

Explicit teaching of synonyms and paraphrasing will improve the reading comprehension ability of middle primary students.

### **ABSTRACT**

The hypothesis of this study is that the explicit teaching of synonyms and paraphrasing will improve the reading comprehension ability of middle primary students.

According to the Oxford dictionary, to paraphrase is to 'express the meaning of something using different words'. It is 'a rewording of something written or spoken'.

Reading itself is a process that requires the skills of both decoding and comprehending. The students who participated in this study were quite adept at decoding, but found it difficult to retell what they had read, or to answer questions about a text.

In this study, a group of ten middle primary students were taught – in an explicit and repetitive way – how to help themselves in terms of reading for meaning. The students were taught to use synonyms and paraphrase to gain meaning.

John Munro's RAP acronym, introduced in this study, proved to be a successful comprehension strategy for the students as it is a simple, straightforward procedure that reminds them to always read and think about the meaning of a text. The acronym is as follows:

- **R**ead the text.
- **A**sk yourself questions about the main ideas and details.
- **P**ut the ideas into your own words and try to change as many words as you can.

The results of this study show that the explicit teaching of the use of synonyms and paraphrasing will support students in their learning and improve their reading comprehension ability:

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study focuses on a group of ten middle primary students who are being taught to use synonyms and paraphrase texts to both support their learning and improve their reading comprehension ability. This study also provides me, their classroom teacher, with the opportunity to reflect on and improve my own teaching practices.

Eight of the ten students involved in this study completed the Reading Recovery Programme as year one students. It was through this explicit and intensive programme that they were able to successfully master the initial step in learning how to read – that is, decode. However, these students now require further focused teaching to enable them to learn how to read for meaning, and thus become independent learners for life. Although the students generally sound like they're talking when reading aloud, difficulties abound when asked to retell what they have read, or when required to answer questions about a text.

The Oxford Dictionary tells us that to be able to decode is to be able to “convert a coded message into understandable language”. This is clearly what the students can already do. However, Sorrell and Bender (1996) define reading as “engaging in the act of searching for and understanding the meaning of the written word” (p.2). The students need to learn strategies that they can readily use when attempting to comprehend challenging texts.

I looked closely at the ten students involved in this study to determine their particular strengths, challenges, similarities and differences. I did this, as is wont, both informally as part of the day-to-day running of the classroom, as well as through formal assessment tasks. A significant similarity was the students' oral language knowledge.

John Munro maintains that, “oral language knowledge is necessary to comprehend what is read”. Since nine of the ten students are of an ESL background and require more opportunities to develop their knowledge of word meanings (vocabulary) and structure (grammar), the obvious course of action in terms of this study would be to emphasise all modes of communication within the reading programme.

Of vital importance would be the continuance of certain practices such as ‘read to’, ‘shared reading’, ‘reciprocal reading’ and ‘rereading as a play’ to help to develop the students’ ‘ear’ for the English language. Introductory book orientations, picture chats and other opportunities to talk would also continue as key elements of a typical reading lesson.

Another important strategy, garnered from my years of experience as a Reading Recovery teacher, was to articulate what needs to be done prior to, during and after reading, and to encourage students to develop the habit of doing likewise. The definitive goal here is to teach a wide range of reading strategies that will support the students’ learning, and, in the process, promote independence. The students will, in effect, be learning ‘how to learn’.

In this study, the problem for me was, “Where do I go from here?” I had to decide on the type of intervention that would most benefit the students in lieu of their oral language knowledge. I decided to focus on the use of synonyms and paraphrasing to support the students in their learning and improve their reading comprehension ability.

A helpful strategy that I decided to introduce and practise (religiously) with the students is John Munro’s RAP acronym. This strategy would help the students to recall what is required when paraphrasing. Once again, the acronym is as follows:

- **R**ead the text.
- **A**sk yourself questions about the main ideas and details.
- **P**ut the ideas into your own words and try to change as many words as you can.

Using synonyms and paraphrasing are strategies that have long been espoused. Fisk and Hurst (2003) “found paraphrasing for comprehension to be an excellent tool for reinforcing reading skills such as identifying the main ideas, finding supporting details, and identifying the author’s voice.” They ‘sing the praises of’ paraphrasing for comprehension because “it integrates all modes of communication – reading, writing, listening, and speaking – which leads to a deeper understanding of the text”.

They also refer to the particular link between reading and writing as “long been established as an effective means of strengthening comprehension.” (p.182) In the same article, Vacca and Vacca (1999) found that: “Students who experience the integration of writing and reading are likely to learn more content, to understand it better, and to remember it longer” (p.262).

The present study aims to investigate whether the explicit teaching of synonyms and paraphrasing, with an emphasis on all modes of communication, will lead to an improvement in both paraphrasing and reading comprehension ability.

## **METHOD**

### **Design**

This study, which is based on the explicit teaching of the use of synonyms and paraphrasing to improve both paraphrasing and reading comprehension ability, compares the test results of the intervention group, taken immediately before and after the intervention.

### **Participants**

**Table 1**

<b><u>Student</u></b>	<b><u>Age</u></b>		<b><u>Year</u></b>	<b><u>ESL</u></b>	<b><u>Reading Recovery</u></b>	<b><u>Reading Age</u></b>
A	8y	3m	3	Yes	Yes	6.5 – 7.5
B	8y	5m	3	Yes	Yes	7.5 – 8.5
C	8y	7m	3	No	Yes	5.0 – 6.0
D	8y	9m	3	Yes	No	7.5 – 8.5
E	9y	2m	4	Yes	Yes	6.5 – 7.5
F	9y	4m	4	Yes	Yes	6.5 – 7.5
G	9y	1m	4	Yes	Yes	7.5 – 8.5
H	9y	6m	4	Yes	Yes	10.5 – 11.5
I	9y	10m	4	Yes	No	9.5 – 10.5
J	10y	3 m	4	Yes	Yes	6.5 – 7.5

The students who were chosen to participate in the study are currently in a year three and four composite class, with ages ranging from eight to ten years.

All the students (except Student C) are of a non-English speaking background and began their school life with minimal or no English. The represented language backgrounds are Chinese, Indonesian, Italian, Lebanese, Nepalese and Vietnamese. Most of the children have at least one older sibling with whom they can converse in English at home, and one student (Student J) has lived overseas for the past two years and is still at the listening (internalising) stage. The only time when these students are exposed to 'proper' or 'correct' English is during formal lessons at school.

Most of the students (eight of the ten) have successfully completed the Reading Recovery Programme and have benefited from an ongoing Reading Buddy Programme whilst in year one. These programmes enabled the children to learn and practise essential life-long reading strategies such as rereading for meaning and the use of analogy when attempting unknown words. However, despite this initial one-to-one early intervention in reading, most of the children are still experiencing difficulties when attempting either formal or informal comprehension tasks. They find it difficult to retell or to answer questions to show their understanding of a text.

Yearly testing P – 6 has consistently shown that while most of the children in the middle and upper primary grades at our school are able to decode, and while they clearly sound ‘as if they’re talking’ when reading aloud, their level of comprehension is hindered by a marked lack of vocabulary. Running record after running record has highlighted an over-reliance on visual cues at the expense of both meaning and structure (grammar). An example of this would be the random insertions and omissions of ‘s’, ‘ed’ and ‘ing’ at the ends of words and the general use (or misuse) of tense.

### **Materials**

The following materials were used for pre-testing and post-testing purposes –

- TORCH – Tests of Reading Comprehension
- John Munro’s Paraphrasing Task – Group Administration
- John Munro’s Synonym Task – Group Administration

The following materials were used as part of the intervention project –

- Board games re synonyms – matching activities
- Computer games re synonyms – matching activities
- Set of dictionaries
- Set of thesauruses
- John Munro’s RAP strategy in poster form
- Literature-based resources focusing on traditional tales and fables  
Eg  
The programme, ‘Much More Than A Story’, is a series of big books of traditional tales and fables, with accompanying software, which is suitable for students in the middle and senior primary grades. It provides the students with opportunities to read, reread, paraphrase and publish.

### **Venue**

The study took place in the year three and four classroom.

### **Time**

The study took place between 9:00am and 11:00am during the ‘literacy block’. All ten sessions were planned and completed, with two or three sessions conducted per week.

## RESULTS

### Comparison of Pre-Test & Post-Test Comprehension

TORCH Test Passage A1 - Grasshoppers

**Table 2**

<u>STUDENTS</u>	<u>TORCH</u>			
	Pre	Pre	Post	Post
	Raw Score	TORCH Score	Raw Score	TORCH Score
A	11	32	14	39
B	16	44	15	41
C	12	34	12	34
D	15	41	18	54
E	13	36	16	44
F	15	41	16	44
G	14	39	17	48
H	15	41	16	44
I	17	48	19	61
J	12	34	14	39

### Comparison of Pre-Test & Post-Test Paraphrasing Task

John Munro's Paraphrasing Task – Group Administration

**Table 3**

<u>STUDENTS</u>	<u>PARAPHRASING TASK</u>	
	Pre	Post
A	11	8
B	14	21
C	6	16
D	9	26
E	13	20
F	12	26
G	16	19
H	24	30
I	37	34
J	9	16

## Comparison of Pre-Test & Post-Test Synonym Task

John Munro's Synonym Task – Group Administration

**Table 3**

<u>STUDENTS</u>	<u>SYNONYM TASK</u>	
	Pre	Post
A	12	15
B	22	23
C	20	27
D	24	33
E	13	15
F	20	20
G	16	24
H	32	38
I	21	25
J	17	18

Overall results indicate support for the hypothesis that the explicit teaching of the use of synonyms and paraphrasing will improve the reading comprehension of middle primary students who are, in the main, accurate text decoders.

**Table 2**

The comprehension scores of most students (all except students B and C) show improvement, indicating a clearer understanding of the text. All students were able to complete the TORCH cloze activity, as a seen text, with greater confidence.

**Table 3**

The paraphrasing task proved to be the most challenging exercise for all the students, with a significant number of them opting to simply re-write sentences, rearrange words or change the tense rather than use as many synonyms as possible. The post-testing results did, however, indicate a better understanding of the text and there was a concerted effort shown to maintain meaning.

**Table 4**

I would venture to say that the post-testing results relating to the use of synonyms did not appear to match the classroom performance of the students (especially in relation to student I).

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this study indicate support for the hypothesis, and the research, which suggest that the explicit and repetitive teaching of synonyms and paraphrasing improves the reading comprehension ability of middle primary students.

All ten students participated enthusiastically throughout the intervention, but (understandably) greeted the formal pre-testing and post-testing activities with much trepidation, and this clearly impacted on their performance. This was especially the case with regard to John Munro's Paraphrasing Task and Synonym Task, where (during post-testing) both students C and G ventured to request the use of a thesaurus!

The students in this study have already made a significant amount of progress in regard to the use of synonyms and paraphrasing to gain meaning, but a lengthier period of intervention would achieve more effective, long-term results. Hence, although the students have had opportunities to practise new and essential reading strategies that will enable them to develop as independent, life-long learners, it is vital that they now be given more time to consolidate all that they have learned.

The students will benefit from the following –

- Continued explicit teaching of comprehension strategies such as RAP
- Continued encouragement to verbalize comprehension strategies
- Introduction of a wider variety of assessment tasks such as cloze activities



**REFERENCES / BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Fisk, C. & Hurst, B. (2003). Paraphrasing for comprehension. *The Reading Teacher*, 57, 2, 182-185

Katims, D.S. & Harris, S. (1997). Improving the reading comprehension of middle school students in inclusive classrooms. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 41, 2, 116-123

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### LESSON 1

**Activities**

- Introducing synonyms
- Locating & reading definition of word, 'synonym', in dictionary
- Listing synonyms using 'Think – Pair – Share' strategy
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Set of dictionaries
- Paper & textas
- Whiteboard

(Introduction 10 minutes) (Activity – 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Introducing synonyms Locating word, 'synonym', in dictionary
	<b>Coaching</b>	Listing synonyms using strategy – Think – Pair – Share
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned

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## LESSON 2

### Activities

- Revising synonyms
- Playing board games – matching activities – in small groups
- Listing synonyms using Think – Pair – Share strategy
- Share Time

### Resources

- Board games (2)
- Paper & textas
- Whiteboard

(Introduction 10 minutes) (Activity – 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Revising synonyms Introducing board games re synonyms (matching activities)
	<b>Coaching</b>	Playing board games in small groups Adding to list of synonyms
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned

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### LESSON 3

**Activities**

- Revising synonyms
- Playing computer games – matching activities – in pairs
- Listing synonyms using Think – Pair – Share strategy
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Computers (5) – Internet – Education Channel
- Paper & textas
- Whiteboard

(Introduction 10 minutes) (Activity – 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Revising synonyms Introducing computer games re synonyms (matching activities)
	<b>Coaching</b>	Playing computer games in pairs Adding to list of synonyms
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned

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### LESSON 4

**Activities**

- Revising use of dictionary
- Playing dictionary races
- Introducing use of thesaurus
- Locating synonyms using thesaurus
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Set of dictionaries
- Set of thesauruses
- Paper & textas
- Whiteboard

(Introduction 10 minutes) (Activity – 20 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Revising use of dictionary Introducing use of thesaurus
	<b>Coaching</b>	Playing dictionary races as a group Locating synonyms using thesaurus Eg synonyms for 'said'
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned

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### LESSON 5

**Activities**

- Introducing RAP strategy
- Book Orientation & Read To
- Modelling paraphrasing strategy in the first person
- Rereading text – in pairs
- Paraphrasing text in the first person – in pairs
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Big Book – The Lion & the Mouse – Series – Much More Than A Story
- Poster of RAP strategy
- Computers (5)
- Related Computer Programme – Speech Bubble or Cartoon Activity
- Set of dictionaries & thesauruses

(Introduction 20 minutes) (Activity – 20 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Introducing RAP strategy Book Orientation & Read To Paraphrasing text in the <u>first person</u>
	<b>Coaching</b>	Rereading text in pairs Paraphrasing text in the <u>first person</u> in pairs
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned

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### LESSON 6

**Activities**

- Revising RAP strategy
- Shared Reading
- Rereading text – in pairs
- Paraphrasing text in the first person in pairs continued
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Big Book – The Lion & the Mouse – Series – Much More Than A Story
- Poster of RAP strategy
- Computers (5)
- Related Computer Programme – Speech Bubble or Cartoon Activity
- Set of dictionaries & thesauruses

(Introduction 20 minutes) (Activity – 20 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Revising RAP strategy
	<b>Coaching</b>	Shared Reading
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	Rereading text in pairs Paraphrasing text in the <u>first person</u> in pairs continued

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned

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### LESSON 7

**Activities**

- Revising RAP strategy
- Rereading story as a play
- Modelling paraphrasing strategy in the third person
- Rereading text – in pairs
- Paraphrasing text in the third person – in pairs
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Big Book – The Lion & the Mouse – Series – Much More Than A Story
- Poster of RAP strategy
- Computers (5)
- Related Computer Programme – Text Box Activity
- Set of dictionaries & thesauruses

(Introduction 20 minutes) (Activity – 20 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Revising RAP strategy Paraphrasing text in the <u>third person</u>
	<b>Coaching</b>	Rereading story as a play
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	Rereading text in pairs Paraphrasing text in the <u>third person</u> in pairs

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned



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### LESSON 8

**Activities**

- Revising RAP strategy
- Book Orientation & Read To
- Rereading text – in pairs
- Paraphrasing text in the third person in pairs continued
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Picture Book – The Lion & the Mouse
- Poster of RAP strategy
- Computers (5)
- Related Computer Programme – Text Box Activity
- Set of dictionaries & thesauruses

(Introduction 20 minutes) (Activity – 20 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Revising RAP strategy Book Orientation & Read To
	<b>Coaching</b>	
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	Rereading in pairs Paraphrasing text in the <u>third person</u> in pairs continued

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned

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### LESSON 9

**Activities**

- Revising RAP strategy
- Choosing & illustrating favourite story-book character
- Modelling retelling of story from character's point of view
- Retelling of story from character's point of view – orally – in pairs
- Retelling of story from character's point of view – draft 1
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Poster of RAP strategy
- Drawing paper and lined paper
- Pencils
- Set of dictionaries & thesauruses

(Introduction 20 minutes) (Activity – 20 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Retelling of story from character's point of view Eg Lion from The Lion & the Mouse
	<b>Coaching</b>	Choosing favourite story-book character Retelling of story from character's point of view – in pairs
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	Illustrating favourite story-book character Writing one part of story from character's point of view – Draft 1

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned

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### LESSON 10

**Activities**

- Modelling rereading for meaning, punctuation & spelling
- Rereading & self-correcting draft 1
- Retelling of story from character's point of view – draft 2
- Choosing a second story-book character & repeating process
- Share Time

**Resources**

- Poster of RAP strategy
- Whiteboard
- Drawing paper and lined paper
- Pencils
- Set of dictionaries & thesauruses

(Introduction 20 minutes) (Activity – 20 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Teacher</b>	<b>Modelling</b>	Rereading for meaning, punctuation & spelling
	<b>Coaching</b>	Rereading & self-correcting draft 1
	<b>Scaffolding &amp; Fading</b>	Writing draft 2

(Share Time 10 minutes)

<b>Responsibility of the Student</b>	<b>Articulation</b>	Students explain what they have learned & when they can use what they have learned
	<b>Reflection</b>	Students reflect on what they have learned, focusing on identifying what they know now that they did not know before
	<b>Exploration</b>	Students are encouraged to consider how they can use what they have learned