Summary Judgements: Perspectives on Reading and Writing

Barbara Seidlhofer
University of Vienna

Summarization is an activity which relates discourse comprehension and production in a particularly striking way. It derives writing from reading in that the rendering of a text depends on its previous interpretation. This paper draws a distinction between two very different kinds of summary: **abbreviated versions** and **brief accounts.** An abbreviated version is primarily the product of a language exercise, operating on the level of the language system by changing structures. A brief account is primarily the product of a social activity, operating on the level of language use by interpreting the propositional meaning and the writer's intention and reformulating it for a different reader. An empirical study of English summaries written by Austrian university students indicates how different degrees of contextualization, or schematic priming, influenced the amount of processing the students performed on the original text: lack of priming (such as missing title) tended to lead them to produce brief accounts rather than (just) abbreviated versions.

INTRODUCTION

It is generally recognized, in principle, that theory and practice need to be interrelated in language teaching. Yet on occasions where one might expect such interrelationships to be worked out there seems always to be such a split between – theorists and practitioners, between 'thinkers' and 'doers'. At the TESOL Convention earlier this year, for example, the people doing research in second language acquisition did their usual 'theoretical bit', whereas most others were concerned with practical matters, and there was little integration among those two groups.

What I should like to do, then, is to make my own attempt at integration by taking a number of concepts grounded in theory and relating them to practices common in language teaching. More particularly, I should like to relate such notions as *interactivity in reading and writing, schematic knowledge,* and *simplification,* and look into the way these are interwoven with the activity of *summarization.* But rather than just connecting theory with more theory I shall also draw conclusions about how insights into the nature of reading and writing have clear consequences for language pedagogy.

I should thus like to use summarization as a way of illustrating which dimensions of reading and writing need to be focused upon in order to establish the integration of these two abilities and to enable students to use language in a purposeful way. I also

---

Barbara SEIDLHOFER is a lecturer in the English Department at Vienna University. She has taught English at the secondary and tertiary levels in Austria, and German in Britain. She holds an MA in Language and Literature from the University of London Institute of Education, which is also where she is currently doing research on written discourse under the supervision of H.G. Widdowson.

want to stress that this is in no way a definitive paper which produces nicely rounded research findings, but it is simply meant as a prompt to enquiry, an enquiry into how particular *classroom activities* are describable in reference to more *general principles.*

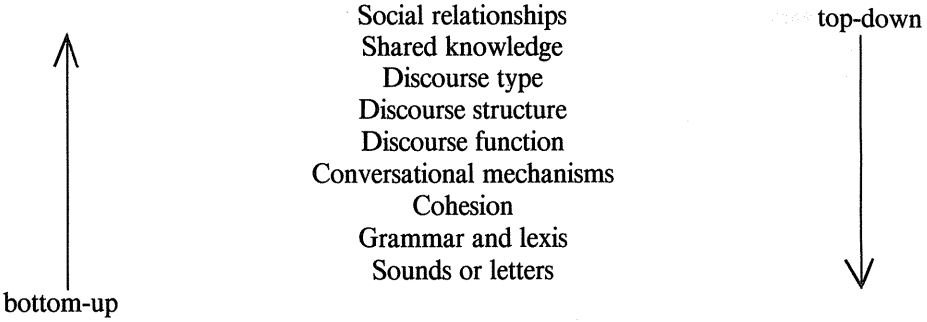
SCHEMATIC KNOWLEDGE

To set the scene for the points I want to make about summarization, I want first to survey what is now fairly familiar ground. Recent research on EFL/ESL reading (e.g. Carrell, Devine & Eskey 1988) and on writing (e.g. Connor & Kaplan 1987) has centred around two topics: schematic knowledge in discourse production and comprehension, and interactivity in the process of reading and writing itself. Let us start with the role of background knowledge in comprehension, formalized as schema theory in artificial intelligence and linguistics. Schemata are mental representations of typical situations. The role of schemata in comprehension is easy enough to demonstrate with reference to the following (now familiar) example:

> The procedure is actually quite simple. First you arrange things into different groups. Of course, one pile may be sufficient, depending on how much there is to do. If you have to go somewhere else due to lack of facilities that is the next step, otherwise you are pretty well set. It is important not to overdo things. In the short run this may not seem important, but complications can easily arise. A mistake can be expensive as well. At first the whole procedure will seem complicated. Soon, however, it will become just another facet of life. It is difficult to see any end to the necessity for this task in the immediate future, but then one never can tell. After the procedure is completed, one arranges the materials into different groups again. Then they can be put into their appropriate places. Eventually they can be used once more, and the whole cycle will then have to be repeated. However, that is part of life. (cited in Bransford & Johnson 1972)

It will be agreed that this is a perfectly well-formed *cohesive* passage with no unfamiliar words in it, and yet reading it is a frustrating experience: we can make very little *coherent* sense of it as long as we are not provided with a schematic frame in reference to which we can interpret it. Not only do we not know what it is about, we also are unable to relate it to any *formal* schemata, i.e. background knowledge about the formal, rhetorical organization and structures of different text types. The schematic frame, or title, for this passage is *Washing Clothes.* As soon as we know this everything falls into place.

What our experience with this passage illustrates is that however perfectly our decoding (or bottom-up) processing may function, it is not very useful unless it is simultaneously guided by concept-driven (or top-down) processing. Cook (1989) has a useful diagram of these bottom-up and top-down processes:



(Cook 1989:80)

Fig. 1.

So whenever we achieve a good match between our conceptual predictions made in top-down processing and information taken in through bottom-up processing we are satisfied that we have understood a text. To illustrate the simultaneity of top-down and bottom-up processing, we can refer to the following sequence:

> John was on his way to school last Friday –
>
> He was really worried about the maths lesson –
>
> Last week he had been unable to control the class –
>
> It was unfair of the maths teacher to leave him in charge –
>
> After all, it is not a normal part of the janitor's duties.
>
> (cited in Sanford and Garrod 1981:10)

The fact that this passage contains so many surprises for us shows just how strong the predictions are that we make, and how much confidence we place in the general *strategic* validity of our schemata on the one hand, and on the other, how rapidly we can readjust them *tactically* if our anticipation is not confirmed but denied during the process of reading.

There is no doubt, then, that reading is a process which requires the reader to be highly active in relating the words on the page to his or her own knowledge. But what is the writer's role in all this, who after all is the initiator of the process.

INTERACTIVITY

With the writer being able to rely on the active participation of the reader, "the act of encoding is best thought of", according to Widdowson (1979:174)

> not as the formulation of messages, in principle complete and self-contained, but as the devising of a set of directions. These directions indicate to the decoder where he must look in the conceptual world of his knowledge and

> experience for the encoder's meaning . . . In this view, reading is regarded not as reaction to a text but as *interaction* between reader and writer mediated through text.

One of the main difficulties, of course, is that the writer has to interact with a reader, or readers, who are absent and in certain cases also unknown. This requires a lot of imagination and skill : writers have to anticipate the likely reactions of the imagined readers and calculate how much information they need to provide to activate the appropriate schemata. Too much would mean being verbose (and therefore boring), too little would result in incomprehensibility. As Widdowson (1970 : 176f.) puts it,

> As I write, I make judgements about the reader's possible reactions, anticipate any difficulties that I think he might have in understanding and following my directions, conduct, in short, a covert dialogue with my supposed interlocutor . . . From the decoding point of view, the reader also assumes the dual role of addresser and addressee, and reconstitutes the dialogue. Rapport between writer and reader is established to the extent that the latter's possible reactions have been anticipated.

The effect of all this interacting and empathizing is that the distinction between reading and writing abilities is reduced, each ability being not separate but implicated in the other. They are two sides of the same coin.

PEDAGOGIC ACTIVITIES

So much for the familiar ground. But it is important to realize that once we subscribe to this view of writing and reading, its implications must be followed through in *all* activities that involve written communication. This means that various procedures commonly employed by language teachers and textbook writers which are usually thought of as quite separate, even conflicting, in approach can be seen as manifestations of the same underlying discourse processes which can therefore be understood, investigated and evaluated by reference to the same theoretical framework. What I should like to do now is illustrate what implications this interrelatedness has for the way we might think about a couple of pedagogic activities.

SUMMARIZATION AND SIMPLIFICATION

One such activity, and one which relates discourse production and comprehension in a particularly striking way, is *summarization.* It derives writing from reading in that the rendering of a text depends on its previous interpretation. It brings into relief the dual writer/reader role by explicitly requiring the enactment of both in order to perform the task. This integration of reading and writing brings into special focus all the conditions of interactivity holding for any written discourse: prediction and activation of schemata (both content and formal), awareness of addressee, purpose

of reading and writing, and practical matters such as time and space constraints. What the summarizer is supposed to do is to perform a mediating function between the 1st Person writer of the original text, him- or herself as 2nd Person recipient and 1st Person renderer of that text, and the prospective reader of the summary, who is 3rd Person become 2nd Person. The object of the exercise is to make the original text, in a shorter form, accessible to a specified reader.

In this respect, I believe, summarization is very similar to another pedagogic activity, namely *simplification.* Both activities involve the interpretation and transformation of an original text for the benefit of a third person. But how exactly is this done? Let us look at simplification first.

SIMPLIFIED VERSIONS AND SIMPLE ACCOUNTS

Widdowson (1978: ch.4) makes a distinction between two kinds of simplification, or rather two different outcomes: *simplified versions* and *simple accounts.* Here are his definitions.

> Simplified versions are passages which are derived from genuine instances of discourse by a process of lexical and syntactic substitution. In effect, what they do is to incorporate . . . glosses . . . directly into an original extract to produce a version which is judged to be within the linguistic competence of the learner. Essentially, then, it is a kind of translation from the usage available to the author of the extract to that which is available to the learner.

In contrast, a simple account is a

> reformulation of propositional and illocutionary development. . . . What distinguishes a simple account from a simplified version is that it represents not an alternative textualization of a given discourse but a different discourse altogether. It is the recasting of information abstracted from some source or other to suit a particular kind of reader.

Widdowson sums up the crucial difference between simplified version and simple account like this:

> . . . a simple account is a genuine instance of discourse, designed to meet a communicative purpose, directed at people playing their roles in a normal social context. A simplified version, on the other hand, is not genuine discourse, it is a contrivance for language teaching.

ABBREVIATED VERSIONS AND BRIEF ACCOUNTS

I embarked on this excursion into simplification with the assertion that the activity of summarization bears important resemblances to it, and I am now in a position to substantiate that claim in more concrete terms. It seems to me that in analogy to *simplified version* vs. *simple account* it makes sense to talk about two kinds of summary:

I shall call them *abbreviated version* and *brief account.* As I said before, just like simplifications, summarization is an act of interpretation, a rendering of someone else's discourse. And just like simplification, this can be done by concentrating either on linguistic elements (which will yield abbreviated versions) or by concentrating on a reformulation of propositional and illocutionary development (which will yield brief accounts). The crucial difference lies in the fact that in order to be able to produce a brief account, the renderer must have a clear sense of who he or she is producing the account for, how much shared knowledge he or she can assume, what the purpose of the interaction is, and in what situation the discourse is conducted. After all, these are normal conditions of discourse, and if they are not met there is no basis for interaction. In real life, we never ever sit down and just "write something", in a vacuum as it were. This, then, seems to be the essential difference between abbreviated versions and brief accounts: that brief accounts are evidence of genuine discourse having taken place, whereas abbreviated versions are pieces of language produced in isolation, for their own sake.

We can therefore identify a range of features which is common to both simplification and summarization, as in the following table:

SIMPLIFIED/ABBREVIATED VERSION	SIMPLE/BRIEF ACCOUNT
• operates on level of language system: changes vocabulary / structures	• operates on level of language use: interprets the propositional meaning and the intention of the writer and reformulates for a different reader
• main processing is linguistic = manipulation of structures	• main processing is conceptual = manipulation of ideas
• simplifier/summarizer = translator with linguistic responsibility	• simplifier/summarizer = explainer with communicative responsibility
• uses original as script: original has to be available	• uses original as prompt: original does not have to be available
• normally retains linear sequence of the original; can be done sentence by sentence	• does not necessarily retain linear sequence of the original; cannot be done sentence by sentence
• alternative textualization of a given discourse	• different discourse altogether
• primarily a language exercise, designed to accommodate linguistic competence	• primarily a social activity, designed to accommodate communicative competence.

The way I understand the labels *abbreviated vrsion* and *brief account* is not as rigid categories, with any summary having to fit into either one or the other, but I see them as helpful conceptualizations of two extremes, two end-points on a continuum with reference to which any given summary can be described.

One can say, then, that an abbreviated version reformulates text as a self-contained semantic object, whereas a brief account reformulates discourse as a pragmatic interaction between participants. To produce a brief account, therefore, one needs to take two relationships into account: that between the Writer and the Reader (the interpreting process) and that between the Reader, now cast in the role of Writer (2), and a third party, Reader (2), the recipient of the summary (the rendering process). We might represent these relationships in diagram form as follows:

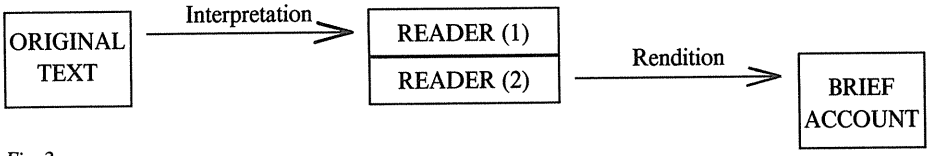


Fig. 2

This paper is concerned with the first of these relationships, with the summary interpretation rather than the summary rendition part of the general process.

EVIDENCE FROM DATA

I want now to illustrate the distinction between abbreviated versions and brief accounts in respect to the interpreting process with examples from a small-scale summarization study I recently conducted with third year Austrian university students of English.[1] As part of a larger experiement the details of which are not relevant here, a group of 43 students was split in roughly two halves, A and B. Group A was asked to write a 60 word summary of an article from *Time* Magazine which was about 1000 words long and entitled "The Dilemmas of Childlessness". Since I was not concerned here with the rendering process, no addressee or purpose of the summary was specified, and there were no time constraints on the completion of the task. Group B basically received the same text and the same task, but with one crucial difference: instead of working on the text as it appeared in the magazine, they were given a typed-out version of the article *without* title, subtitle, column, illustration, or any other indication of what kind of text they were dealing with. Only the paragraphs of the original were retained.

The point here was to remove the clues of context and writer intention which would normally activate the discourse (interpreting) process, and so present group B subjects with the bare textual residue.

[1]I am very grateful to the colleagues and students at Vienna university who cooperated in the empirical study.

I make no great claims for this piece of empirical research. My comparison as it stands now is very much in its first phase, based on holistic impression rather than detailed linguistic investigation. Also I am aware of the fact that I am talking about a fairly small sample, so my analysis is qualitative, not quantitative. Nevertheless, there are tendencies which are worth noting.

So what are the most striking differences between the summaries written in groups B and B? As I said before, in terms of tasks the main difference between groups A and B is the schematic priming they received: group A had the title and the subtitle, information such as that they were dealing with an article in *Time* Magazine written in 1988 plus all the implications (e.g. written primarily for an American readership, etc.).

Thinking back to the *Washing Clothes* passage, not having a title for it meant not being able to activate the appropriate schema to make sense of it. However, that passage was of course especially devised so as not to give its meaning away, for instance by lexical items such as *washing* or *clothes.* Quite the opposite is true of the *Childlessness* article: not only is *babies* the very first word, also the main issue is clearly stated in the first paragraph: "... not all Americans are sure they want to help fuel the baby mania." This is not vague or obscure at all, hence having a title is not vital for activating an appropriate schema. All the more surprising was it to find that having a title and subtitle did make a considerable difference. Although both groups had all the essential information as to what the article was about available in the body of the text, the title ("The Dilemmas of Childlessness") still played an important role: despite the fact that the students did not actually *need* it for the interpretation of the article, those who were given it depended on it and allowed it to constrain their summaries. This is congruent with what Brown and Yule (1983:247) call the "strong view" of schemata: "In the strong view, schemata are considered to be deterministic, to predispose the experiencer to interpret his experience in a fixed way."

This is precisely the effect schematic priming seems to have had on the way the students understood the article: it predisposed them to read the text in a certain way. What this means in the context of the present enquiry is that titles tend to make the reader submissive to writer intention and to take the schematic indicators not as clues but as directives. The first impression I got when reading the summaries was that those in group A (i.e. with title) were more uniform in that they were more like the original article and thus also less different from one another. More specifically, the effects of the differences in priming in terms of the processing the students performed on the text can be illustrated by the following examples:

Summaries written in:

GROUP A (with title)	GROUP B (without title)
(kept original title)	provided their own titles & came up with imaginative ones: *To Have Or Not To Have; The Baby Busters*
generally followed sequence of propositions of original	some reordering of propositions
list-like appearance; coordination predominates	stronger conceptual grouping; subordination predominates
little 'explication' by summarizer	considerable 'explication' by summarizer, e.g. *reasons range from . . . , the fact originates in . . . , the development is fostered by . . . , research shows . . .*
predominantly simple conjunctions: *and, but, although* (cohesion mostly on **external** plane) [cf. endnote]	more complex use of conjunction: *all in all, whereas, as a whole* (cohesion often on **internal** plane) [cf. endnote]
few "own" words (i.e. words that do not appear in original text)	many "own" words & phrases, including "accidents", e.g. *'bearable age'* for *'child-bearing age.'*

[Appendix A contains typical examples of actual students' summaries]

All in all, considerable reconceptualization, or deep processing, seems to have been done by the respondents in group B, whereas those in group A mostly limited themselves to the 'shallower' processes of deletion and enumeration. In fact, going back to my juxtaposition of *simplified/abbreviated version* and *simple/brief account,* I would say that by and large group A produced abbreviated versions and group B brief accounts.

Now, assuming that further enquiry confirms this tendency, we are faced with a somewhat paradoxical situation. For the subjects who were provided with the discourse clues produced a textual *version,* whereas those who were provided with the bare text derived from it a discourse *account.*

It would appear, then, that the crucial determinant of summary as brief account is the recognition of the second relationship, which involves identifying the recipient of the summary. The question is: who did the summarizers see themselves as summarizing *for*? No addressee was specified. One could argue, of course, that they were really summarizing for the lecturer who had set them the task. But my guess is that by having to do more processing due to the lack of a priming title and due to

the rather shapeless text on the page, the respondents in B got more involved in the subject matter and in the problems raised in the article and may therefore have ended up summarizing for themselves, according to their own interests, and therefore less concerned with just displaying comprehension abilities. In short, they rendered their interpretation with themselves as second person recipients in mind.

CONCLUSION

So what are the implications of all this for further work on summarization? In terms of theoretical enquiry, a better understanding is needed of how priming works. In order to achieve this, the data need to be analyzed in more detail. It may also be necessary to conduct further experiments and to use a method of analysis that is better suited to the investigation of the actual processes going on during summarization, such as protocols. In particular, it is necessary to look at ways in which the rendering process is affected by the specification of different recipients.

In a wider context, it seems to me that the distinctions I have been making with regard to simplification and summarization also apply for another procedure, that of *translation.* Of course, what distinguishes translation from the other two activities is that it is interlingual rather than intralingual, but otherwise the basic processes are the same. This line of thought may open up the potential of, and thus restore, translation as an effective pedagogical activity.

What about the pedagogical implications of this small study? First of all, it raises the question as to whether schematic priming is necessarily a good thing: since a title provides students with a kind of top-level summary of the text before they actually read it, the interpretation, or rather *an* interpretation, is anticipated, handed to them on a plate as it were. As the experiments show, this may stop them from actively engaging with the text. It seems therefore that for certain purposes, for instance to encourage intensive rather than extensive reading, not giving a title may be a useful option.

More generally, in view of the fact that summarization is an activity often required of students without any explicit learner training, the results suggest that learners can be very sensitive to differences in summarization tasks, and that it is therefore crucial to take into account such factors as schematic priming, specification of addressee and writing purpose when setting summary tasks and when formulating criteria for the judgement of summary quality.

Obviously summarization involves a complex interaction between different kinds of schematic knowledge: the writer's, the reader's, and that of the person for whom the summary is written. The experiment reported here was largely limited to the first of these three, the writer's, how this is signalled by a title, and how it interacts with the reader's schemata. Therefore the above considerations are of course merely a first step in a direction which to my mind is clearly worth exploring further.

ENDNOTE

The distinction between the *external* and *internal* planes of conjunctive relations derives from Halliday and Hasan (1976:239ff). They quote the following two examples:

(a) Next he inserted the key into the lock.

(b) Next, he was incapable of inserting the key into the lock.

Halliday and Hasan comment on this by saying that in (a), the conjunction *next* represents a relation between events in *external* reality, whereas in (b) the conjunctive relation is *internal* to the communication situation. What is of interest here is that the *internal* conjunctive relation, according to Halliday and Hasan, expresses "the speaker's own 'stamp' on the situation – his choice of speech role and rhetorical channel, his attitudes, his judgements and the like" (p.240) – an interpretation which supports the observation that more processing occurred in Group B.

REFERENCES

Bransford, J.D. and Johnson, M.K. (1972) Contextual prerequisities for understanding: some investigations of comprehension and recall. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behaviour* 11.

Brown, G. and Yule, G. (1983) *Discourse Analysis.* Cambridge University Press.

Carrell, P. and Eisterhold, J. (1988) Schema theory and ESL reading pedagogy. In Carrell, P., Devine, J. and Eskey, D. *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading.* Cambridge University Press.

Connor, U. and Kaplan, R. (Eds.) (1987) *Writing Across Languages: Analysis of L2 Text.* Addison Wesley.

Cook, F. (1989) *Discourse. (Language Teaching. A Scheme for Teacher Education).* Oxford University Press.

Halliday, M.A.K. and Hasan, R. (1976) *Cohesion in English.* Longman.

Sansford, A.J. and Garrod, S.C. (1981) *Understanding Written Language.* Wiley.

Widdowson, H.G. (1978) *Teaching Language as Communication.* Oxford University Press.

Widdowson, H.G. (1979) *Explorations in Applied Linguistics.* Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX A

EXAMPLES OF STUDENT'S SUMMARIES

Group A (with title, etc.)

(1) Those Americans who choose not to have children usually come from urban areas, are well-educated and marry late. Some of them make the choice deliberately and some postpone the decision until nature decides for them. The childless often satisfy their nurturing instincts with nieces and nephews. Some childless women think they have violated a biological law but most of them enjoy their freedom.

[all phrases taken over literally from the original text]

(2) According to a study made in the U.S.A. many well-educated women decide not to have children. They fall into two categories, the deliberate types and the postponers. While the deliberate ones never regret not having had a child, the postponers very often ask themselves whether they have violated a biological law.

[note how similar the two Group A summaries are]

Group B (no title, no indication as to provenance of text, etc.)

(1) **The Baby-Busters**
It has to be noticed that during the last 35 years the average birthrate among the college-educated, urban businesswomen has been decreasing considerably for reasons of changed moral values, striving for success in their careers as well as hard working conditions. These women either decide against children at a very early stage or they postpone the decision until it is too late. However, regrets about this decision are not unusual at a certain age.

(2) **Decreasing Birthrate**
The birthrate among well-educated women has decreased enormously. This trend is due to the current economic situation, to men's reluctance to share child-raising and to women's attempt to settle down in a business world dominated by men. However, there seems to be some backlash to this trend in the air.

[note how different the Group B summaries are from each other and from the examples from Group A]