

Collaborative summaries: A powerful strategy for MLLs

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Summary: This powerful strategy coaches students to recognize main ideas in a passage and summarize them, gradually progressing from individual to pair work to larger groups. Students learn to use evidence from the text to defend their interpretations of the main ideas, which becomes more challenging (but exciting) as groups expand.

Keywords: summarizing, collaboration, MLLs, collaborative writing, group work

Here's an understatement: Teaching multilingual learners to write summaries of English text is hard. Those of us who've done this (or at least, tried to) are well-familiar with some of the challenges: The biggest one is plagiarism—because just comprehending text in the first place is hard, let alone putting it into one's own words and sentence structure. And for myriad other reasons: It can feel like a boring, meaningless task. Learners can lack the confidence to do the job at all, let alone do it well. And on and on the challenges go.

One activity that can help with these challenges is collaborative summary writing. This powerful teaching strategy coaches students to recognize main ideas in a passage and summarize them, gradually progressing from individual to pair work to larger groups. Students learn to use evidence from the text to defend their interpretation of the main ideas, which becomes more challenging (but exciting) as groups expand. I personally have tried many of the more traditional (and problematic, boring) strategies in having students write their own summaries in intermediate adult ed ESL classes, in graduate level research classes, in both online and face-to-face developmental and regular English college classes, in undergraduate academic ESL classes—you name it (particularly in the adult ed and higher ed arenas). However, when teaching K-12 teacher candidates recently, I stumbled across this collaborative summary-writing strategy and do not plan to go back. It worked extremely well with mixed groups of teacher candidates (both native and non-native speakers of English), and as many participants in my conference workshop at WAESOL 2024 attested, this method has worked well in a variety of ESL.

The first step and key to successfully utilizing this method is curating and providing engaging, relevant texts for learners to read. With K-12 teacher candidates, Malcolm X's "Learning to Read" (an excerpt, and there are various versions of this excerpt) works well, as it embodies not only the miracle of an adult teaching himself how to read, but a true-to-life example of the power of learning to read, and the complexity of racial issues in the US. With WAESOL workshop participants, an article from *WAESOL Educator* proved more relevant and engaging! (The structure for the latter was also very helpful to summarizing, including clear steps that could form the outline for the summary they came up with.) Depending on the level of learners, I may or may not choose a text with verbal and nonverbal clues such as graphics, pictures, subheadings, etc. For more advanced learners, I've shied away from these to make it more challenging. With lower levels, proving texts with these clues is critical—it encourages them to engage in the very achievable detective work of text comprehension.

Next, decide on and provide the templates and ground rules for a collaborative summarizing activity. Here is a wonderful [collaborative summary writing template](#) that I've used, but I'll be honest: I have not been able to find the origin. If a *WAESOL Educator* reader can locate it, please let us know! There are others that might be more appropriate for kids, etc. I like this one because it walks students through the steps of the process. A drawback of this particular template is that there really is not enough room to write more than a few phases. It also will be important to specify that a "main idea" is not just a group of words (i.e. a topic) but instead is formed as a sentence. In addition, you want to determine

ground rules for group work. If you regularly engage in group work already, you've no doubt already established and even co-created these with your classes (i.e. [Reading Apprenticeship's classroom negotiated norms](#)). Something along the lines of [Kate Kinsella's Discussion Cards](#) can be very helpful here.

This is where the classroom activity begins. Here are the steps of the process. You can add to or eliminate any steps/phases as you see fit for your teaching context:

1. Individual learners read and write a 5-sentence summary of a text. I've often used a text we read earlier in the unit that students are already familiar with. If not, you can do the reading together in class or assign it as homework. Options might include group readings of a text using reciprocal roles or group reading, paragraph by paragraph, of a text, having them pause and verbally summarize each paragraph. Reading Rockets offers a concise list of reading strategies leading to summarizing activities [here](#). However, I do have students do the actual writing of summaries in class to discourage any use of unauthorized sources (AI, friends or family members, etc.) OR to supervise their use of authorized sources (if you do allow the use of AI, etc.) and also help us all to focus on the same thing at the same time.
2. Learners get in pairs. They share their individual summaries, then negotiate and collaborate to write a new joint summary of 5 sentences or so.
3. Each pair now joins with another pair and repeats the process. There is likely to be more "noise" at this stage—more negotiation and defense of ideas chosen for summaries. (Hopefully, anyway. You definitely want to avoid domination by any one learner or pair.) Groups edit their summaries for meaning, language, and word choice.
4. Now groups of 4 join with other groups of four to create groups of 8 and repeat the process. This can be a particularly contentious phase. Groups again edit their summaries for meaning, language, and word choice.
5. One student from the group of 8 presents the summary to the class—possibly just reading it out loud, or projecting it on the document camera, or from the computer if typed.

6. The finale is up to you and depends on your goals for the activity. I've had the class vote on the "best" summary, which has inevitably led us back to what a "good" summary really is—can the group's opinions be included? How much of the original text can be included? Etc.

What does evidence-based research say about this method of processing texts? In the literature, here are some of the positive outcomes of collaborative summary writing (CSW): 1. It enacts Vygotsky's sociocultural theory & ZPD with collective scaffolding (Lin & Maarof, 2013). 2. It provides an authentic opportunity to "language" (Swain, 2000). 3. It allows individual "novices" to become "experts" as a group (Sajedi, 2014; Lin & Maarof, 2013). 4. It's best integrated into a longer unit: teach content, grammar, vocabulary first 3 weeks; then writing process (sentence & paragraph writing, editing, unity, coherence); then teach summarizing & summary writing; then practice in the classroom & move toward CSW (Lin & Maarof, 2013). 5. Collaboratively written summaries are more grammatically accurate, linguistically complex, contain better content-organization-vocabulary (most studies of CSW). and 6. It promotes greater sense of accomplishment (Chao & Lo, 2011)

Reyes (2023) offers several compelling benefits of the strategy, or more generally, collaborative writing: 1. It aligns with English Language Proficiency (ELP) and College and Career Readiness (CCR) standards. 2. It affords workplace prep. 3. Students build on their own and others' knowledge. 4. It fosters a supportive learning community. 5. Writing becomes less isolating/scary. 6. It develops audience awareness. 7. Students learn to defend their choices. 8. It demonstrates writing as a process. 9. It draws on the strengths of all members. 10. It integrates the 4+ skills.

Without a doubt, collaborative summary writing is a powerful strategy to use with your multilingual learners. So far, there has not been a perfect way to make it happen, but your ideas and input are definitely welcome as we continue to explore this method of making texts and strategies come alive for our learners!

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CITE THIS ARTICLE

Jordan, S. (2025). Collaborative Summaries: A powerful strategy for MLLs. *WAESOL Educator*, 50(1), 9-11.

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