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SUMMARY OR SYNTHESIS? A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION OF EFL STUDENTS' MISUNDERSTANDINGS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

Diva Zahra Anindya¹, Faurus Zaman Fadhly*²

^{1,2}English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teachers Training and Education,
Universitas Kuningan, Indonesia

Corresponding author's email: faurus.zaman.fadhly@uniku.ac.id

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Abstract: Summary and synthesis are fundamental skills in academic writing. However, many students continue to confuse those two and often treating synthesis as an extended summary. This study investigates EFL students' misconceptions regarding synthesis and summary, and explores the factors that contribute to their misunderstanding. Using a qualitative research approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten undergraduate students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas Kuningan. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three major findings that suggest a gap between students' theoretical understanding and practical application. The study highlights the need for clearer instructional strategies, more structured synthesis exercise, and consistent guidance in academic writing courses.

Keywords: *synthesis; summary; academic writing; misconceptions; EFL students; qualitative.*

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is the cornerstone of scholarly engagement in higher education. Wei & Liu (2024) stated that academic writing is very important in higher education because it is a core competency that enables students to communicate formally about research and ideas which is crucial for students' academic success and career development. Academic writing involves mastery of language and the ability to engage with ideas throughout the text. One of the most cognitively demanding aspects of academic writing is source-based composition, particularly when students are required to summarize or synthesize information. Both processes involve engaging with external texts, but have different purposes and demand different levels of critical thinking. However, many students, especially those in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, often confuse synthesis with summarization leading to writing that lacks analytical depth and originality (Hartina et al., 2021).

Synthesis writing has gained significant attention in academic settings due to its crucial role in building knowledge. It requires students to read multiple texts, identify connections between ideas, and integrate them into one coherent sentence that reflects their own understanding and voice (Vandermeulen et al., 2023). In contrast to summaries that restate ideas from a single source, synthesis involves intertextual comparisons, thematic clustering, and knowledge transformation (van Ockenburg, 2022). Kamijo (2023) argues that many L2 writers lack metacognitive awareness of the difference between synthesis and summarization that affects their ability to move beyond shallow text production. However, this complexity makes synthesis writing difficult for students, especially if instructional support is minimal or unclear.

A number of studies have documented of how students struggle with the demands of synthesis. Vandermeulen et al. (2023) emphasized that synthesis tasks involve recursive processes that

require students to switch constantly between reading and writing roles. Students have to plan, evaluate, and reorganize content while constructing their own arguments which many people find very tedious. In line with that, Crossley et al. (2021) found that proficient synthesis writing correlates with strategic use of sources, proper citation practices, and reduced reliance on copying.

One particularly insightful contribution came from Chuenchaichon (2022), who investigated the challenges Thai EFL students face in writing summaries. His findings indirectly highlight the deeper problem of summarizing which is the blurred conceptual boundaries between summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing. He reported that students struggled to extract the main ideas, had difficulty paraphrasing appropriately, and often copied when unsure how to proceed. Importantly, many participants believed they were synthesizing when they were merely summarizing or repeating isolated points. This indicates that learners are often not taught to distinguish between summarizing and synthesizing, which is a critical fallacy in the teaching of academic writing. Pasaribu et al. (2024) also reveal persistent syntactic and morphological errors particularly in scholarship essays. These errors stem from interlingual and intralingual interference, suggesting that students remain limited to surface-level summary than deep synthesis.

This observation is in line with Fährly (2022) who conducted a meta-synthesis on EFL learners' academic writing challenges. He concluded that students often fail to connect ideas across multiple sources. This indicates that synthesis is not only underdeveloped but also fundamentally misunderstood. Riadil et al. (2023) also found that EFL students lack structural and conceptual clarity when integrating multiple texts. They often treat synthesis as a mechanical summary of multiple articles. Djuwari (2021) goes further by stating that true novelty in academic writing emerges from synthesis. Without a clear understanding of how to connect and evaluate sources, students cannot construct meaningful arguments.

In the Indonesian context, Hartina et al. (2021) examined literature review in undergraduate theses and found that synthesis was at a low level, with students relying more on summarizing sources rather than building an interpretive framework. These weaknesses derived not only from a lack of instruction but also from conceptual confusion

which makes a gap that must be addressed to improve the quality of academic writing in higher education. Similarly, Anjarwati et al. (2024) provide a comparative perspective, examining the syntactic complexity in graduate-level writing. Their findings show that doctoral dissertations contain more complex syntactic structures than master theses. It implies that the ability to synthesize is tied to language maturity and proficiency. van Ockenburg (2022) also emphasizes that the teaching of synthesis should begin before university entry. He argued that the lack of alignment between

writing expectations in high school and higher education contributes to student difficulties.

Furthermore, Adizovna (2023) emphasizes that summary writing is a critical skill for academic success. She highlights that successful summary writing involves three cognitive steps that are understanding the text, considering its main ideas, and rewriting in one's own words. However, Dewi & Saputra (2021) found that EFL students in Indonesia encounter both linguistic such as misformation and omission and non-linguistic such as limited vocabulary knowledge difficulties in summary writing. In contrast, synthesis writing requires higher-order thinking. Students must comprehend individual texts and evaluate relationships among them. This complexity makes synthesis particularly challenging for EFL learners who often lack sufficient linguistic resources or academic literacy practice (Maamuujav et al., 2021). Their study reveals that EFL students frequently struggle with syntactic variation and lexical sophistication which are essential for making cohesive and comparative syntheses.

Despite the awareness of the need to explicitly teach synthesis, there is little known about how students conceptualize synthesis and summarization. Most previous research has focused on writing products, not on the beliefs and assumptions students hold about these tasks. A qualitative exploration of students' own understandings could uncover the cognitive and instructional roots of their misconceptions and provide insights into how academic writing can be better structured.

To address these challenges, this study aims to qualitatively investigate the misconceptions students have regarding synthesis and summary in academic writing. Specifically, it explores: (1) What are the common misconceptions students have regarding synthesis and summary in academic writing? (2) What factors contribute to

students' misunderstanding of synthesis in academic context?

Through these questions, this research intends to discover how such misconceptions affect the way students approach academic writing and why these misconceptions persist despite instruction.

This study offers a new perspective by focusing not on students' writing products, but on their personal understanding and interpretation of synthesis and summarization. While many previous studies have assessed writing quality or teaching effectiveness, this study emphasizes how students perceive the two concepts, and why they often confuse them. By collecting and analyzing students' responses through qualitative interviews, this study provides new insights into how misconceptions are formed and persist, especially in the context of EFL academic writing.

The results of this study are expected to inform the development of more effective academic writing instruction. By identifying the types of misconceptions students experience and the factors that influence them, educators and curriculum designers can create clearer and more targeted learning materials. These findings can help teachers provide clear guidance on the difference between synthesis and summary, which in turn can improve students' ability to write unified, coherent and original academic texts. Ultimately, this research supports better learning outcomes by aligning teaching strategies with students' actual needs and understanding.

METHOD

This study applied a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore EFL students' misconceptions about synthesis and summary in academic writing. The participants were ten undergraduate students from the English Education Program at Universitas Kuningan, ranging from first year to third year. All participants had previous experience with academic writing tasks such as literature reviews and argumentative essays. Interviews were conducted individually via WhatsApp using a combination of text and voice messages to ensure convenience and flexibility. Each participant was asked ten open-ended questions designed to explore their understanding, experience and difficulties in distinguishing between synthesis and summary.

The collected data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and key themes that aligned

with the research questions. This approach is particularly suitable for exploring open-ended perceptions and has been widely used in qualitative social research (De Paoli, 2024). The analysis focused on identifying common misconceptions and factors that contributed to students' misunderstanding of synthesis. Ethical considerations were addressed by informing participants about the purpose of the study and obtaining informed consent in a digital format. Participants' identities were anonymized and all data were treated confidentially.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed several patterns related to the research question of this study. The findings are organized into three key points: (1) conceptual confusion between summary and synthesis, (2) lack of explicit instruction and practical guidance, and (3) challenges in applying synthesis in academic writing tasks.

Conceptual confusion between summary and synthesis

Most participants showed awareness of the basic definitions of summary and synthesis. However, deeper analysis revealed that many of them confused synthesis with extended summary, and often described it as "a combination of summaries" or "summarizing multiple sources." For example, Participant 2 explained synthesis as "*combining two sources to get the meaning and then summarize both.*" Similarly, Participant 3 explained it as "a conclusion drawn from combining information from different sources," although her approach still leaned towards reporting rather than integration.

While some students were able to articulate theoretical distinctions, their writing practices often reflected limited application. Participant 10, for instance, described synthesis as "arranging words from different articles," but later acknowledged the difficulty of structuring the content in a coherent and connected way. These examples show that synthesis is often seen as a mechanical process, rather than a critical and analytical one.

Lack of explicit instruction and practical guidance

A significant factor contributing to students' misconceptions is the lack of clear and consistent instruction on synthesis. Some participants reported that summary writing was often taught and practiced, while synthesis was only briefly

mentioned or not at all. Participant 3 said, "I don't remember being taught about synthesis - maybe I forgot, or it was never mentioned." Participant 9 also stated the same, "It was probably explained, but just briefly, and the explanation wasn't very helpful."

In some cases, participants noted that only some students had the opportunity to practice synthesis. Participant 2 commented, "There was some practice for synthesis, but only a few students got to do it - I was one of them." This lack of structured exposure and practical experience seems to reinforce the confusion students have between the two concepts.

Challenges in applying synthesis in writing tasks

Although students claimed to understand the meaning of synthesis, many of them expressed difficulty in practicing it. Common challenges were selecting and organizing relevant ideas from multiple sources, avoiding summarizing each source individually, and maintaining their own tone in their writing. Participant 4 explained, "It's hard to avoid just summarizing each source one by one instead of combining them into one idea." Participant 6 stated, "The hardest part is connecting ideas from different sources without making it look like a list."

Unclear instructions and uncertainty about what to expect also contributed to the lack of confidence. Participant 8 said, "Sometimes the instructions from the lecturer aren't very specific, so I'm unsure if what I wrote was appropriate." Most participants felt more comfortable writing summaries, as this task was more structured and familiar. In contrast, synthesis requires more judgment, which many students found quite challenging.

The findings suggest that students can define synthesis and summarization at a surface level, but their practical understanding is still weak. Misconceptions are caused by inadequate instruction, lack of concrete examples, and minimal feedback. As a result, students often fall back on summarizing techniques even when synthesis is expected. These results suggest the need for more explicit instruction, guided examples, and opportunities to practice writing syntheses to overcome the gap

between conceptual understanding and practical application.

The findings of this study highlight a common and persistent problem in EFL academic writing. Although many students claimed to understand the difference between summary and synthesis,

their actual writing behavior suggested otherwise. Most participants described synthesis as the process of combining summaries or taking key points from multiple texts which is an idea that demonstrates a basic level of understanding, but also a significant misunderstanding. This confusion is not unique to the current context. It aligns with Chuenchaichon (2022) found among Thai EFL students, who also struggled to clearly separate summarizing, paraphrasing, and synthesizing.

One possible explanation for this confusion is the lack of clear and explicit instructions. Some participants in this study admitted that they had never been directly taught how to synthesize, and most had only encountered the concept briefly, even further without practical examples or guided practice. This reflects the gap described by Kamijo (2023) who emphasizes that many L2 students lack metacognitive awareness of synthesis, and by Vandermeulen et al. (2023) who state that synthesis writing requires continuous practice and instruction, not just theoretical explanations. Students in this study often relied on summarization because it felt more familiar and manageable, especially when the writing task was not properly guided by the lecturer.

Another pattern that appeared was students' difficulty in organizing information from multiple sources and combining it into a unified and coherent argument. Many stated that they were unsure how to avoid listing ideas separately or simply paraphrasing without developing a synthesis. These challenges are consistent with Riadil et al. (2023), who found that EFL students tend to treat synthesis as a linear summary of multiple texts, rather than an analytical process of comparison and integration. Maamujav et al. (2021) add that EFL learners often lack the lexical and syntactic resources to perform synthesis effectively, which might explain why students in this study reported feeling more confident in summarization tasks, which are more structured and linguistically manageable.

Moreover, the findings emphasize the gap between theoretical understanding and actual writing performance. Although students can correctly define synthesis in theory, they often return to summarizing behavior in practice, especially when task instructions are unclear. Dewi & Saputra (2021) noted similar problems among Indonesian EFL learners, citing linguistic and instructional factors as the cause of weak summarization and synthesis performance. This highlights the need for more direct instructions,

clearer guidance, and focused practice to help students overcome the gap between knowing what synthesis is and applying it effectively in writing.

In summary, this study confirms that misconceptions about synthesis are caused not only by linguistic limitations, but also by instructional gaps. Although synthesis is a high-level writing skill necessary for academic success, it is still barely taught and practiced. The results of this study underscore the urgency for educators to explicitly differentiate synthesis from summarization, provide concrete examples, and offer structured opportunities for synthesis writing in the curriculum.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to explore students' misconceptions about synthesis and summary in academic writing, and to understand the factors that lead to this confusion. The results show that although students often recognize synthesis and summary as distinct concepts, in practice they tend to treat synthesis as a series of non-connected summaries. Their understanding is generally shallow, and this limited understanding affects how they approach tasks such as literature reviews or integrated essays. For most students, synthesis is still a vague and unfamiliar process - more theoretical than practical.

The study also revealed that this confusion is not only a matter of individual misunderstanding, but rather caused by wider instructional gaps. Many students reported that they received inadequate guidance on how to synthesize, limited opportunities to practice, and only a few examples that clearly illustrate what good synthesis looks like. As a result, even students who are motivated to do well often rely on summary-based approaches, lacking the tools or confidence to write more analytically.

These findings carry important implications for educators. Academic writing instruction needs to place greater emphasis on synthesis that is not only as a concept to be defined, but also as a skill to be practiced and developed. Lecturers should provide clear examples, show synthesis in action, and guide students through the process with structured exercises and targeted feedback. In doing so, students will not only understand the difference between summary and synthesis, but also gain the ability to write with greater depth, coherence, and originality.

Future research might explore how different teaching interventions, such as explicit guidance, peer collaboration, or guided revision, can help

students improve their synthesis ability over time.

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