are visual representations of thoughts, facts and ideas. Graphic organisers consist of Venn diagram, network tree, T-Charts, KWLH, Fishbone Map, Cycle, Continuum Scale, mind maps, and the list goes on. Each graphic organiser caters to the various different types of text that can be visualised in a simpler and more condensed form (Refer to Appendix 1). Thus, graphic organisers help students organise the text in the correct sequence and in a systematic flow.

Graphic organisers aid students to remember and recall information read in the text within a shorter time when preparing to engage in writing a summary. Students do not need to refer or to read the entire text again in order to look up the main ideas or relevant information. Graphic organisers, therefore, create a more systematic approach to summarising as well as saving much of the students' time during this activity. They represent knowledge in visual format that allows students to gain an overview of the text. Teachers should, therefore, learn to teach students summary writing using graphic organisers.

The Study

The purpose of this small scale action research was to investigate to what extent the use of graphic organisers would help students to do summary writing. The subjects were 15 year-old students from a school in the Klang valley, Malaysia. A total of 35 students participated in this action research over a period of 8 weeks.

The students were given various different kinds of texts to allow them to practice the use of the different kinds of graphic organisers. The objective was to allow students to familiarise themselves with the different types of organisers and to determine which graphic organiser would be most suitable.

Procedure

Students were first introduced to various types of graphic organisers. Then, they were given a short text on “Road Accidents” and were provided with practice on using graphic organisers and summarising skills. Once they understood the process, the writers next moved on to the next phase to observe to what extent the use of graphic organisers would help students to do summary writing. In this stage, students were given a text entitled “Heroin and Morphine” (Appendix 2). They were given 15 minutes to skim through the text silently. The writers then provided the students with a graphic organiser (Appendix 3) to help them focus on the important issues in the text. The graphic organiser with guided questions is used as a form of scaffolding technique. The example below illustrates how a graphic organiser was used to teach summary writing.

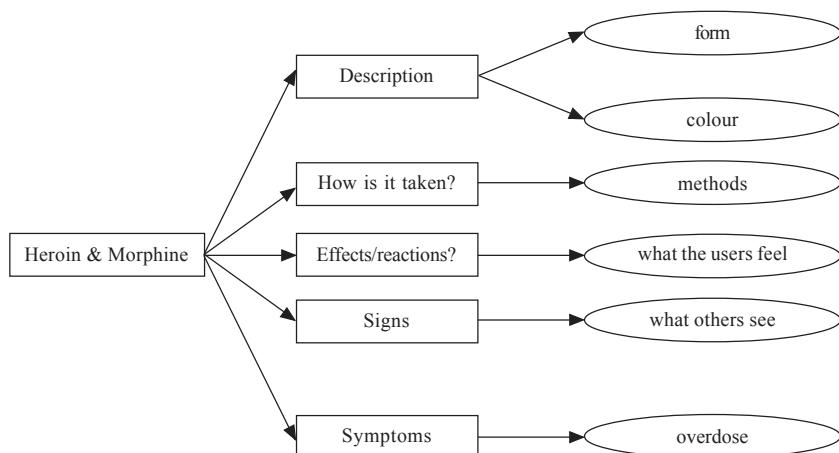


Figure 1: Example of a Graphic Organiser

Next, the writers took the students through a brainstorming session paragraph by paragraph by first discussing the content and meanings of difficult words. The process of eliciting important information from the students by using journalistic questioning strategies then followed this. This was mainly to allow students to think and visualize for themselves as they had been provided with a graphic organiser to help them focus on the main issues in the text. As students reflected on the questions posted to them, they were required to underline keywords or phrases, which were then transferred onto the graphic organiser provided. The

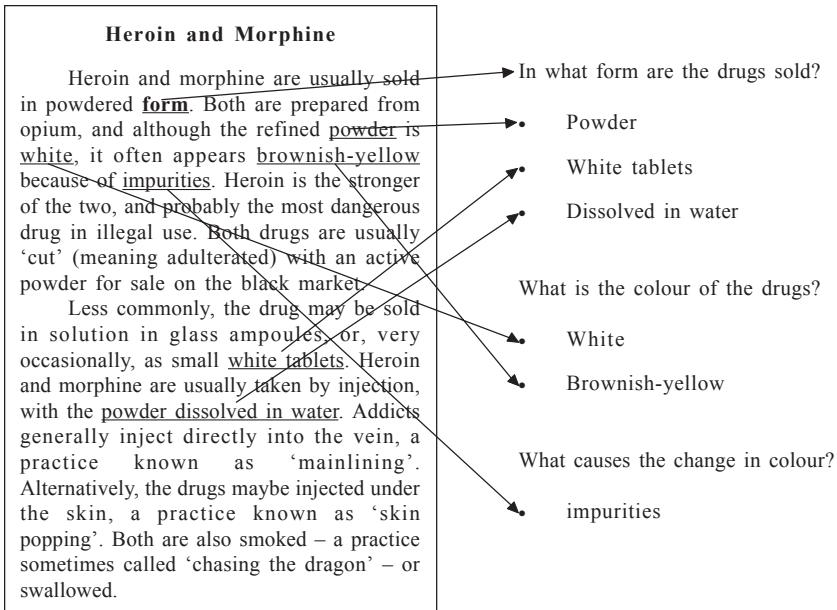


Figure 2: Analysing Text Using Graphic Organiser

rest of the lesson progressed in a similar fashion until the discussion of the text was completed. Below is a sample of how the text was analysed through the brainstorming activity.

By underlining or circling the keywords, students were able to identify the important information required in summarising the text. This activity provided students with a direction for organising their thoughts and for visualizing the content of the text. This technique fostered the cognitive awareness in the students where they were able to make meaning of what they had read and further encouraged them to be more aware of how they understood the concept.

Helping students to move from one paragraph to another through brainstorming activities fostered a systematic way of skimming and scanning for relevant information in detail. It also allowed students time to focus on a small bit of information at any one time instead of the entire text. Working with a whole text all at once might discourage the weaker students and it would be much more difficult for them to comprehend a long text which contained a lot of information. To them it might seem that every sentence was important, thus, leaving them confused as to which information they should pick out from all the seemingly important sentences.

Once the text had been discussed and analysed at the paragraph level, the students could now be left to work independently to graphically organise the main issues in the text. They were given the opportunity to use any form of graphic organisers they feel comfortable with (Refer to Appendix 4). Based on the graphic organiser, students were, then, required to write out the sentences using the keywords and phrases in the graphic organisers. Weaker students were encouraged to lift sentences containing the keywords and phrases from the text. From this point onwards, students who were confident enough to construct their own sentences were provided with a list of words and phrases that could be used to aid their summary writing activity (Refer to Appendix 4). As for the better students, they were encouraged to combine two connecting sentences with the use of conjunctions. This was to reduce the number of grammatical errors and to help students from going astray. It is important that students are taught this skill as the number of words should cater to the needs of the questions – normally students are required to summarise the text to one third of the actual text.

The final step involved the reading of the final draft. Here, students were required to check for spelling errors, sentence construction and the number of words stated as required by the question. Finally, the students completed the summary and stated the number of words at the bottom of the paragraph. Such a process allowed creativity and flexibility in engaging students in the process of summary writing.

Discussion

This small scale action research has shown that summary writing requires more than just the good proficiency in English. It also requires the ability to understand a text thoroughly. Shallow understanding of a text will lead to failure in providing the relevant information required in the summary of a text. The traditional method of picking out or identifying one sentence per paragraph seems a risky and poor way of identifying main ideas. The possibility of not knowing which sentence holds the key element of the required text may further discourage students to attempt tasks involving summary writing.

It was found that students were able to manage their summary writing activity better through the use of a guided graphic organiser. Thus, the writers believe that it is crucial in this case to provide students with a suitable and user-friendly tool to help them plod through the text in

a more systematic way, eliciting only relevant information and focusing on only the main details.

The action research has also shown that graphic organisers do aid students to move towards a more organised direction while analysing the text from paragraph to paragraph. Students' understanding of the text can be seen in their personal graphic organiser where only relevant information is elicited from the required text as illustrated in Appendix 3. Visual representations of information are known to aid memory and it is easily understood as symbols and keywords help to speed up communication between the students and the text itself. They are also easily recognised at a glance and most importantly save time.

Conclusion

The use of graphic organisers in the pre-summary writing activity has been proven to be extremely effective and less tedious. The improvement in the students' summary writing skills can be seen in the students' thinking patterns through their designed graphic organisers. Initially, students were unable to work independently on their summary writing activities and depended heavily on the teacher to help them identify the main ideas as well as to explain the gist of the text.

Taking these problems faced by a majority of students and teachers in the learning and teaching of summary writing skills, the action research focused on the use of different types of graphic organisers to provide students with a tool to enhance their understanding of the text and to elicit relevant information required for them to write a summary based on any type of text. The graphic organisers helped students to work independently without having to depend on the teachers to provide them with every detail to be included in their summary. Teachers who chose to use this technique would be able to help students move at a quicker pace in understanding and analysing the required text.

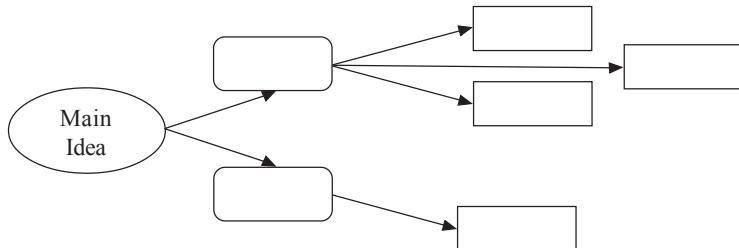
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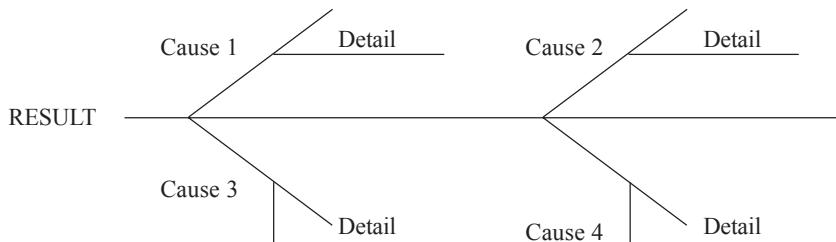
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Appendix 1

Cerebral Chart

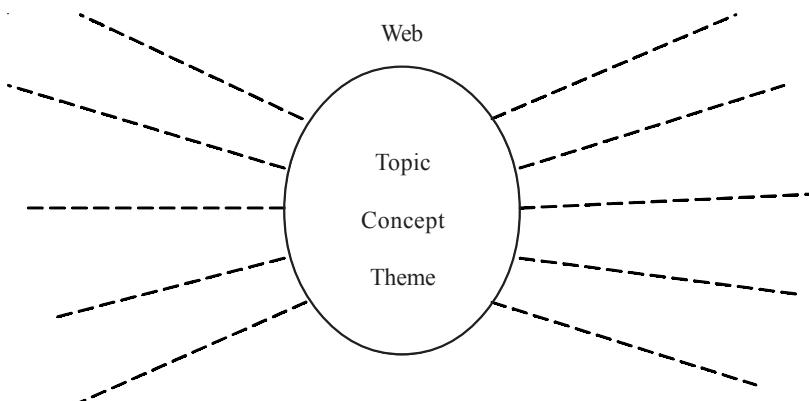


Fishbone Map



Synectics

Definition				
Similar	Feels Like	Opposite	Similar	Synthesis



Appendix 2

Summary Writing 2

Heroin and Morphine

Heroin and morphine are usually sold in powdered form. Both are prepared from opium, and although the refined powder is white, it often appears brownish-yellow because of impurities. Heroin is the stronger of the two, and probably the most dangerous drug in illegal use. Both drugs are usually 'cut' (meaning adulterated) with an inactive powder for sale on the black market.

Less commonly, the drugs may be sold in solution in glass ampoules, or, very occasionally, as small white tablets. Heroin and morphine are usually taken by injection, with the powder dissolved in water. Addicts generally inject directly into the vein, a practice known as 'mainlining'. Alternatively, the drugs maybe injected under the skin, a practice known as 'skin popping'. Both are also smoked – a practice sometimes called 'chasing the dragon' – or swallowed.

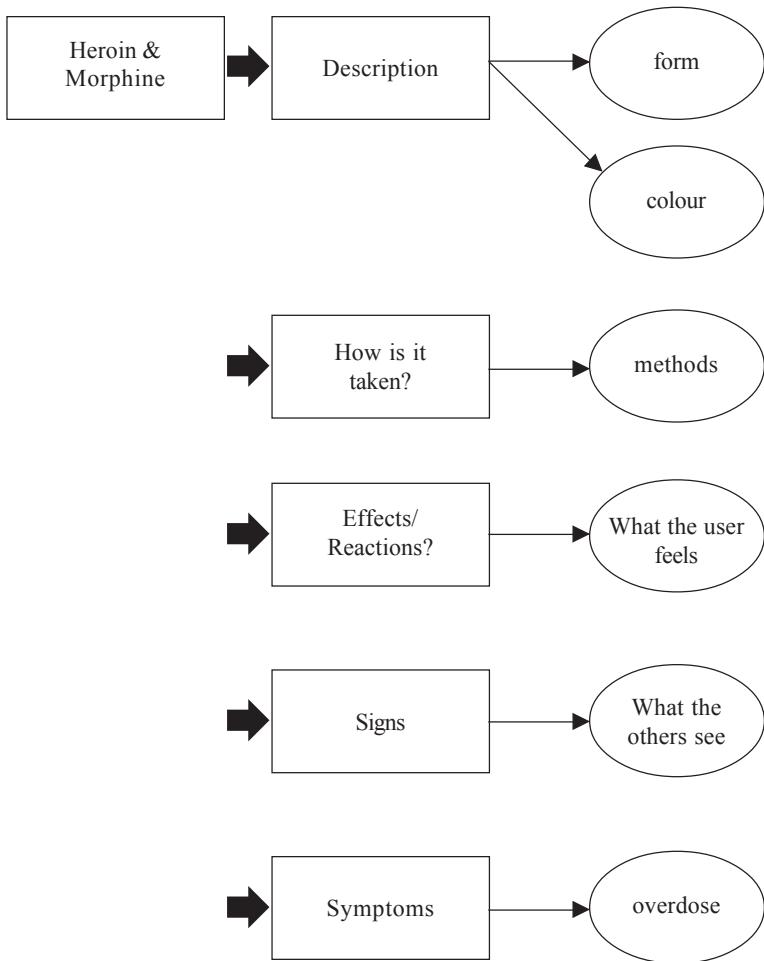
Users of either drug lose touch with reality, and feel drowsy. Some people, however, experience only unpleasant effects after taking heroin. Heroin and morphine are both addictive, and habitual users tend to stop feeling any pleasurable effects. The drugs become necessary simply to remain 'normal', or to escape from harrowing withdrawal symptoms. Signs of intoxication are often slight. The user may seem merely withdrawn into a private world. Larger doses produce more marked drowsiness. Scars of injection, known as 'tracks', may be visible on the user. These are commonly found on the inside of the forearms and the front of the elbows. There may also be ulcers, or the scars of healed ulcers.

Discarded syringes, needles and ampoules, or foil and tube (used for sniffing the smoke from the drug), may indicate that the drugs are being used. If supplies are threatened, the user is likely to exhibit acute withdrawal symptoms and to become frantic and violent. He or she may turn to crime in the search for more.

Overdose symptoms causes deep coma, in which the patient is breathing but cannot be woken. The pupils of the eyes are reduced to mere pinpoints. Breathing may also stop. An overdose is a particular risk when an addict has been off drugs for some time; in hospital, for example, or in prison. A single injection within days of discharge can kill, because the body can no longer tolerate doses to which it was previously accustomed.

*DRUG TREATMENT, Emergency: What to do in an emergency.
Reader's Digest Association Limited, 1986, London.*

Appendix 3



Appendix 4



