

Investigating Summary Writing Difficulty among Students of Senior High School: A Case of Bolgatanga Municipality

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Abstract

The investigation is geared to explore summary writing difficulty in three Senior High Schools in the Bolgatanga Municipality. The study population was three hundred (300) students and twenty-three teachers were randomly selected. In all, 323 responded to the questionnaire on summary Writing. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics. The results showed that Senior High School students in the Bolgatanga Municipality have difficulty in writing the one sentence summary which is usually set for the final WASSCE examination. The study also reveals that little attention is given to summary in the syllabus. The researcher recommended that, the syllabus be arranged in a manner that makes any one aspect of the English language very useful for the understanding of another. Again, teachers must plan their timetable to give adequate attention to summary writing. But above all, teachers should be adequately trained and resourced to have confidence in all aspects of the subjects.

Keywords: Summary, Difficulty, Descriptive, Writing, Syllabus, Examination

INTRODUCTION

Summary writing is the aspect of core English Language which from time of immemorial, posed and still poses a serious problem to many students. Summary writing may simply be defined as reducing a text to its basic essentials. In that respect, it is a mark of one's

competence in the language in question. For this same reason, it has been used as one of the educational tools to measure intelligence and scholarship (Agordjor,2004:5).

Flottum(1985), Jamieson (1999) and Casazza (1995) have all underscored the importance of summary to the student as practised in France. They argue that Summary writing is a component of the college entrance examination and for which attention is given to it in textbooks. In that context, therefore, summary writing is to test intelligence, one's background knowledge as well as one's stylistic skill.

Sackeyfio (1999:2) shares a similar view about the importance of summary writing as a necessary skill to "maintain essential sanity in today's world ... where we are 'buffeted with lots of information,' and for the student, it is very necessary skill to "cope with further education". It must be emphasized that summary writing, in spite of the important role it plays, still poses difficulties to students, and hence, must be tackled with all the seriousness it deserves.

Behrens ad Rosen state: "Writing summary is an excellent way to understand what you read. This in itself is an important goal of academic study" (Behrens & rosen, 1997.p3). from this assertion, it is realized that the significance of summary writing in school cannot be overemphasized. It is however, worthy to note with deep concern that, students' answers to summary questions over the years leaves much to be desired. Chief Examiners' Reports issued by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) are credible source of information on students' difficulties in summary writing. These reports over the years reveal an unchanging abysmal performance of students in the summary aspect of English language.

Chief Examiners Report (Nov/Dec 1999) indicates that there was some level of improvement in the manner in which candidates responded to the comprehension questions; specifically, those on the context meaning of words. However, on the weakness of candidates on comprehension and summary test, the report reveals how deficient candidates were in handling summary and comprehension questions as some of the provided answers which were not based on the passages. This is a clear manifestation that they did not understand the passages.

On summary, the report categorically state that candidates' performance was disappointing as some of them paid no heed to the rubrics and simply lifted whole portions of the passages as answers. That apart some of their answers were not in sentences as required by the questions. There was glaring evidence that some candidates did not understand the passages at all.

Subsequent Chief Examiners' Reports followed the same trend. Candidates' Report (July/August 2002) states that, "Many candidates found the passage for the summary test rather difficult and therefore, performed poorly. There was lots of 'lifting' from the passage. Some candidates did not attempt the question". However, the comments by the Chief Examiners on the other aspects of the English Language paper (especially, comprehension and composition) were relatively satisfactory. With the numerous suggestions given by the Chief Examiners, one would have thought the situation would

have been remedied but unfortunately, it still lingers on and continues to attract unfavourable reportage by Chief Examiners.

The general comments of the Chief Examiner (2004:7) maintain that, "The performance of candidates in summary...was poor. The comprehension and summary test were irrelevant to the passage". Just like the aforementioned Chief Examiners' Reports, the 2005 version highlights the difficulties candidates continue to encounter with summary writing. The report makes it crystal clear that, "A good number of them treated the questions as if they were 'comprehension' questions and some of them resorted to extensive lifting of material from the passage to answer the questions and lost marks". (Chief Examiners' Report May/June. 2005.pp.10-11). It is worthy to note that the Chief Examiners' Report in recent times still paint a dismal picture about summary. For instance, Chief Examiners' Reports(2007:11) adds credence to the ongoing trend in the 'summary saga'. The report postulates that, "As it has been in the past years, candidates performed poorly here. Many of them could not spot the parts of sentences that had to be summarized.

One recurrent issue in these reports is "lifting verbatim material from the summary passage. This confirms the researcher's position that students have difficulty in summary writing. Indeed, this chronic 'summary saga' raises serious concerns in the public domain; therefore, pragmatic measures must be put in place to resolve the issue. The Chief Examiners' Reports equally point out candidates' deficiencies in the comprehension and composition sections of the English Language paper but the comments on summary are quite disturbing.

Statement of the Problem

Performance of student in the English Language examinations in the Bolgatanga Municipality has not been that encouraging. This is confirmed by the English language results released every year by the West African Examinations Council (WAEC). Specifically, summary has been a problem for many students in the Bolgatanga Municipality. It must be emphasized that the Chief Examiners for some time now have bemoaned in their reports, the unacceptable manner in which students tackle the summary questions. The trend remains unchanged as the years go by. This is a very disturbing situation and hence, has necessitated the conduct' of this research. The researcher engaged in this study to ascertain the factors which account for the poor performance of students in the Bolgatanga Municipality in summary writing.

Research Questions

The researcher will address the following questions in his study:

1. Are there difficulties in summary writing in Senior High School in Bolgatanga Municipality?
2. What methods do teachers in schools of the Bolgatanga Municipality use to teach summary?
3. Is the presentation of summary writing in current textbooks an adequate guide?

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study are to:

1. To examine the difficulty in summary writing in Senior High Schools in Bolgatanga Municipality.
2. Examine the methods teachers in schools in the Bolgatanga Municipality use to teach summary.
3. To establish whether the presentation of summary writing in current textbooks is an adequate guide

The Scope of the Study

English language comprises a variety of components such as; comprehension, composition, grammar, phonetics and phonology (speech work) just to mention a few. Each of the mentioned components poses one challenge or another to students. However, due to the limited time at the disposal of the researcher, he focuses the study on summary writing: a study which takes a look at students' difficulty in summary writing in three selected school in the Bolgatanga Municipality. Since summary writing encompasses every aspect of the English language study, the researcher concentrates on how to help students to easily identify the topic sentence and major and minor support sentences of a paragraph. The approach is to draw on the relationship between paragraph writing between paragraph writing and summary writing.

The main concern of the study is to outline steps to guide students on writing the one-sentence summary which is the type of summary examinable by the West Africa Examination Councils (WAEC) at the Senior High School level.

Significance of the Study

The study will be of immense importance to all stakeholders in education. In the first place, the study is of pedagogical importance to both teachers and students in the Bolgatanga Municipality. The study would also present a more acceptable approach to mastering English summary that demonstrates the close correlation between a good paragraph development and steps towards good summary writing. Furthermore, the study would be an indispensable guide for remedial teaching in both composition and summary writing at the Senior High School level. This research will contribute to knowledge in summary writing and will encourage other researchers to carry out more studies on the topic. It will also have implication for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Summary?

Flottuti (1985:29) state that the first problem with summary writing "was how to define summary". He suggests that this problem manifests itself in various terms that are used to define it. These terms inter alia include 'short representation' and 'abstract'. Other terms used include 'theme', 'topic, and 'point'. Even though each of these terms refers to a different phenomenon, they are all referred to as 'summary'. He contends that, ".....the definitions tend to be too vague to be of use for a concrete linguistic study".

Purpose of Summary

Behan & De Witt (2003), internet source (October 19,2010) underscore the significance of summary in their assertion. From their view point, a summary is to capture 'the gist of or essence of a work for an audience who has no immediate access to the original'. This position is strongly corroborated by Casazza (1995:28). She contends that: one strategy that can enhance the reading programme for the post-secondary level to produce "active and thoughtful readers who can monitor their own comprehension and who comprehension and have a set of strategies for interacting with text and organizing the information into meaningful context that increases comprehension and retrieval at a later time".

For the reading benefit of oneself, Williamson(2003) maintains that, "A summary is mostly a reading exercise". It is clear in the above context that summary is an essential skill for daily life. According to Bleck (n.d) internet source (October 19, 2010), "the goal of summarizing material is to pass along the ideas belonging to another". He reiterates that this is done with fewer words than the original document. Therefore, the one writing the summary must endeavour to 'maintain the integrity of the original document, not distorting the original views, ideas, attitudes, or their importance in the original'. The summarizing skill as an academic tool has been variously held by some authorities. For instance, Seyer (1995:28) contends that a summary has "to demonstrate that assigned materials has been read and understood". Seyer's assertion cannot be disputed as it points to the fact that a given material should be carefully read and be well understood before one can write any meaningful summary of that material. In short, Seyer simply reiterates that careful reading and understanding are very important considerations to effective summary writing.

Types of Summary

There are two kinds of summaries: that which is done as a means of comprehending a text-the study tool, and summary of a given specification of length or detail for some professional or academic need Bleck B. 2010.

Considering the volume of content extracted from the text to build the summary, there are types such as the precis, the descriptive, the paraphrase, and the analytical summary among others.

The Precis

A precis is a type of summary written in the writer's own words about text source, Bleck (n.d.). Characteristically, it does not make any conclusion about the original, its audience or anything relating to the text. It provides the reader with an accurate, but brief map of the original devoid of the writer's opinion of the subject. Internet source (October 19, 2010).

The Descriptive Summary

The descriptive summary must give all the information contained in the formal restatement, as does the precis. But then, it must not just be a map of the original text, it is a bit more detailed than the precis. In the descriptive summary writer conveys his/her

observations of the text to the reader. The descriptive summary is more detailed in that, it states the kind of evidence the original presents and how this evidence is organised. That means that summary writers add some explanatory material between the lines of the precis to show how the original text makes the arguments (Thury & Drott, 1997)

The Analytical Summary

An analytical summary is both a descriptive and a condensed account of an essay, article, chapter, book, or other work. This is written largely, but not necessarily exclusively, in one's own words and limited to the essential ideas contained in the original work. It is very similar to the paragraph characteristically; it will identify the author and the title of the work in its opening paragraph. Its subsequent paragraph will contain major points of the work to develop the central claim. The concluding paragraph of the analytical summary restates the central claim. The summary must note the dominant attitude as conveyed or expressed by the original writer. Except for a historical account, it is written predominantly in the present tense.....The author writes.....'not 'the wrote.

The paragraph Summary

A paraphrase is a restatement of a text or passage. In other words, it is one's rendition of essential information and ideas expressed by someone else presented in a new form. It typically explains or clarifies the text that is being paraphrased. Normally, a paraphrase need not accompany a direct quotation, but when it does, the paraphrase typically serves to put the source's statement into perspective or to clarify the context in which it appeared. A paraphrase is normally more detailed than a summary and better preserves the essential meaning of the material being paraphrased.

From another perspective, in a paraphrase summary, as in a paraphrase, you pretend to be the author and speak from the author's point of view. The paraphrase summary presents the original writer's arguments directly: the summary writer writes very much as if he/she were the original author. But then, the paraphrase summary is usually more comprehensive than the analytic. Here, the basic difference is the perspective the writer of the summary must take in writing the summary.

Summary writing in senior high school

Summary writing is an essential tool used in both pre-tertiary institutions to help students scan a given text for relevant information, and for teachers to determine the students' understanding of a text, among other uses. There are three very important ways in which summary writing is applied and tested in schools. These are the readers' summary, summaries as parts of essays; the summary essay and summary out-line notes.

Conclusion

From the body of literature reviewed, it has been established that summary is the art of reducing a given passage or write-up to its barest essentials. Depending on the length, detail and style, there are various summary types such as the precis, paraphrase, the informative and descriptive and the analytic summary among others.

This body of knowledge has also underscored the value of summarizing as a skill. It is said to be a very useful skill to the student, the professional and even the men on the street. For each, it is either for managing copious information or for presenting a given requirement of its many kinds. It was also observed that, from the Microrules of Kintsch and van Dijk (1978) curved the principle of Brown and Day (1980). These principles have, over the years, influenced many works on the approach to summary writing, both foreign and local (Ghanaian). The notable Ghanaian ones include Sackeyfio (1995, 1999).

METHODOLOGY

It presents the methods used in investigating students' English summary writing difficulties in the Bolgatanga Municipality. It gives an overview of the sources of the data used for the study, the population of the study and the kind of sampling used. Similarly, it discusses the methods, the techniques and the instruments of investigation that have been used for the study.

Source of Data

Data was collected from students and teachers of three schools in the Upper East Region of Ghana. These schools are Bolgatanga Senior High School, Bolgatanga Girls' Senior High School and Zamse Secondary School. The three schools were selected as a matter of convenience. Selecting more than three schools will make the data so huge to analyse. All these schools are within the Bolgatanga Municipality this makes it easier for the researcher to collect data without hustle. The researcher used Bolgatanga Girls Senior High School: a girl only school to find out how girls perceive summary writing. Zamse Secondary Technical School was selected to find out how students with technical background also perceive summary writing.

Data collecting tools

Observation is one of the tools the researcher employed to gather data for the study. It is used for examining a phenomenon or behaviour while the behaviour is going on. Seliger and Shohamy (1989:162). Observation enables the desired behaviours to be studied at close range with many of the contextual variables present. This feature is particularly important in the study of language behaviour.

Questionnaires were also used as the second tool by the researcher collate data. Two set of questionnaires were design for this study: one for students in the selected schools and the other for English Teachers in those schools.

Sample population

The study population was three hundred (300) students and twenty-three teachers were randomly selected. In all, 323 responded to the questionnaire on summary Writing. Two sets of questionnaires were design for this study: one set contained 19 items for students and the other set contained 24 items for teachers.

Sampling Technique

Random sampling was employed in collecting the data. One hundred students were selected from each of the three schools in the municipality to ensure that the data for the study was broadly based. With the high population of each of the selected schools, the researcher decided to use only the final year students have been given much tutorials on how to summarize since there were at the verge of writing their final WASSCE. Having narrowed the respondents to only final year students, the researcher then used a simple procedure to select the respondents: the researcher write 'in' and 'out' on pieces of paper and made sure that the papers with 'in' are exactly hundred (100). This implies that any student who picked 'in' was considered as a respondent. This selection procedure was applied in the selected schools.

DATA ANALYSIS

Difficulties in summary writing in Senior High School in Bolgatanga Municipality.

with regards to the question whether students regards summary writing a difficulty exercise, 69% of the respondents indicated that it was difficult. 31% of the respondents however, believed that summary writing was not difficult.

The majority of the respondent admitted that summary writing was the most challenging aspect of the English Language. The responses revealed that 177 respondents representing 59% identified summary writing as the most challenging. 60 respondents representing 20% said grammar was the most challenging. 54 respondents representing 18% said comprehension was the most challenging, while as few as 9 respondents representing 3% said composition was the most challenging.

In view of whether class size makes it difficult for the English language teachers to give students regular exercises on summary, 213 respondents representing 71% said yes. But 87 respondents representing 29% said no. furthermore; the majority of respondents totalling 243 which represents 81% agreed that an aspect of summary should be taught during every composition and comprehension lesson. 57 respondents representing 19% thought otherwise.

As regards to the approach adapted to each English Language Summary, 18 teachers representing 61% responded that comprehension was best used as an introduction to the teaching of summary. However, 7 teachers representing 30% said composition should best be used as an introduction to summary. Touching on the interest level of summary writing 9 teachers representing 39% indicated that students interest level was high in it. However, 14 teachers representing 61% responded that students had low interest in it. This implies that, in spite of the perceived difficulty students have with summary; they have the desire to learn.

Observation

The researcher was able to observe three lessons on summary writing: a lesson in each selected school. The classes observed were all final year ones. In school B, a teacher was assigned an aspect which he taught the whole group. That is to say one teacher handled

an aspect in a given class. With school A and C, the practice was different; a teacher handled all the aspect in a given class. For convenience therefore, it was only possible to observed a lesson in each school since invariable I would have observed the same teachers repeatedly.

Bolgatanga Girls' Senior High School

The lesson observed was a follow-up one because the teacher consistently referred the students to previous ones. It took the form of note-taking on summary writing. Towards the end of the lesson, the teacher then provided sentences which students were required to reduce to their shortest possible forms. The objective was for students to be able to identify extraneous material in a given sentence. Class participation was very low. Students felt reluctant to take down the notes. Their disposition portrayed a complete lack of enthusiasm in the on-going exercise. The majority of them carried pamphlets which probably explain their apathy. The students were given a trial passage on summary to answer.

Bolgatanga Senior High School

Coincidentally, the lesson in the above school was on the application of the macro rules of summarizing. The teacher tried to demonstrate the skill of reducing sentences, working at a few examples. After he had meticulously taken students through his examples, he gave them a task to work at two other sentences individually. The teacher's explanations were also hinged on a previous lesson. The teacher did not look at the attempts made by the students but followed it with a short passage as homework on summary writing. I wondered what sense students would have made of the assignment, taken cognizance of the teachers inability to inspect the attempts made by the students in class in order to determine their problem areas.

Zamse Secondary Technical School

In this school, the teacher had a very manageable class size. The class was given a previous comprehension passage to study and a set of questions followed. The demands were four in all: identify the topic sentence, the title and two main ideas expressed in the passage. In order to help students understand the demands of summary better, the teacher tried to demonstrate the relationship between reading comprehension and summary writing. Like many others, he considered summary as merely a comprehension skill.

It is clear from the lessons observed that most teachers in the Senior High Schools treat summary writing lessons as they do in the regular comprehension lessons. The researcher finds this approach rather worrying. Indeed, it must be stated that this approach does not seem to be helpful as students continue to obtain poor results in both internal and external examination. From the study he stated authoritatively that comprehension is not the surest approach to teaching summary, but rather composition.

The researcher also observed that teachers' strategies in teaching English summary writing were not self-explanatory by students. Teachers, more often than not, doled out copious notes on principles of summary writing to students. This was normally followed

by attempts by students at summarising selected sentences and eventually at summarizing whole passages.

Summary Writing in the Textbooks

Of the 30 units in Book 1 of the official text, 3 have sections on summary. In addition, there is a section on developing an essay which is relevant to reinforcing the process of summary writing. Book 2 has 27 units in all, 6 of which have sections on summary writing. There are 17 units in book 3; of the units have section on summary writing. Of the 3 sections that treat summary writing in Book 1, two give explanations of the processes involved in summary writing; all three give practice exercises. In Book 2, four of the units give instruction on the processes of summary writing as well as exercises. The remaining two are only questions for practice. Book 3 has five of the sections as well as exercise on summary writing. The last part of the 6 sections gives practice in summary writing. It is arguable that there is not enough practice in summary writing considering the magnitude of the problem of students as they enter Senior High School with very little or no idea of writing summary. The syllabus for the JHS makes provision for practice in summary writing from year two. In spite of this summary still remains a major problem for the students. In fact, any examiner at the SHS level will testify that candidates do perform abysmally in the summary writing section than in any other section of the English language test. This is confirmed by Sackeyfio (1999). Consequently, it cannot be said that the textbooks give adequate practice to summary.

Summary of Major Findings

All the works reviewed during the study established that summary writing was a challenge to the Senior High School student. The cause of students' poor performance in summary writing are manifold and include the design of the English textbook, the teachers' approaches to the teaching of summary writing, and students' general perception towards summary writing. It has been established that from the syllabus designer to the teacher, English summary writing is not given equal attention in school as is given to the other aspects of the English language. Because summary writing is so treated in the syllabus and textbooks, teachers' current approach to teaching the skills involved in summary has not been very useful to the Senior High School student. The effect has been that students develop negative mind set towards English summary writing and subsequently perform poorly in the final examination.

Implications for Syllabus Designers

The syllabus for both JHS and SHS include general and specific objectives for the lessons there is also an expanded scheme of the topics to guide teachers on what they are expected to cover. It would help teachers if the philosophical understandings of the areas taught were included in the scheme. This would enable teachers to appreciate the wisdom behind the selection of certain aspects of the subject, thereby motivating them to work at every aspect with equal enthusiasm.

Implication for teachers

It is important for teacher to be more proactive in helping find solutions to students' problems. There is the need for teachers to learn to motivate students to eschew certain negative perceptions they might have for certain subjects. This means that the teachers themselves must be positive in their outlook towards what they teach. It is not enough for teachers to teach a subject just because it is on the timetable. There is the need to educate teacher trainees on the philosophy surrounding the teaching of certain, if not all subjects areas. If they learn the rationale behind some of the things they teach, teachers will then appreciate their importance and approach the teaching with alacrity. They will also be in a position to provide help for their students who are developing apathy towards lessons. It is expedient for teachers to be motivated to pursue researches in the classroom (action research). This will help them understand the problems encountered in the teaching/learning process.

Implications for Textbook Writers

There should be a direct link between syllabus designers and textbook writers. The syllabus for the JHS, for example, provides for the teaching of summary writing, beginning from year two. Under the reading programme, pupils are to be guided to be able to identify and write main points in given texts and also summarize given texts.

There is very little practice in summary writing at this stage resulting in the Senior High School students' poor knowledge of summary writing. This means that the teaching of summary writing at the Senior High School level needs to be comprehensive. Unfortunately, the treatment of summary writing in the textbooks is not adequate either. For instance, the treatment does not take care of errors such as overgeneralisation and limited response. It does not address directly such other recurring errors as mistaking illustrations for main points, the inclusion of extraneous material in the summary, and the imposition of personal opinion of the students on the subject matter discussed in the passage. But then, it is still important to directly instruct students to understand that a summary must state the opinion or position of the original writer, but that of the summary writer should be excluded. Such direct instructions should help student to focus.

Text and questions should be design such that they will address specific problems of students. Exercises should focus on giving complete sentences in summary writing. For example, students must be helped by giving them a variety of exercise to see the difference between writing a summary and making notes, where it is appropriate, to write short phrases.

Furthermore, it is imperative that textbook writers help teachers who may be weak at summary writing to deliver helpful guidance to their students. They can do this by providing teachers with handbooks.

In addition, even though summary writing has a much wider application than an extermination requirement, there must be exercises in the textbooks that are tailored along the lines of the examination.

CONCLUSION

The researcher opted to investigate the area of summary writing for two reasons. First and foremost, the researcher's personal experiences as a teacher at the senior high school level of the difficulties both teachers and students have with summary writing. Also, the abysmal performance of students in summary writing has attracted unfavourable reportage by chief examiners over the years.

The study reveals that most students find summary writing an uphill task and that if they had a choice they would opt to do without it. But then, the literature on summary writing underscores its importance not only in academic work but also in many other endeavours of life. As indicated in the review of the literature, summary writing could lead to the development of positive mind-set towards the study of summary writing in particular, and ease of working with texts in general.

The researcher also suggested that, the syllabuses be arranged in a manner that makes any one aspect very useful for the understanding of another. To validate this suggestion, Sackeyfio (1995) states that, there is indeed an urgent, need to restructure the English language syllabus at both the teacher training college level and the teacher training Universities. To ensure that the institutions instil in their products the skill of teaching summary writing at junior high schools and senior high schools, prominence should be given English summary writing in textbooks. Above all, the concept of dovetailing should inform the patterning of English aspects taught at these levels for instance, writing narrative essays must be preceded by the treatment of narrative passages on comprehension the pupils or students could then be easily guided to reconstruct similar essays using narrative drawn from the passages. With the idea of composition still fresh on their minds, the approach to summary writing could then be introduced. The paragraph development knowledge and skills gained in essay writing could therefore be explored in synthesizing the one sentence type of English summary required of the Senior High School student. But above all, teachers should be adequately trained and resourced to have confidence in nearly all aspects of the subject, so that they may impart the knowledge with the zeal that will sustain students' interest.

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