Effect of Précis Writing Instruction on the Creation of Cohesive Text by Iranian High School EFL Learners

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Abstract

Being expert in establishing cohesion and coherence in writing is not an easy task. The EFL learners are to pass through very long, uneven paths such as précis exercise to achieve this skill. The present study was launched to explore the effect of précis writing on the creation of a compact text. To this end, a true-experimental method of research with the pretest-posttest control design was employed. Via double-stage sampling, 40 female students were selected at Fatemeh-al-Zahra High School in Kabutarahang, Hamedan, Iran. The control group was taught some grammatical structures such as active and passive voices, reduced adjective clauses, and different tenses in English during twelve sessions; while the experimental group received a lesson plan consisting of twelve sessions of précis writing. To analyze the data collected via pretest and posttest, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was run. The findings of the study indicated that the participants in the experimental group performed better in producing cohesive and qualified texts than those in the control group. The conclusion drawn was that teaching précis, as a basic skill, can improve the writing ability and provide the students with more opportunities to utilize the cohesive devices and consequently produce more cohesive pieces of text.

Keywords: précis writing, cohesive text, Iranian EFL learners

Introduction

Précis, cohesion, and coherence as aspects of a text are interrelated. A précis is a shortened version of someone else's writing or thoughts (Bleck, 2001). Olson (2006) has stated that the goals of précis are to compress, distill, and clarify a lengthy passage, article, or book, while important concepts, key words, and important data should be kept. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976) "cohesion is a semantic one, referring to relations of meaning existing within the text, and it occurs where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. Cohesion is expressed partly through grammar and partly vocabulary" (pp. 4-5). Coherence refers to the understanding that the reader derives from the text, which may be more or less coherent depending on a number of factors such as prior knowledge and reading skill (McNamara, Kintsch, Songer, & Kintsch, 1996; O'Reilly & McNamara, 2007).

According to Nunan (1999), "producing a coherent… piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing to do in language in terms of skills" (p.271). Writing is a difficult skill because of its inherently complex characteristics which according to Wall (1981) "range from mechanical control to creativity, with good grammar, knowledge of subject matter, awareness of stylistic conventions and various mysterious factors in between" (p.53).

As Pilus (1993) mentioned, writing requires conscious work on the part of the writer who, besides having to contain his own thought, has to be competent in all the written aspects of a language, from mechanics to discourse. According to Richards and Renandya (2002) the difficulty of writing skill is due to both generating and organizing ideas and translating these ideas into a readable text.

Halliday and Hasan (1976, 1985) believed that cohesion and coherence, as the two important textual factors, had long been considered as important features of good writing. The concept of texture is made up of the sentential and textual levels and shows the feature of being a text. Any text is made up of both a unit of syntax and a unit of semantics. Syntactic component deals with types of phrasing, types of clause constructions, and types of passive structures, clausal combinations, and word order within a sentence; semantic component involves the senses and mappings from word meanings to sentential meanings (Halliday & Hasan, 1976).

According to Grabe and Kaplan (1997) at textual level, the relation between sentences plays a crucial role in the achievement of coherence. Cohesion can be established via using various means including reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction, and lexical relationships. Based on the classification of the sub-categories by Halliday and Hasan (1976), reference can be grouped into four categories: pronominal, demonstrative, definite article "the", and comparative. Substitution has been classified into four sub-categories, too: *one/some/ones* (as substitutes of noun phrases), *do so/it/that* (as substitutes of predicate), *here/there/then* (as substitutes of adverbials), and finally *so/not* (as substitutes of clauses). Ellipsis has been divided into three sub-categories: *noun phrases*, *predication*, and a *clause*. The fourth is conjunction, which can be subcategorized into five: *additive, adversative, causative, temporal* and *continuative*.

Alexander (1962) proposed that précis should be written in such a way that it reads as a *continuous paragraph*. To achieve this, one should use link-words like *but*, *and, however, also,* etc. to connect points. When one has become proficient at this, he or she should try to connect his or her points by writing complex sentences, (i.e. beginning a sentence with words like *since, though, even if, when, after, before etc*.).

Uso-Jane and Martinez-Flor (2006) have dealt with writing within environmentalist, innatist, and interactionist approaches.

Within environmentalist approach writing was neglected, because environmentalist ideas were rooted in structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology which described language as a mechanical process based on stimulus-response-reinforcement chains. Based on this theory, writing was considered as secondary to speech since it was regarded as just its orthographic representation.

Within an innatist approach children are innately predisposed to learn language (Chomsky, 1957). Emig's (1971) work responded to the shift in writing orientation away from product toward process. She found that the stages of writing are recursive and creative. From her research some cognitive models of writing emerged. For example, Flower and Hayes (1981) set forth a cognitive model of recursive writing consisting of three major elements: (1) *the planning stage* which includes the processes of generating ideas, organizing

ideas, and setting the goals for writing; (2) *the translating stage*, in which writers write down their thoughts; and (3) *the reviewing stage*, in which writers evaluate and revise the text. Kerns (2000) points out "writing was no longer seen simply as a way of recording thoughts, feelings, and ideas after the fact, but also as a key means of generating and exploring new thoughts and ideas" (p.233). Hence, learners are taught to become active writers to generate thoughts and ideas. The main role of teacher in innatist approach is to foster and encourage learner's creativity, guide them in the process of drafting, revising, and editing their writings (Silva, 1990; Kerns, 2000; Silva & Matsuda, 2002).

Under the influence of interactionist approach and the development of discourse analysis, attention shifted toward the sociocultural context of the writing act. In linguistics, discourse analysis can be associated with formal linguistics (text linguistics) or systematic linguistics (genre analysis). Within text linguistics Winter (1977) and Hoey (1983) distinguished three main patterns of textual organization: (1) *the problem-solution pattern*, in which a problem is presented in a given situation followed by the response to the problem and the evaluation of the response as a solution to the problem; (2) *hypothetical-real pattern*, which, first, is characterized by the presentation of a statement which is to supported or   rejected, and then the affirmation or denial of that statement; (3) *general- particular pattern*, in which a generalization is presented followed by an exemplification of that generalization. Within systematic linguistics, Halliday (1978) developed a systematic way of describing language in terms of its functions within social contexts.

According to Swales (1990) genre is:

> …a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parents' discourse community, and thereby constitute the rational for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style. One communicative purpose is both a privileged criterion and which operates to keep the scope of a genre as here conceived narrowly focused on comparable rhetorical action (p. 347).

Swale's (1990) definition of genre, which was closely tied to Halliday's (1978) functional approach to language, highlighted the fact that the most important feature of genre is the communicative purpose of a text and it

influences the textual choices of the writer. Genres are not patterns of the words but rather socially accepted ways of using a language for communicative purposes.

The crucial role of context in which language happens is important to teach to the writers. From the genre approach, three main phases are recommended to be followed: (1) *modeling*, in which the teachers provide an explicit explanation of genre to be deal with.; (2*) negotiating*, in which the teacher guides the class composition by means of questions, and (3) *construction*, in which the students construct the genre by working through several drafts in consultation with the teacher (Hyland, 2002).

From cross-cultural theory perspective, writing is a cultural phenomenon. Each language has rhetorical conventions unique to it. The linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the first language interfere with writing in the second language. So writing is a dynamic, creative, social, and contextualized process of communicating through text (Conner, 1996).

Writing well as an ability is not a naturally acquired skill. It is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Research on English composition can be seen in the light of two general trends: product-oriented and process-oriented approaches. The former, according to Nunan (1999) "…is the one which focuses on the final product, the coherent, error-free text"(p.272). Nunan (1999, p. 272) defines the latter as "… the one which focuses on the steps involved in drafting and redrafting a piece of work". In this approach, written feedback is given to both content and form during all phases of writing (i.e., from the initial stage during which ideas are generated to the final stage where the entire discourse is revised).

This study, like many others, is a confirmatory one. Both theoretically and empirically, it is in line with the previous literature. Yet, the studies related to the theme of the article do not abound. Some being conducted in Iran and some other countries are referred to below.

Behnam and Ali Akbari (2009) tried to explore the role of formal schemata in the development of EFL learners' précis writing. Formal schemata (Sharp, 2002) are part of the macrostructure of a text and contain the logical

organization of the text which the writer has used to represent the intended meaning. The findings of their study indicated that the experimental group learners performed better in their précis than the control group.

Crossley and McNamara (2009) investigated the roles of coherence in evaluations of essay quality. Their study investigated expert ratings of individual text features. The results suggested that coherence was an important attribute of overall essay quality.

Bae (2000) investigated the nature of cohesion, coherence, content, and grammar emergent in children's essays, with a greater emphasis given to the understanding of cohesion and coherence. The measurement of these constructs was operationalized into a picture-based narrative writing task for scoring criteria for quantification. Main findings were as follow: (a) referential and lexical cohesion correlated highly with the overall writing quality defined as the sum of the ratings of coherence, content, and grammar; (b) ellipses and substitution showed a weak correlation with the overall writing quality; (c) lexical and referential cohesion were significant predictors of coherence while other types of cohesion were not; (d) dominant reference types were pronominal forms and proper nouns, and prominent types of conjunctive relation were temporal and additive; and (e) the most common error in cohesion was inaccurate reference.

Olateju (2006) examined the extent to which ESL learners had been able to achieve cohesion in their written texts by examining the cohesive devices used by the students during their continuous writing sessions at school. The data used were drawn from seventy final year

students of Ooni Girls High School in Osun State Nigeria. The elicitation technique was an essay writing exercise in which the students were given two essay questions which would enable them to show their knowledge of cohesive devices such as pronouns, connectors, conjunctions, repetition, and synonyms in English. The results of data analysis showed that the students lacked competence in their use of cohesive devices although they had been exposed to intensive teaching of English for six years in the secondary school.

Azzouz (2009) conducted a study to see whether students are familiar with the use of grammatical cohesive devices in writing essays. It aimed at finding the importance of using cohesive devices to create cohesive discourse. It hypothesized that the use of grammatical cohesive devices would strength

students' writing. The results showed that the use of grammatical cohesive devices by second- year Students of English at the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Mentouri, Constantine, was quite enough. However, some inappropriate uses of grammatical cohesive devices were easily noticed.

Ghasemi (2013) reviewed some studies focusing on the use of cohesive devices (CDs) and the relationship between the numbers of CDs and writing quality. This study had aimed at investigating CDs used in different genres composed by learners from around the globe and the relationship between the use of CDs and quality of their essays. His analysis of the collected data from different EFL/ESL researchers indicated that the learners were able to use various CDs in their writings. Additionally, his study highlighted some of the cohesive problems in writing and the possible pedagogical implications for teachers. The results of this research have shown general pattern of CDs in EFL/ESL learners' academic and nonacademic writing.

Although the literature concerning the relationship between précis writing and cohesive texts is not rich enough, it provides the researchers with valuable insights and motivation to do attempt to contribute to the field. Hence, the following research question was raised:

Does précis writing have positive effect on the high school students' creation of cohesive texts?

Method

Participants

The initial population of the study was 140 female students in Fatemeh-al-Zahra High School in Kabutarahang, Hamadan, Iran. Forty of them were selected via double–stage sampling technique. That is, in the first stage, a Business Result Test (Oxford University Press, 2009) was administrated to the population and eighty students whose scores ranged from 27 to 40 were selected. In the second stage, via systematic random sampling 40 of them were selected as sample and were randomly assigned to an experimental and a control group, 20 participants in each. All the participants were studying at pre-university level and their age ranged from 18-20 years old.

Instruments and Materials

Three instruments were used in the study. The first one was a placement test, Business Result test (Oxford University Press, 2009) used to almost homogenize the participants. The test included 60 multiple-choice items covering grammar and vocabulary. The second one was a pretest which was a text extracted from *"A first Book in Comprehension, Précis, and Composition"* by Alexander (1965) and before the treatment it was administered to the participants in the groups. The third one was a posttest that was another text from the mentioned book and it was administered to all participants after the treatment. As to the pretest and posttest the participants were asked to make a précis as short as 85 words out of the texts.

The materials used in this study for qualified précis writing were *"A first Book in Comprehension, Précis, and Composition"* by Alexander (1965), "*60 Steps to Précis Writing*" by Alexander (1962), and Halliday and Hasan's (1976) five major categories (i.e., *reference, conjunction*, *substitution, ellipsis,* and *lexical cohesion*

Procedures

The study was conducted in four phases. In the first phase, the pretest was administered to the groups. Then, cohesive devices were taught to the groups based on Halliday and Hasan's (1976) five major categories (i.e., *reference, conjunction*, *substitution, ellipsis,* and *lexical cohesion*) in two sessions, each taking 60 minutes. In the third phase, taking advantage of the Alexander's books mentioned above, some techniques of précis writing were taught to the experimental group during twelve 60-minute sessions. At the end of each session, the participants were assigned a text to make a précis out of it at home based on what they had been taught and deliver their précis to the researcher later for any probable feedback. The control group, however, did not receive the techniques of précis writing; the group received just the same assignments (texts) as the experimental group did and its participants were asked to write précis out of the given texts based on their own taste. Finally, the posttest was administered to the two groups.

Design

In this study, a true- experimental method of research with pretest-posttest control design was used. There were one independent variable, précis writing instruction, and one dependent variable, creation of cohesive text.

Results

Since in this study there was pretest or covariate which might have affected the groups' scores on the posttest, the researcher decided to run the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to adjust or remove the effect. First its assumptions were checked as follows (Table 1).

Table 1

The Normality of Experimental Group's Scores Via Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		pretest	posttest
N		20	20
Normal Parameters(a, b)	Mean	9.0250	12.3375
	Std. Deviation	2.46542	1.79780
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.122	.164
	Positive	.122	.164
	Negative	-.076	-.123
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.545	.733
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.927	.655

a Test distribution is Normal.
b Calculated from data.
c group = experimental

The results of running One-Sample Kolmogrov-Smirnov Test in Table 1 show that the experimental group's scores on both pretest and posttest were distributed normally ($p > 0.05$). The results of the KS test for the control group are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
The Normality of Control Group's Scores Via Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

		pretest	posttest
N		20	20
Normal Parameters(a, b)	Mean	8.0125	6.2000
	Std. Deviation	1.94915	1.67921
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.103	.122
	Positive	.103	.122
	Negative	-.070	-.087
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		.459	.544
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.984	.929

a Test distribution is Normal.
b Calculated from data.
c group = control group

As Table 2 indicates the control group's scores on the pretest and posttest had also normal distribution ($p > 0.05$). Figure 1 illustrates the point clearly.
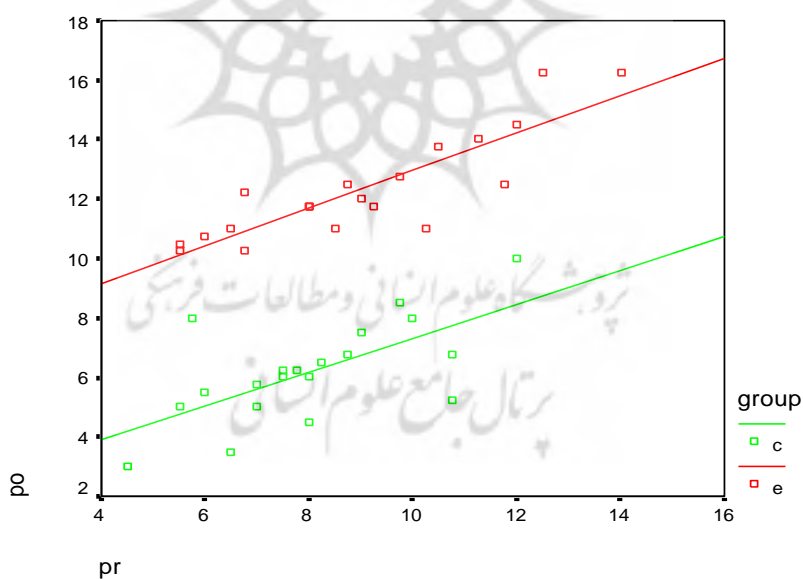

Figure 1: The linear relationship between the scores of pretest and posttest for all groups

Figure 1 shows a positive linear relationship between the groups' scores on the pretest and posttest.

Table 3 indicates the results of the Homogeneity of the Slope of Regression Lines.

Table 3
The Homogeneity of the Slope of Regression Lines

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	446.025(a)	3	148.675	117.249	.000
Intercept	40.600	1	40.600	32.019	.000
G	14.505	1	14.505	11.439	.002
PR	63.791	1	63.791	50.308	.000
G * PR	.201	1	.201	.158	.693
Error	45.649	36	1.268		
Total	3928.063	40			
Corrected Total	491.673	39			

Table 3 indicates that the slope of the regression lines for both groups was homogeneous, $F_{(1,36)} = 0.158$, P= 0.693, p > 0.05. Table 4 provides the results of the levene's testr

Table 4
Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances (a)

F	df1	df2	Sig.
1.269	1	38	.267

Table 4 shows that the variances of the groups were equal [$F_{(1,38)} = 1.296$, $P = 0.267$, P > 0.05]. The descriptive statistics of the groups are provided in Table 5.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics of the Groups

group		Pretest	posttest
e	N	20	20
	Mean	9.0250	12.3375
	Std. Deviation	2.46542	1.79780
	Minimum	5.50	10.25

	Maximum	14.00	16.25
c	N	20	20
	Mean	8.0125	6.2000
	Std. Deviation	1.94915	1.67921
	Minimum	4.50	3.00
	Maximum	12.00	10.00
Total	N	40	40
	Mean	8.5188	9.2687
	Std. Deviation	2.25277	3.55064
	Minimum	4.50	3.00
	Maximum	14.00	16.25

Table 5 clearly illustrates various statistical parameters (number, mean score, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum scores) of the group separately.

Since the requirements (normality of data, linear relationship between the scores of pretest and posttest, homogeneity of regression lines, and equality of variances of groups) were met, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was run and its results are shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Tests of Between-Subjects Effects Showing the Main Effect of the Treatment

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	445.824(a)	2	222.912	179.886	.000	.907
Intercept	40.800	1	40.800	32.925	.000	.471
PR	69.135	1	69.135	55.791	.000	.601
G	289.233	1	289.233	233.406	.000	.863
Error	45.850	37	1.239			
Total	3928.063	40				
Corrected Total	491.673	9				

The results of ANCOVA in Table 6 show that the main effect of the treatment or précis practice on the dependent variable (cohesive writing) was significant, $F_{(1,37)} = 233.406$, $P = 0.000$ or 0.001, $P < 0.05$, Eta 0.863. For the current study, as it is seen in Table 6, the effect size of 0.863 is very large. Expressed as percentage (multiplying eta squared value by 100), 86.3 percent

of the change on the dependent variable has been due to the effect of the independent variable. The groups' Estimated Marginal Means are presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Groups' Estimated Marginal Means

group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
e	12.030[a]	.252	11.519	12.541
c	6.507[a]	.252	5.996	7.018

a. Covariates appearing in the model are evaluated at the following values: pr = 8.5188.

As it is evident in Table 7, the estimated marginal or adjusted mean score (12.030) of the experimental group is higher than that (6.507) of the control group, a difference which is significant ($p < 0.05$) based on Table 6 . Figure 2 below is also a support to the information in Table 7.
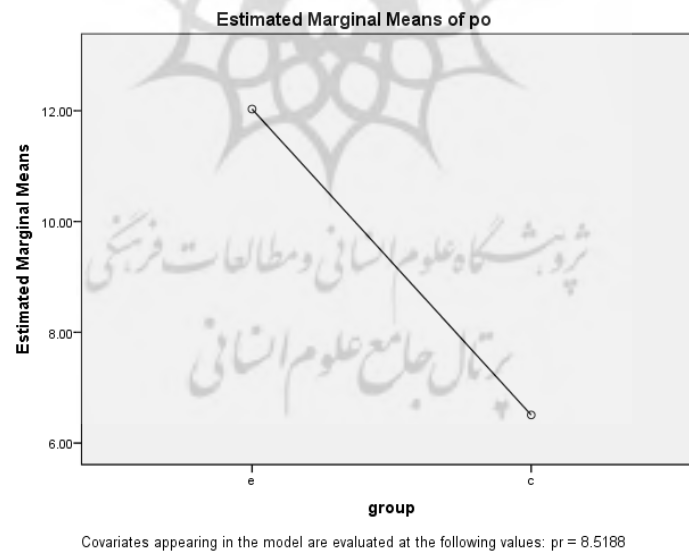

Figure 2. Estimated marginal means of the groups on the posttest

Figure 2 crystallizes the difference the between the groups' mean scores, that of the experimental group is very higher than that of the control group.

Discussion

The results revealed that précis practice done by the participants of the experimental group had significant effect on their creation of cohesive text, $F_{(1,37)} = 233.406$, $P = 0.000$ or 0.001, $P < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.863$. One explanation, perhaps, for this finding is the participants' acquaintance with the précis writing strategies, something which they lacked before receiving the treatment.

Regarding the question whether précis writing instruction positively affects Iranian high school EFL learners' creation of cohesive text, the findings revealed that teaching précis strategies improved the learners' writing skill, for the experimental group's mean score (9.0250) on the pretest raised to 12.375 on the posttest and when adjusted it was 12.030 while the control group's mean score (8.0125) on the pretest decreased to 6.2000 on the posttest and its adjusted amount was 6.507.

The result of this study is similar to some of previous studies. Azzouz (2009) conducted a study to gain more insights about the role of cohesive ties in cohesive writing and she found that using appropriate devices would result in cohesive discourse. Similarly, Rohmah (2010) conducted a research on cohesion and coherence of thesis abstracts written by students of English Letters and Language Department of UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang in Nigeria. He found that the abstracts were not coherent because the students only 'put' and 'stuck' pieces of information together in their abstracts irregularly without thinking whether their ideas were coherently linked to each other or not. The reason was either wrong usage of cohesive devices or the lack of some of them such as substitution, antonym. In the same vein, Behnam and Ali Akbari (2009) investigated the role of formal schemata in the development of précis writing in an EFL context. They believe that some students' apparent reading and writing problems may be the problems of insufficient background knowledge of the kind. In their study, Nandhini and Balasundaram (2013) also used supervised machine learning technique for summary extraction of science and social subjects in the educational text. The extrinsic evaluation result showed the significant effect of assistive summary on improving readability for the target audience. Moreover, they found that the participants who received the treatment could write a brief and original summary of the important ideas given in a long selection. Xin-hong,(2007) has stated that English cohesion theory proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976) makes great contributions to the

understanding of the coherence and cohesion of the English texts which should be applicable in the teaching English writing so as to improve the cohesion in the students' compositions. His study described a practice of this order among non-major graduate students. The conclusion was that teaching activities of this kind can indeed improve the cohesion in the students' compositions.

This study, like many others, suffers its own limitations. The participants who took part in the study were only female. One does not know what would be the result if in the groups there were both male and female students. Another limitation of the study is its rather poor related literature which may be attributed to two reasons. That is, either research is rare in the area of précis writing or the researcher could not find more related studies.

A fair inference from the literature reviewed and the results of analyzing the data related to the study is that introducing the concepts of cohesion, coherence, cohesive devices, and précis writing strategies to language learners is both theoretically and practically of high importance as far as writing skill, especially creating a piece of cohesive text is concerned. The more the students are acquainted with the mentioned notions, the better command they will have at language producing and even receiving.

Précis writing may be a significant tool for various groups who, in one way or another, deal with education. For teachers, because by instructing different steps and/or strategies of précis writing they may facilitate the skill of writing for their students. For students, because it is a very effective practice which most probably makes them competent in creating a coherent and cohesive piece of text. For the researchers, because it can be a very powerful note-taking strategy which every researcher needs.

As a final remark, the future researchers interested in the area are recommended to test and compare the effect of various steps or strategies of précis not only on writing but on reading.

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