Summary Writing as a Tool for Improving the Comprehension of Expository Texts: An Intervention Study in a Primary School

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1 Theoretical Background

According to the most influential model of text comprehension (W. Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983), reading is characterized by different levels of comprehension, which range from superficial to deep. Initially, propositions are elaborated upon, and the relationships between the propositions, known as the microstructure, and between groups of propositions, known as the macrostructure, create a textbase. These processes require active meaning construction. For example, a reader must infer causal, spatial, and temporal relationships when the connections are not explicitly expressed, must relate a pronoun to its referent at the microstructural level, and must relate a group of propositions to the appropriate superordinate topic at the macrostructural level. Readers, who have their own goals, reduce and reorganize the microstructure into the macrostructure using the macrorules of deletion, generalization, and construction. In fact, readers summarize what they are reading, and this activity is closely related to text comprehension. As W. Kintsch (1998) emphasized, “the formation of a macrostructure is an integral part of normal text comprehension. It does not occur merely in response to special task demands, such as instructions to summarize the text, but is an automatic component of the process of comprehension that cannot be separated from it” (p. 174).

The relationship between summarization and text comprehension is particularly relevant from an instructional perspective. The ability to summarize a text adequately in either oral or written form is a basic tool to assess student comprehension and a learning strategy. Written summaries require a higher-level processing of the text (Britt & Sommer, 2004). By manipulating the content, summarizers reconstruct the meaning, which helps students better understand what they have read, particularly with regard to constructing and retaining the central ideas of the texts (Armbruster, Anderson, & Ostertag,

As Bretzing and Kulhavy (1979) noted, summarizing facilitates semantic processing because the activity requires the integration of text information and prior knowledge. Thus, summarizing facilitates a deep comprehension of the text at the textbase and, with respect to the situation model, a mental representation of the material characterized by the integration of text information and personal knowledge (Franzke, Kintsch, Caccamise, Johnson, & Dooley, 2005; W. Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978; Wade-Stein & Kintsch, 2004). Starting from the upper grades of primary school, students should be taught to use written summaries to analyze and understand expository written texts when studying. In the Italian school system, the processing of expository texts starts during 3rd grade, when children must read, analyze, and study written texts on science, history, and geography. This processing becomes more important in grade 4, when there is an increase in the material to be studied. The task becomes more frequent during the ensuing years, from middle school to university.

Although summarizing is a basic component of text comprehension, students often find it difficult, particularly when they are asked to summarize in written form. Following the analysis of summarization processes based on W. Kintsch and van Dijk’s (1978) model of text comprehension, several studies have considered the difficulties of writing summaries (A.L. Brown & Day, 1983; A.L. Brown, Day, & Jones, 1983; Friend, 2001). Although the construction of the macrostructure is an automatic component within the process of comprehension, many students are unable to manage the strategies of deletion, generalization, and construction. It is necessary to acquire the ability to adequately use these macrorules, which is often accomplished through direct instruction (Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, & Baker, 2001).

The difficulty that children experience with writing adequate summaries has primarily three reasons, which pertain to the reading and writing activities involved in summarization and will be analyzed in the following paragraphs: 1) the complexity of expository texts, which are the typical genre of materials that are to be studied and summarized, 2) the strategies and cognitive processes to be used during summarization, and 3) the specificity of summaries as a writing genre. This chapter focuses on using summaries as a learning strategy. Specifically, we are interested in analyzing the effects of writing a summary on expository text comprehension. After considering the complexity of summarizing, we will present the results of our study, which aimed to analyze the effects of summary instruction on the expository text comprehension of fourth graders.

1.1 The Complexity of Expository Texts
Expository texts are more difficult to process than other genres (Hidi & Hildyard, 1983; McCutchen & Perfetti, 1982) because they typically contain a sub-