Abstract

Learning how to use paraphrasing strategies in both fiction and non-fiction texts increases the reading comprehension accuracy of students in years 3and 4.

A concern expressed by the teachers of years 3 and 4 students was that quite a number of students are good readers in terms of word accuracy but are not understanding what they are reading and therefore not making links with and in the reading and not being able to perform related tasks. These students were not making enough links either in narratives or other fiction texts or in factual material. When asked to express their views, ideas and state facts in their own words they often struggled. By teaching these students paraphrasing skills it was hoped that they were better able to make valid links with the text, express ideas in their own words and answer related literal, inferential, reorganisational and evaluative questions.

After initially testing 16 students using PROBE, 9 students were found to be similar – high word reading accuracy, low comprehension scores. Of these 9, 5 students became the intervention group who would receive the explicit teaching and the remaining 4 students would be in the control group. Both groups contained some students from year 3 and year 4. The intervention group was withdrawn at literacy time four days for 3 successive weeks (12 sessions in all) and the sessions were about 40-45 mins induration (about the same duration as their normal classroom reading session).

The students were specifically taught how to paraphrase and were given time to practise this skill both orally and written. They were encouraged to list their own synonyms for specific words in context and a group list was added to at regular intervals. At the beginning of each session the students retold the previous day's text and were encouraged to repeat as much detail in their own words. The texts used came from materials used at this level and contained 6 fiction texts and 6

non-fiction texts. After the first two sessions, the students were required to write their own sentence, given a sentence from the day's text, changing as much as they could into their own words while retaining the meaning. In the 4th, 8th and 12th sessions they were given 5/6 words from the texts read to write their own synonyms. The control group did not receive this explicit instruction and remained in their class participating in literacy activities. All 9 students were then tested again using PROBE on both seen and unseen texts.

The results show that the students who participated in the paraphrasing sessions did improve in their comprehension accuracy in the seen texts. However, two of these students did not improve in the unseen texts. The control group also showed improvement over this period of time. One student in the control group showing the most improvement was also receiving assistance in reading from the teacher aide at the time of the research.

The implications for teaching literacy is that explicit teaching of comprehension skills, including paraphrasing and the generation of synonyms needs to be part of students' literacy learning once they have become proficient decoders of English. For some students this can begin before year 3 and deriving meaning from what is read should always be a crucial part of any reading session. Students need to use material read in several ways so that they can revisit the context and language and therefore make more links and understandings. Readers need to be asking questions as they read to gain understanding and in order to become proficient readers.

Introduction

Most of the students in the school are very accurate decoders of the English language and they are learning this skill at an early age. We are increasingly finding that in years 3 and 4 and often into the upper primary years, the students' ability to comprehend what they have read is not developing alongside their decoding skills. There is a "gap" in their reading accuracy, in their ability "to have such knowledge of a language as to be able to understand things written in it… and to make out the significance" (The Macquarie Dictionary p. 1413). Once students' ability to decode is highly accurate they are able to free space in their minds to make links with what they are reading in order to develop their understanding of the topic or story. Skilled teachers begin this process even in the junior years. Students need to see reading as "an act of composition…we compose meaning in our minds. Thoughtful, active readers use the text to stimulate their own thinking and to engage with the mind of the writer." (S. Harvey, A. Goudvis 2000)

Comprehension does not always develop naturally alongside or after the ability to decode a language and must be specifically taught to students if they are to become proficient readers. When we read we need to manipulate concepts and make predictions. When reading a new text we align what we are reading with an area of knowledge we already have so that links are formed and this new knowledge becomes part of what we now know and think- it goes into our long term memory. In this way, we accommodate new vocabulary, new sentence structures, new topics, new knowledge, new values and attitudes. By teaching students comprehension strategies such as paraphrasing, using synonyms, rereading and retelling, they will be able to make these important links.

When educators teach comprehension strategies explicitly, they are empowering their students to be able to apply them in other situations rather than in just finding answers to particular questions in a particular text. Teaching students how to do something skills them for learning just as teaching

them how to research is more important than teaching a particular knowledge base. Harvey and Goudvis state in *Strategies that Work,* "Comprehension means that readers think not only about what they are reading but what they are learning. When readers construct meaning, they are building their store of knowledge…along with knowledge must come understanding". (p.9) Teaching students to go beyond the literal aspects of a text by focussing on main ideas, identifying the important aspects and being able to express these effectively in their own words will develop greater understanding.

This research project aims to show that students in years 3 and 4 who learn how to use synonyms and to paraphrase will show improvement in their reading comprehension.

Method

Design

This study used an OXO (Observe, Treatment, Observe) design. The students, both the control group and the intervention group, were assessed at the beginning to ascertain their comprehension levels in fiction and non- fiction texts using PROBE. The pre-test also provided a reading age (see Table 1 below). The intervention group was then involved in twelve lessons where they were taught and practised paraphrasing. The intervention group was given small assessment tasks at the end of the 4th, 8th and 12th lessons in which they had to write synonyms for words that had been part of prior lessons. Both groups were assessed again using PROBE. The final assessment retested the two pre-test texts (both fiction and non fiction) and the following reading texts that were six months higher in reading age. In this way it could be seen how the participants performed on both seen and unseen texts.

Participants

The participants were students from years 3 and 4 who had been assessed as being accurate readers (Above 28 Reading Recovery Level and with a reading accuracy of above 90%) but below average comprehension. The students were chosen both from consultations with their classroom teachers and using the PROBE results gained from the testing done at the beginning of 2005 on all students in years 3 and 4. Of the sixteen students tested, nine were then selected to be in the research project – 5 (Students A, B, C, D, E) in the intervention group and 4 (Students F, G, H, I) in the control group. The students range in age from 8 years 11 months to 11 years old and most have reading ages from slightly below their chronological age (i.e. within six months) through to slightly above. Only one student, Student D (intervention group), was tested as having a reading age more than a year below his chronological age and one student, Student G (control group) as having a reading age about a year above her chronological age (see Table 1 below). Three of the students in the intervention group (Students A, B and D) had been involved in the Reading Recovery in their Grade

1 year and one student (Student C) had three years in a Prep/Year 1 class as it was assessed at the time that she would benefit from another year in the junior area of the school. Student F currently receives reading and spelling assistance from a teacher aide 3/ 4 times a week as due to family issues she has missed schooling in her previous years. Four students (Students B, C- intervention group; Students F, G- control group) are in year 4 and the other five are in year 3 (see Table1 below).

The intervention group was withdrawn from the classroom for 12 teaching sessions (4 lessons per week over a three week period) and each session was approximately 40 minutes in duration.

Table 1 - Reading Accuracy

Student	Grade Level	Chronological Age	Reading Age *	Reading Accuracy Pre-test Fiction*	Reading Accuracy Pre-test Non-Fiction*	Reading Accuracy Post-test Fiction#	Reading Accuracy Post- test Non-Fiction#
Student A	3	9.8	8.00-9.00	97.5%	98%	97.5%	98%
Student B	4	9.5	10.00-11.00	99%	97%	97.5%	95%
Student C	4	11	10.00-11.00	98.5%	97.5%	97%	96%
Student D	3	9.2	7.00-8.00	99%	98%	97.5%	99%
Student E	3	8.4	8.00-9.00	96%	98.5%	98.5%	97.5%
Student F	4	9.10	8.00-9.00	93.5%	96%	97.5%	97.5%
Student G	4	10.3	11.00-12.00	98%	98.5%	99%	99%
Student H	3	9.00	8.00-9.00	98%	98.5%	100%	98.5%
Student I	3	8.11	7.5-8.5	97.5%	99%	98%	97.5%

*Reading Age and Reading Accuracy from the PROBE pre-test given for this research project.

#Reading Accuracy from the PROBE post – test (6 months beyond reading age as assessed in pre-test

Materials

The materials used in this research project include :-

- Assessment tool (for both the pre and post tests) – PROBE Comprehension of Reading Test.

- Assessment during the teaching sessions :- List of words (taken from texts read) – given at end of 4th, 8th and 12th sessions provided for students to write their own synonyms. -Sentences from the texts used were given at the end of each session for the students to paraphrase.

- Texts taken from *Rigby Literacy Collections 1 Middle Primary* include :-

"The Big Wind"

"Computer Bites"

"Water Dragons"

"Bitten by a Rattlesnake"

"Camping Out"

- Texts taken from *Key Comprehension Series – Key into Inference* include :-

"The Car"

"Scorpions"

"Bananas"

- Texts taken from *Key Comprehension Series – Key into Reorganisation* include :-

"Dragsters"

"Rats"

"Jupiter"

- Text Taken from *English Skills for Primary Students – Reading and Comprehension-*

"Fire at Cockatoo"

- A selection of various thesauruses suitable for students in years 3 / 4.

- List of synonyms- added to at various stages.

Procedure

Five students were withdrawn from the classroom during 12 literacy times to work together in a small group over a period of three weeks. These students were tested prior to commencing the lessons and again in the week following the lessons.

The first two sessions were aimed at introducing the idea of paraphrasing and using synonyms. These sessions went as follows – 1. Silent reading of text

2. Reading of text out aloud

3. Retelling of main ideas and introduction of RAP strategy (see Appendix 3)

4. Selection of words from the text to discuss suitable synonyms.

5. Students choose words from text and provide synonyms.

6. Sentences from the text are paraphrased by the group.

The next ten sessions had a similar format with sessions 4, 8 and 12 including a list of words from previous texts for the students to write synonyms.

1. Retell previous day's text to see how many main ideas and details were maintained keeping as close to the original in meaning.

2. Silent reading of new text.

3. Read new text out aloud- each taking turns to read a paragraph /section.

4. Discuss the main ideas from each section of text using their own words. (Occasional reminder of RAP paraphrasing – see Appendix 3)

5. Add new words to our list of synonyms.

6. Each student paraphrases a sentence from the text (written task).

7. Share these new sentences and add any synonyms and ideas from the others.

8. In sessions 4, 8 and 12 the students would be given 5/6 words and they were to write their own synonym.

9. Answer several questions (literal, inferential, reorganisational and evaluative) related to text.

Results

Table 2 - Intervention Group

Student	Pre-test Fiction	Pre-test Non-Fiction	Post-test Fiction	Post-test Non-Fiction	Post-test 6 months Fiction	Post-test 6 months Non-Fiction	Difference Seen texts	Difference Unseen Texts
Student A	50%	50%	75%	50%	62.5%	62.5%	25%	25%
Student B	90%	50%	100%	50%	50%	40%	10%	-50%
Student C	20%	40%	60%	40%	20%	20%	40%	-20%
Student D	62.5%	62.5%	100%	87.5%	87.5%	87.5%	62.5%	50%
Student E	12.5%	0%	37.5%	25%	25%	62.5%	50%	87.5%

Table 3 - Control Group

Student	Pre-test Fiction	Pre-test Non-Fiction	Post test Fiction	Post test Non Fiction	Post test 6 months Fiction	Post test 6 months Non Fiction	Difference Seen Texts	Difference Unseen Texts
Student F	50%	37.5%	62.5%	62.5%	87.5%	50%	37.5%	60%
Student G	30%	30%	40%	40%	30%	20%	20%	-10%
Student H	50%	12.5%	75%	25%	25%	50%	37.5%	12.5%
Student I	37.5%	37.5%	37.5%	87.5%	62.5%	12.5%	50%	12.5%

The results for the intervention group show that there was improvement for all students in the post-test of the seen texts especially the fiction texts. Three students- Student A, Student B and Student C, scored the same result on the seen non- fiction text in both the pre and post- tests. However, Student B and Student C scored lower in the unseen texts. These two students were reading texts at a higher reading level (up to 2 years higher) than the others. Perhaps, this shows that they may have needed even more scaffolding and teacher support than those students reading easier texts. Another factor may have been that the texts chosen in the teaching sessions were easy in terms of word usage and ideas and context, whereas, the texts in the post- test were at a higher level of difficulty. The students on the lower level texts showed the greater gains and two students (Student D and Student E) may have improved their reading level as well as their comprehension as their results showed that they coped very well on the unseen texts that were 6 months older than their chronological age.

Another factor for the differences shown may be that students need greater support and more explicit teaching when dealing with non-fiction texts. In my experience as a Reading Recovery teacher and as part of the CLaSS literacy program, I have found that students don't always have the understanding of non-fiction texts as they are able to bring to fiction texts. When there is a storyline the students seem to be more proficient at making connections with and in the text. This could also be affected by the fact that they are more likely to have had experiences related to the text or read similar story lines. Whereas in non- fiction texts they may have little or no knowledge of the context and the specific language used about the subject. I have found that when teaching with non- fiction texts, the students make more gains and are able to use the information to complete related tasks when the non-fiction texts are at a lower reading level than what they would normally be reading.

The results shown by the control group also showed gains. Student F showed the greatest gains in both the seen and unseen texts. This student is receiving extra support with her reading and writing

and we cannot discount the effect that this may be having. Her family situation has become more stable in recent months and she appears more settled and focussed on her schoolwork. Interestingly, Student G who is reading at a higher level than the other students in the control group had negative results on the unseen post-test, as did the two similar students in the intervention group. These students are involved in teaching in their classrooms that would include various comprehension strategies such as RIDER, retelling in their own words and answering literal, inferential, reoganisational and evaluative questions about what they are reading. This everyday literacy teaching that is part of our 3/ 4 years program is also assisting the students in their comprehension skills.

All the students in both groups improved when they were tested on the seen texts, even though there had been over three weeks between the tests. Revisiting reading material with students appears to assist them in making greater connections and in answering related questions. This certainly has implications for teaching and developing greater understanding of what is being read.

Table 4 - Synonym Test Results

Student	1st Test- 4th Session	2nd Test- 8th Session	3rd Test- 12th Session
Student A	80%	66.5%	66.5%
Student B	80%	83.5%	83.5%
Student C	40%	83.5%	83.5%
Student D	80%	66.5%	100%
Student E	40%	66.5%	50%

When looking at the results of the synonym tests - Student A's scores for the second and third tests are the same but lower than that of the first; Student D was lower in the second as compared to the

first but had a perfect score in the final test; Student E began with a low score, increased and then dropped in the third test; only Students B and C increased their scores from the first test and were able to sustain this increase. All students except Student A had higher scores in their third test than their first test (Students B and E's score differences were relatively small). One explanation for lower results in the second and /or third tests could be that the students had words that had been dealt with in earlier sessions and did not remember them. The words were also presented out of context and this may have caused some confusion. Perhaps the synonym tests became memory tests and in hindsight, testing only the more recent words (from that particular week) at the end of the week could have made a difference to the overall results.

<u>Discussion</u>

This research explored the hypothesis that **Learning how to use paraphrasing strategies in both fiction and non-fiction texts increases the reading comprehension accuracy of students in years 3 and 4.**

The results of this project support this hypothesis in part. The students in the intervention group did improve or maintain comprehension levels in texts that they had read before and discussed, but in unseen texts two students scored a lower comprehension result. This implies that students need explicit teaching and scaffolding of ideas and links when reading. In their junior years, these students were taught decoding skills extremely well as shown by their high levels of reading accuracy (see Table 1) and now the challenge is to improve their ability to comprehend what they read. Reading involves both decoding and the making of meaning. Harvey and Goudvis state in *Strategies that Work- Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding* that students need to "explore thinking when reading" and the teacher's role is to "provide explicit instruction in reading strategies that help readers better understand what they read" (p.5). Paraphrasing both oral and written, using synonyms and answering questions about the text are some ways to assist students improve their understanding of what they read. The two students whose results were lower for the unseen texts (see Table 2) were not able to apply these strategies to texts that were too difficult for them at this stage of their reading development. They obviously needed to keep performing the skills at their current reading ability. Marie Clay (1993) states that for younger readers " If given harder materials to read he would work at a frustration level"… and "would no longer be practising, in smooth combination, the skills he has developed so far" (p.13) Perhaps this is true of older readers developing their comprehension skills, that they need texts at their reading level or just slightly more challenging in order to strengthen their skills. The level of scaffolding needed for each student to progress differs and may need to be adjusted even during a session and teachers need to become skilled at this.

One element of the sessions was the retelling of the previous days text. I found that the students became increasingly better at providing the main ideas and details while maintaining the meaning and author's perspective. They very much discussed and added to and/or clarified what their peers were retelling. This "conversation" about the text helped them to reorganise or reaffirm their understandings of the text. They were, in fact, practising again their paraphrasing of the text. They were building up towards a good paraphrase that conveys "the meaning of the original document using the students' own vocabulary and phrasing" (C.Fisk, B. Hurst 2003). They are still very much at the practising and reinforcing stage of learning paraphrasing and will need to continue this further in the classroom. Fortunately, this strategy can be easily transferred to the classroom where most literacy teaching is done in small groups that promote this type of discussion and the making of links in their reading.

Another aspect of the sessions was where the students wrote a sentence in their own words while maintaining the meaning. There was an increasing awareness that this paraphrasing of a sentence may involve making many word changes, having more or less words and still keeping true to the sense of the sentence and perhaps using a phrase to convey a single word. In the first attempts at this activity all the students wanted to change one word for another and quickly gave up when they couldn't think of a direct substitute. However, the students began to realise that sometimes changing one word for another was not appropriate and the meaning was not maintained, that words change their meaning depending on the context and that it was appropriate to change the structure of the sentence while still holding true to the meaning. Writing the sentence down and then opening up discussion allowed for some very valuable exchange of ideas and alternatives. I believe that the students added to their understanding and this also assisted them in improving their retellings in the following sessions.

Around the sixth session, when asking the questions at the end of the lesson, I had the students underline the parts of the text that assisted them in answering. We discussed that information can come from different parts of the text, that information wasn't always written specifically to answer the question and that we had to draw our own inferences and conclusions. The students stated that underlining the relevant parts of the text did help them to answer the questions more completely. I feel that this strategy would help them in the future to deal with comprehension questions and I would like to use this with other students to see if it helps them too. It is a method of revisiting material with a specific and relevant purpose and hopefully strengthening links and understandings.

In the original testing week where I tested 16 students, I found that the initial word tests to place the students within a reading range showed quite a number of students had average or less than average word recognition for their age. This made me wonder if this is also a factor in their ability to paraphrase and comprehend as they perhaps do not have alternative words to use. This has implications for our literacy teaching and these paraphrasing skills may need to be taught and developed further in the early years of literacy learning. We have found in the last few years our students in the junior classes are becoming better decoders at an earlier stage and perhaps we need to start on comprehension skills and building vocabulary at an earlier stage too. Small group teaching sessions with students who have very good decoding skills could focus more on comprehension skills, especially orally, and increasing vocabulary within context where the words and ideas are linked and can add to the students' understanding of the topic or story.

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Appendix

Appendix 1   Teaching Format for Sessions 1 and 2

 1. Silent reading of text.

 2. Reading of text out aloud.

 3. Retelling of main ideas and introduction of RAP strategy (see Appendix 3).

 4. Selection of words from the text, discuss suitable synonyms and begin a synonym list.

 5. Students choose words from text and provide synonyms.

 6. Sentences from the text are paraphrased by the group.

Teaching Format for session 2 differs in that firstly, the students retell the previous day's text after a reminder about RAP. The synonym list already introduced is added to during the session.

Appendix 2   **Paraphrasing Lesson Format – Sessions 3-12**

Activity	Description	Time
Retelling text	Students retell main parts of the previous day's text including as much detail as possible.	3-5 mins
Silent reading of new text	Students read the new text to themselves.	3-5 mins
Reading new text out aloud	Students take turns to read the new text, one paragraph/section each.	5 mins
Discussion of main parts of the text	Students discuss the main parts of the text in their own words. Students are reminded of RAP – see Appendix 2	5 mins
Add new words to list of synonyms	Synonym list is revisited and new words from the day's text are added. (This is not done in every session and sometimes the words are added to the list after the session and shared with the students at a later session.)	5 mins
Questions related to the text	Students are asked a variety (literal, inferential, reoganisational and evaluative) of questions about the text.	5 mins
Paraphrasing a sentence from the text	Each student is given a different sentence to rewrite in their own words. They are encouraged to change as many words as possible but to keep the meaning the same. Discuss each student's attempt and others offer suggestions and changes.	5-10 mins
Synonym Test	At the end of the 4th, 8th and 12th session the students are given 5/6 words (from texts they have read) to write their own synonyms.	5 mins
Total		36-45 mins

(Adapted From approach described in *Triadic Approach to Reading Comprehension Strategy*

Instruction- A. Sorrell. See bibliography for complete reference*)*

Paraphrasing

Read the text

Ask yourself, "What are the main ideas and details ?"

Put the ideas into your own words and change as many

words as you can.