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Précis practice as a component of an academic writing course

Précis as a specific type of summary is frequently included in academic writing courses. This genre is of great use in the development of academic reading and writing skills, particularly with the view to the final thesis whose basic elements involve paraphrasing and summarising techniques. The objective of the article is to present the problems which arise when *précis* is introduced to students. The findings are based on a survey conducted among the students of English Philology at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska. The survey proves that it is advisable to carefully introduce the genre of *précis* since students tend to neglect the significance of summary writing and to focus on more technical aspects like bibliographical notes or references. The knowledge concerning *précis* writing may increase students' awareness of summary techniques and of their proper place in the creation of academic writing courses.

Key words: *précis*, summary, writing skills, academic writing

1. Introduction

Academic writing courses seem to be the core of university curricula as they lead and prepare students for their final writing task which is their diploma project. What appears to be the most important element of these curricula is the introduction of such writing techniques as paraphrasing and summarising. Among various activities which may enrich students' writing skills is *précis* writing practice, which seems to be of great value. As a specific type of summary, *précis* is frequently included in academic writing courses but, simultaneously, its introduction is highly problematic due to its novelty for students and the techniques used in this genre.

To further explore this topic, a survey was conducted among the students of English Philology at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska. The aim of the survey was to assess their knowledge on the *précis* writing skill and their awareness of its importance for their studies and future career.

2. Literature review

The introduction of *précis* writing in academic writing courses is problematic for a few reasons. First of all, the term is hard to define. The genre of *précis* has long been known and practised as a type of summary but still this term is used to describe either a compact text showing the logic and main ideas of the original text only or a text which additionally contains elements of evaluation. The following paper focuses on the second definition as *précis* is sometimes called critical summary, which suggests that it includes more elements of evaluation and analysis than a typical summary. While writing a summary involves the skills of paraphrasing and evoking the main gist of the text, writing a *précis* will mean adding information about methods of analysis and interpretation or even elements of a review such as strong and weak points of the original text. Therefore, in writing a *précis* not only faithfulness to the content is important but also "interpersonal meaning" (Hood, 2008: 363), which involves preserving the spirit of the original text and its attitude. This aspect is of particular significance for university students who prepare for working on their diploma projects and need to be able to write a research paper with elements of a review of the literature on their subject matter.

For these reasons, writing a *précis* is much more complicated than writing a summary as it involves not only writing skills such as selection and reduction but also critical thinking and reasoning skills. This is why the perfection of this genre appears to be a highly complicated task for students as they are usually not accustomed to reading a text with the view to its deeper understanding. What they usually do is to perform reading comprehension tasks typical for exam formats, which involve reading for gist, multiple choice questions or matching the headings.

Another problem seems to concern students' approach to summary writing itself. As Spirgel and Delaney (2016) noted, "summary writing is usually a passive and nonreflective process ... characterized by the copy-delete strategy" without "any meaningful alterations" (p. 172). Such an attitude might be problematic in the context of writing a diploma project and possible accusations of plagiarism or at least of "patchwriting" (Howard, 1995), i.e. paraphrasing using too many structures and words from the original text. Moreover, students frequently do not pay enough attention to the coherence and cohesion of their texts and put pieces of information together without any logical connection between single sentences (Karimi and Regheb, 2017: 110). Other problems students encounter while writing a *précis* are related to the distortion of the original information, providing inappropriate equivalents, wrong sentence structure and spelling mistakes (Woodsworth, 1988: 281). Such problems could, however, indicate that students encounter difficulties concerning a deeper understanding of the text, which might result from their low reading comprehension skills. Another reason might resort to the fact that they simply do not put enough effort into their work on summarising, which necessarily should involve integrating their general knowledge and reworking the text at a deeper level rather than the simple selection of the most important information.

However, summary / *précis* writing is essential in developing students' skills in various aspects. First of all, this is "a core requirement for students to make the

shift from consumers of research-based knowledge to creators of research-based knowledge" (Hood, 2008: 351), which is highly significant in the context of their diploma project. Additionally, students improve their skills related to linguistic competence and their field of knowledge. This aspect has been explored by the researchers (e.g. Wichadee, 2014; Zhou and Siriyothin, 2009) who used various methods such as tests, questionnaires or face-to-face interviews with students in order to check the impact of *précis* / summary writing on students' efficiency and general language fluency.

Gao (2017), Yamada (2002) or Zhou and Siriyothin (2008) emphasise the impact of summary writing on reading comprehension, whereas Karimi and Regheb (2017) see *précis* writing as advantageous for general writing skills. Students can also broaden their range of vocabulary and develop critical thinking skills (Frey, Fisher, Hernandez, 2003). Moreover, the skill of summarising actually positively influences students' performance in exam reading tasks as well as their ability to take notes and generally understand texts (Marzec-Stawiarska, 2016). Finally, Radmacher and Latosi-Sawin (1995) proved that psychology students after the course in summary writing had 8% better scores in their final exam than those who did not have such a course.

The last, although not the least important, advantage of the introduction of summary writing courses is connected with the fact that students become more sensitive to the issue of plagiarism. However, the problem of copying can also be seen as a symptom of students' "developing competence in text-responsible writing" (Keck, 2014: 4) and, as research shows, gradually becomes less significant as students acquire more independence and their language competence grows (Keck, 2014; Yasuda, 2015). However, from the very beginning, the problem of copying should be eliminated and students ought to be made aware of the consequences of plagiarism in their university work.

Taking all the aforementioned problems into account, the *précis* writing course ought to be carefully considered. That is why, in writing a *précis*, one needs to apply the so called transactional strategy instruction (TSI), in which "readers must be able to transact with text to gain meaning" and see the relationships within the text (Wichadee, 2014: 61), which seems to be of particular use as it enhances both reading and summary writing skills. Definitely, typical exam reading strategies may be of great use in the understanding of any text and, what follows, in the writing of a *précis*, but one needs additional skills which could add to a more efficient performance of this task.

That is why *précis* as a genre in academic writing courses should be introduced by means of several scaffolding strategies and techniques. The research by Marzec-Stawiarska, (2016) shows that various types of instruction might significantly impact students' efficiency in summary writing. That is why scaffolding strategies should be implemented, which would emphasise the role of *précis* and summary writing in the process of project writing against the background of academic skills development. First of all, as Yang (2015) suggests, concept maps might prove useful in this task as they graphically present the main ideas in the text and the connections between them, which allows students to better understand essential concepts in

the text. Thus, concept mapping strategies facilitate improving students' reading and writing skills as well as help "externalize their prior knowledge and combine it with the new ones" (Yang, 2015: 273). The importance of using various mediators such as word mapping or brainstorming is also emphasised by other researchers (e.g. Emam, 2011).

Additionally, such a strategy reflects the approach of learner-centred learning as both focus on thinking processes as well as the need to discover answers, which results in learners' stronger involvement in the process of learning and in their growing autonomy. This approach is in accordance with the findings of the self-determination theory, developed by Ryan and Deci (2000), which assumes that a human being has an intrinsic tendency to develop their skills and abilities, which further satisfy their three basic needs: the need for autonomy, which makes people want to know more, the need for competence, which allows them to feel more capable of independent decisions, and the need for relatedness, which involves contacts with other people. All these three needs are also satisfied in the *précis* writing course, which, in turn, leads to a general better performance of a student.

3. Material and methods

The main goal of the study was to examine the awareness among English Philology students of the importance of the skills of *précis* / summary writing as well as other accompanying skills such as paraphrasing or making bibliographical references, which might be useful in writing a diploma project. Additionally, the study was to reveal whether the approach implemented in the course of Reading and Writing of Field Texts was suitably introduced to achieve the above mentioned goal.

To this end, the experiment concerned ten students (two males and eight females) of English Philology at Pope John Paul II State School of Higher Education in Biała Podlaska, who attended the course of Reading and Writing of Field Texts in the second semester of their second year. Their English language skills were at the C1 level or a little lower. The course was obligatory for all students and consisted of fifteen 90-minute classes (30 teaching hours). It was focused on perfecting the skills necessary for writing a diploma project in the students' third, and last, year of studies. Students only chose between the fields of study they wanted to pursue in their diploma papers: didactics or translation studies. The students who took part in the study represented the first group. At the end of the course, the students filled in a questionnaire concerning their perception of the course and the skills studied and practiced there (Appendix 1).

Before the course, the students had little knowledge on summary or *précis* writing as this genre had not been practised earlier during their studies apart from one writing class in their first year. However, the general observation among teachers was that the students did not master the skill of writing a summary. The students' basic way of dealing with this skill was to mechanically rewrite certain fragments of the text with few or no alterations. Therefore, a course which would teach the students to write a proper summary or *précis* seemed indispensable.

The course of Reading and Writing of Field Texts consisted of 15 classes (30 teaching hours). The techniques necessary to write a diploma project were introduced within the first 5 classes (10 teaching hours). The first class started with the practice of academic vocabulary to provide the semantic basis for the writing of any academic texts. The knowledge of such vocabulary is particularly useful in the context of word replacement in paraphrasing and summarising tasks. The next class was focused on paraphrasing exercises, starting from simple sentences. The techniques of summarising were introduced in the third and fourth classes as this issue refers to longer texts and is therefore more complex and demands more thinking and linguistic skills. Afterwards, the ability to use bibliographical notes and references was practised (the fifth class). The students had an opportunity to focus on writing a summary or a *précis* with all bibliographical information so the full version of what may be expected in the process of diploma project writing. The whole process from the stage of academic vocabulary building to writing a summary with bibliographical references is realised within 5 classes. The remaining classes are devoted to writing and presenting a text a few pages long which constitutes a preparation for the diploma project itself.

The survey was conducted at the end of the semester and consisted of 5 questions. They concerned various aspects and skills practised during the course, namely learning academic vocabulary, paraphrasing, writing a summary, making bibliographical notes and references. The aim of the survey was to check students' awareness as to the significance and usefulness of these aspects of the subject of Reading and Writing of Field Texts both in writing in general and in writing their own diploma projects.

4. Results

The first question of the survey concerned the usefulness of the ability to master the following aspects: learning academic vocabulary, paraphrasing, writing a summary, making bibliographical notes and making references. The question was posed in the context of the diploma paper which was to be prepared the next year. The results are presented in Table 1 and show the number of students who selected the appropriate level of usefulness of the aforementioned aspects.

Table 1. Responses to the question: How useful is the ability to master the following aspects for the writing of your diploma project (from 1 to 5; 1 – the least useful, 5 – the most useful)?

Number of points (from 1 to 5; 1 – the least difficult, 5 – the most difficult)	1	2	3	4	5
Learning academic vocabulary	-	-	-	2	8
Paraphrasing	-	1	-	1	8
Writing a summary	-	1	5	1	4
Making bibliographical notes	-	-	-	6	4
Making references	-	-	1	2	7

The second question referred to the difficulty of learning academic vocabulary, paraphrasing, writing a summary, making bibliographical notes and making references in the classes of Reading and Writing of Field Texts. Table 2 shows the number of students who selected the appropriate level of difficulty of the aforementioned aspects.

Table 2. Responses to the question: How difficult were the following aspects in the classes of Reading and Writing of Field Texts (from 1 to 5; 1 – the least difficult, 5 – the most difficult)?

Number of points (from 1 to 5; 1 – the least difficult, 5 – the most difficult)	1	2	3	4	5
Learning academic vocabulary	-	2	4	2	2
Paraphrasing	-	3	4	2	1
Writing a summary	-	3	2	3	2
Making bibliographical notes	-	3	3	3	1
Making references	-	3	3	4	-

The aim of Question 3 was to check the students' knowledge of the difference between paraphrasing and summarising. All the students answered this question and emphasised that paraphrasing is focused on altering the wording and grammatical structures of the text but leaving the meaning unchanged, whereas summarising involves shortening the original text.

The next question concerned the time which ought to be devoted to the teaching of paraphrasing and summarising. Six students suggested that between two and four 90-minute classes should be sufficient, one person opted for 15 classes, other answers were rather unrealistic (50-60 classes).

The last question of the survey was related to any additional elements which might be added to the course of Reading and Writing of Field Texts. Six students suggested more practical exercises and more time spent on particular aspects, one person indicated the need for more information on building a plan of an academic text. The other students did not suggest any changes.

5. Discussion

The survey revealed that the value of *précis* writing seems to be underestimated by students. The students who participated in the survey stated that writing a summary was one of the least useful abilities in the process of writing their diploma theses. What is interesting, paraphrasing was ranked higher in this list although this skill seems to be quite similar to summary writing. The abilities which were considered as most useful were those connected with technical aspects of writing a diploma project, namely the use of bibliographical notes and references, as well as the knowledge and right choice of academic vocabulary.

The lack of appreciation for *précis* writing may be the result of another problem, namely the difficulty of the genre for students. The same students were also asked to rank the same aspects of learning academic vocabulary, paraphrasing, writing a summary, making bibliographical notes and making references but in the context of their difficulty. The survey revealed that writing a summary was the most difficult task for the students although there were significantly fewer responses of this type, compared with the question about the usefulness of various tasks. This might indicate that difficulty is only one of the factors which contribute to the underestimation of *précis* writing among students.

This tenet might also be plausible in the context of another question asked in the survey, on the number of 90-minute classes which should be devoted to the teaching of paraphrasing and writing a summary. Six students suggested 2–4 classes on these aspects of writing, which means that they were either easy to master or underestimated by the students. What seems to be consoling, however, is the fact that the awareness among the students as to the differences between the techniques of paraphrasing and summarising is relatively high, which might rule out the lack of necessary knowledge as a source of problems with *précis* writing.

The results of the survey show that the introduction of summary or *précis* writing in academic writing courses should be carefully conducted as this is a significant skill, necessary in writing a diploma project. Therefore, a detailed preparation is needed to introduce this genre to students so that they could rightly appreciate it and understand its value and meaning for their diploma theses. The preparation course ought to include the practice of the skills typical for summary writing, which could be called "macrooperations (known also as macrorules or strategies of summarising)" (Marzec-Stawiarska, 2016: 91) and include the strategies of deletion, generalisation and construction. The last element involves more interpreting and analysing skills and thus is particularly useful in *précis* writing but all three strategies enhance text comprehension and, what follows, although not directly, summary writing skills.

However, to be able to employ these skills in practice, students need to be equipped with the basic knowledge on the idea of summarising and proper academic vocabulary which would help them restate sentences or phrases from the original text. Therefore, although the course in Reading and Writing of Field Texts conducted at English Philology consisted of 30 teaching hours, 10 of them were devoted to summary writing and preparation for it. There are various courses

which solely consist of 30 hours of summary writing but this course was devoted to the preparation for diploma project writing so other topics apart from summary writing had to be introduced as well. The question remains if this amount of time (10 teaching hours) is enough to fully teach the aforementioned material. The answer seems to be negative. In the survey, about half of the group believed that 2–4 classes (4–8 teaching hours) should be sufficient to master paraphrase and summary writing while others mentioned the demand for even 15 classes devoted solely to these two aspects. Moreover, the last question of the survey concerned any additional information or aspects which should be added to the syllabus of the course. If any answers were provided, they mostly focused on the need for more practice.

These observations prove that summary / *précis* writing ought to become the core of any academic writing courses but it should be presented within a wider perspective of the diploma project and the practical use of the *précis* for the purposes of presenting the overview of any text as well as its interpretation and critical evaluation.

6. Conclusions

Academic writing courses ought to be an essential part of the university curriculum, not only in philological studies but in other faculties as well. As Limke, Holloway and Knight (2011) postulate, "writing-across-the-curriculum" should become a standard approach in higher education as the writing skill is of great significance in all fields of knowledge throughout the whole course of study (p. 6).

Within the curriculum, learning to write a correct *précis* ought to be one of the most important elements of the syllabus in writing courses. However, students encounter various problems relating to the difficulty of the genre and lack of previous experience with such texts. That is why only careful preparation and a lot of practice may guarantee that students will master the skill of *précis* writing.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.

The survey conducted in the classes of Reading and Writing of Field Texts

1. How useful is the ability to master the following aspects for the writing of your diploma project (from 1 to 5; 1 – the least useful, 5 – the most useful)?
   a. learning academic vocabulary   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
   b. paraphrasing   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
   c. summarising   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
   d. making bibliographical notes   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
   e. making references   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
2. How difficult were the following aspects in the classes of Reading and Writing of Field Texts (from 1 to 5; 1 – the least useful, 5 – the most useful)?
   a. learning academic vocabulary   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
   b. paraphrasing   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
   c. summarising   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
   d. making bibliographical notes   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
   e. making references   1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5
3. What is the difference between the techniques of paraphrasing and summarising?
4. How many 90-minute classes should be devoted to teaching paraphrasing and summarising?
5. What elements should be added to the syllabus of Reading and Writing of Field Texts?

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