ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to find out what impact synonyms and paraphrasing strategies have on a student's literal comprehension.

Six children were identified with high reading accuracy for the age but poor comprehension skills. The students selected had not received any previous type of intervention as they displayed such high reading accuracy and understanding of text read to them. Once the problem was identified the following prediction was formulated.

The explicit teaching of synonyms and then paraphrasing will improve the literal comprehension of Year 2 students.

In this study the students were broken into two equal groups, the experimental group and the control group. Both groups underwent testing of their reading accuracy, literal comprehension, synonym knowledge and paraphrasing skills. The experimental group were then involved in 10 intervention sessions over a three week period. The sessions began with building up the student's awareness and understanding of synonyms. Once students were comfortable using synonyms they then began to use these to put sentences into their own words, paraphrase, as a way of recognising the author's message. The study was then concluded by re-testing both groups with equivalent tests.

The explicit teaching of synonyms and then paraphrasing resulted in the experimental group's literal comprehension. The improvement levels varied for each student. The experimental group also demonstrated a significant improvement in their synonym knowledge and paraphrasing skills.

The educational implications for teaching comprehension to Year 2 students is need to expose them to explicit teaching of comprehension strategies. All students would benefit from the strategy of paraphrasing and overtime a greater improvement of literal comprehension would be noticeable.

INTRODUCTION

By the time students reach the middle of Year 2, majority are well on their way to reaching an instructional reading accuracy of text level 28. This could be contributed to the huge emphasis on literacy that is placed on students during their first three years of schooling. Students are taught reading strategies through modelled, guided and shared reading experiences on a daily basis with foci centred on how texts work.

Unfortunately comprehension can be put aside, unintentionally, in the race to get students 'on text' and to build their reading accuracy. Students are taught extensively to decode, visualise, self-correct, re-read, read on and predict, but sometimes students are so busy doing all these things that they simply forget what the author is telling them. These issues as well as those found in a study conducted by Dewitz & Dewitz (2003) who "reasoned that comprehension is influenced by text type, prior knowledge, and mode of reading as well as passage level" (p. 423). If students do not improve their comprehension levels to a standard that matches their reading accuracy then they are going to experience difficulties reaching the expectations of interpreting a diverse range of texts in the middle years of primary schooling (McCray, Vaughn & Neal, 2001 p. 17). With this in mind, it seemed essential that these students receive intervention to build up strategies that will improve their literal comprehension.

There have been many studies investigating student's comprehension difficulties. Parker, Hasbrouck & Denton (2002) have noted that poor comprehension is demonstrated by students for several reasons: The failure to understand key words, sentences or how sentences relate to one another, failure to understand how the information fits in a meaningful way and when interest and concentration are not maintained.

In the paraphrasing strategy (Schumaker, Denton & Deshler, 1984) suggested using the acronym RAP to help improve students comprehension. RAP helps students through the following steps to paraphrase and remember what they've read. The steps require the students to: **R**ead a paragraph. **A**sk yourself "What are the main ideas/ details?", and **P**ut into your own words. Paraphrasing requires the reader to look at one sentence at a time and then retelling the sentence in their own words. Munro (2004, p836) has suggested that paraphrasing requires the

reader "to generate a literal representation of a sentence read by substituting as many words and phrases in it". With this in mind, it is also important for the student to be able to draw on a broad network of vocabulary. The student needs to make meaningful links with words they have stored in their prior knowledge and those that appear in the text.

This present study looks at students with high decoding skills when reading texts aloud but fail to "identify the author's voice" (Fisk & Hurst, 2003 p. 183). Therefore when asked to answer literal comprehension questions the students experience difficulty. This study aims to extend on previous research by monitoring the influence that modelled, taught and practiced paraphrasing strategies, in conjunction with the use of synonyms, will have on a student's literal comprehension.

PREDICTION

The explicit teaching of synonyms and then paraphrasing will improve the literal comprehension of Year 2 students.

METHOD

Design

This project uses OXO design in which the gain in literal comprehension following the explicit teaching of synonyms and paraphrasing is monitored for Year 2 students.

Participants

The participants were six Year 2 students (five girls and one boy). The students were selected because of their high reading accuracy but poor literal comprehension of the text read orally. Each student's instructional text level was 28 but displayed difficulties in recalling the main or key ideas from the text. Each student displays confidence in reading but there is a range in the reading strategies used when decoding unfamiliar words. These include the absence of some students not re-reading for meaning or self-correcting. Majority of the errors made by the students were meaning (46.6%) and visual (41%) miscues and 30% of errors had no attempt made at the unknown word. These percentages, along with their answers to questions about the text, influenced the selection of the students to partake in the study.

The experimental group, consisting of two girls and one boy (students A, B & C), were exposed to 10 teaching sessions during the literacy block over three weeks.

Materials

Materials used include the following

- PM Benchmarks Kits 1 & 2(Nelley & Smith, 2000 & 2002) Text Level 26 (The Game of Soccer and A Sense of Smell). An assessment of reading accuracy and comprehension.
- Record of Oral Language ROL (Clay et al, 1999) Paraphrasing Assessment. Students
 asked to paraphrase sentences read to them and marked on the number of key/main
 ideas retained.
- Synonyms Task (Munro, 2005) Students assessed on ability to provide alternative words with similar meaning read by the teacher.
- Collection of texts 50 Shared texts (Jolliffe, Head & Waugh).
 - When I'm Big
 - The Sound of the Wind
 - When the Wind Blows
 - The Three Little Pigs
 - Minibeast Movements
 - The Tortoise and the Hare
 - Summer Rain
- Dictionaries and Thesauruses
- Catholic Education Office, Speech Pathology Language Program Learning Words 1 (Similarities and Differences)
 - Matching Words
 - Yes/No cards & Yes/No Game 1
 - Fill in the Gap 1
 - Memory Game 1

Procedure

Six students were identified by classroom teacher with poor comprehension skills through Reciprocal Reading sessions. The students each underwent a variety of assessment tasks, (prose reading, comprehension questions, synonyms task and ROL) before three students were selected for 10 intervention sessions. The duration of each session was approximately 20 minutes.

The first session introduced the students to the term synonyms. They were asked if they heard of the word or knew what it meant. As a group we then looked up the definition in the dictionary and came up with a common understanding of what are synonyms. They were then asked to suggest synonyms for big and bright and discussed whether their response fitted with our definition, why and why not.

Sessions two and three revisited what synonyms are and also focused on where we find synonyms and using synonyms in a sentence. Students were also required to use a thesaurus during these sessions for assistance.

Sessions four to six continued to recap the meaning of synonyms and being able to suggest accurate synonyms for words in texts. These sessions also introduced the concept of paraphrasing and how synonyms can help us to recall the main ideas in our own words.

Sessions seven to ten began with short activities/games involving synonyms. These sessions built on what they now knew about paraphrasing and asked them to put it into practice. Session seven and nine required a lot of modelling by the teacher. During session eight, students were introduced to the paraphrasing strategy RAP – Read a paragraph, Ask yourself, "What are the main ideas and details, and Put into you own words (Schumaker, Denton & Deshler, 1984). This strategy was continued in sessions nine and ten. For a more detailed account of these sessions please refer to the Appendix – Lesson Plans.

Following the ten sessions, students were post-tested using PM Benchmark Kit 2 – Text Level 26(Smith & Nelley, 2002), Synonyms task (Munro, 2005) and alternative levelled sentences of ROL (Catholic Education Office – Melbourne).

RESULTS

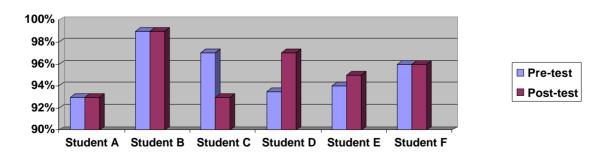
	Experime	Experimental Group – Results from Pre &Post testing (PM benchmarks Kits)					
	Student A		Stud	ent B	Student C		
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	
*Accuracy	93%	93%	99%	99%	97%	93%	
Self – correction	1:4.75	1:6	1:2	1:3	1:7	1:8.5	
Fluency (Time)	4min 29sec	5min 20sec	1min 42sec	1min 45sec	3min 35 sec	4min 21sec	

	Contro	Control Group – Results from Pre & Post testing (PM benchmarks Kits)					
	Stud	ent D	Stud	ent E	Student F		
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	
*Accuracy %	93.5%	97%	94%	95%	96%	96%	
Self – correction	1:7.5	1:4	1:7	1:12	1:3.6	1:8	
Fluency (Time)	7min 18sec	3min 56sec	2min 20sec	3min	4min 14sec	3 min 53sec	

^{*}Percentage of reading accuracy over 200 words for Pre-test and 208 words for Post-test on an unseen text.

Comparison of Reading Accuracy - Pre & Post testing

Reading Accuarcy at Text Level 26



		Experimental Group – Comprehension Results										
	Student A					Stud	ent B		Student C			
Questions	Р	re	Po	ost	Р	re	Po	ost	Р	re	Po	ost
	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs
1	Χ	1	✓	1	Χ	1	✓	1	Χ	1	Х	1
2	1/2	4	1/2	1	1/2	1	✓	1	1/2	1	1/2	1
3	✓	4	1/2	1	1/2	1	✓	10	1/2	1	1/2	1
4	1/2	12	✓	1	X	1	✓	1	Х	1	✓	1
5	Χ	9	1/2	1	1/2	1	1/2	1	✓	1	✓	1
Total	2	2	3	1/2	2	1/2	4	1/2	2	2	(3

Key X= incorrect response

 \checkmark = correct response $\frac{1}{2}$ = Half a mark awarded.

Time / Sec = Time taken to respond to question.

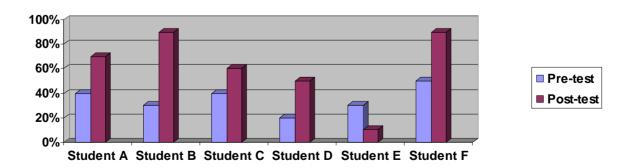
		Control Group - Comprehension Results										
		Stud	ent D			Stud	ent E		Student F			
Questions	Р	re	Po	ost	Р	re	Po	ost	Р	re	Po	ost
	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs	Reply	Time/ Secs
1	Χ	1	Χ	20	Χ	8	Х	15	Χ	20	✓	1
2	X	26	1/2	1	1/2	2	Х	26	1/2	1	1/2	1
3	✓	1	1/2	1	✓	1	1/2	1	1/2	1	✓	1
4	Х	16	✓	1	Х	2	1/2	8	✓	1	✓	1
5	Х	10	1/2	1	Х	1	X	20	1/2	1	✓	1
Total	•	1	2	1/2	1	1/2	•	1	2	1/2	4	1/2

Key X= incorrect response

 \checkmark = correct response $\frac{1}{2}$ = Half a mark awarded.

Time / Sec = Time taken to respond to question.

Comprehension Assessment at Text Level 26

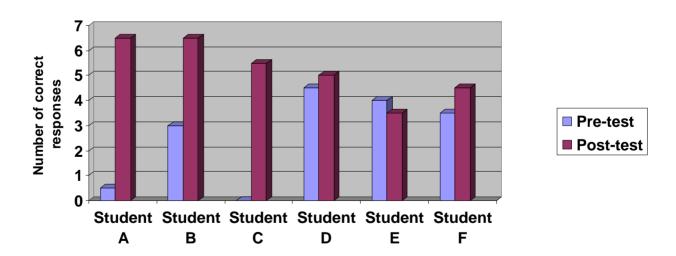


Analysis of ROL – Paraphrasing Pre-test & Post-test Results

	Students	Pre-test	Post-test	Overall Improvement
Experimental	Α	3.5%	46%	92%
Group	В	21%	46%	54%
	С	0%	39%	100%
	D	32%	36%	10%
Control Group	Е	28.5%	25%	-12.5%
	F	25%	32%	22%

Comparison of ROL Results

Paraphrasing Assessment - ROL

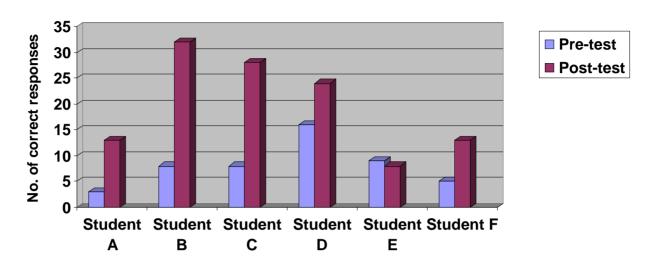


Analysis of Synonyms Task – Pre & Post testing Results

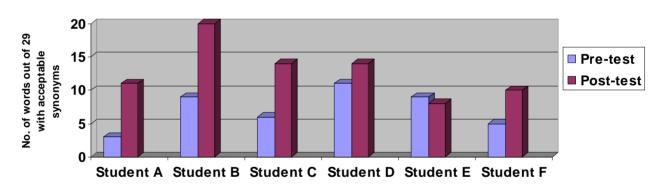
	Experimental Group						Control Group					
Target	Stud	ent A	Stud	ent B	Stude	ent C	Student D Student E Student			ent F		
Word	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Small	C1	C1 IR	C1	C3 IR	0	C1	C1	C3	0	C1	C1	C2
Fast	0	C1 T	OV	C1 IR	0	C1	NA	NA	0	NA	NA	C1
Old	NA	NA	C1	C1 IR	0	IR	NA	NA	0	Т	NA	0
Leave	NA	C1	V	C1	0	NA	C1	C1 IR	0	C1	Т	Т
Car	IR	C1	IR	C1	IR	NA	C1	C1	0	NA	V	IR
Shoe	Р	C1	IR	C1	0	C1	NA	NA	C1	NA	NA	C1
Child	C1	C1	Р	C1 P	Р	C3	C1	C1 P	C1	C1	Р	Р
Fat	Р	NA	C1	C1	0	C4	C2	C2	C1	NA	NA	C1
Walk	V	NA	IR V	IR	0	IR	NA	0	0	0	0	Т
Cat	NA	C1	0	C2	NA	NA	C1	C2	NA	C1	C1	C1
Fatigue	NA	NA	NA	C1 D	IR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Boat	IR	C1	C1	C2	C1	C2	NA	NA	C1	NA	D	C1
Clean	V	C2	V	C1 IR D	Т	C1	C2	C4	C1	NA	NA	0
Sick	C1	NA	C1	C2	IR	IR	NA	C1	C1	C1	NA	NA
Tiger	Ρ	C2	C1	C3	C2	C3	C3	C3	C1	C1	C1	C1
Engine	NA	NA	IR	IR	NA	D	NA	C1	IR	NA	IR	IR
Ignore	V	NA	D	IR	T	C3	NA	D	NA	IR	D	NA
Precious	NA	IR	C1	C1	C2	C1	IR	NA	IR	IR	NA	IR
Angry	NA	NA	C3	C2	NA	D	C2	C2	IR	C1	C1	C2
Hit	IR	IR	C1	C4	T C1	C2	NA	C1	C1	IR	NA	NA
Give	V	NA	Т	Т	IR	IR	Т	Т	Т	0	Т	Т
Stop	٧	NA	IR	D	Т	S R	D	C1 IR	IR	IR	D	NA
Cage	D	NA	IR	C1	Т	IR	IR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Adolescent	NA	NA	IR	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Station	Р	IR	IR	IR	NA	IR	NA	NA	IR	NA	NA	IR
Release	NA	IR	IR	C1	C1	C1	C1	C1	IR	NA	C1	C1
Flow	IR	IR	IR	IR	IR	IR	IR	IR	IR	IR	D	C2
Liberate	NA	NA	IR	IR	NA	NA	NA	IR	NA	NA	NA	NA
A building	NA	C1	IR	C2	C1	C4	C1	IR	C1	C1	NA	D
Total of correct responses	3	13	8	32	8	28	16	24	9	8	5	13
	KEY – IR Incorrect Response V Verb NA No Attempt P Plural C Number of Correct responses T Tense D Definition O Opposites											

Comparisons of Synonyms Task Results

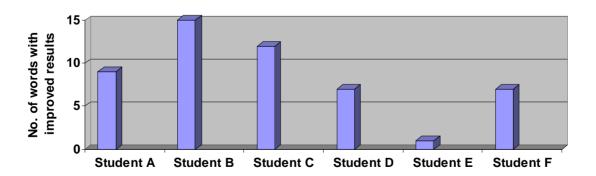
Synonyms Task



Synonyms Task - Words with acceptable synonyms suggested.



Synonyms Task (Post-tesing Improvements)



DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to measure the effectiveness of explicitly teaching synonyms and paraphrasing and the impact this has on a student's literal comprehension.

The students were enthusiastic and participated actively during the 10 intervention sessions. During the first two sessions it was evident that the students had not fully grasped the concept of synonyms as they often suggestion opposites, plurals or a different tense for the word to be changed. This was also evident in the student's Synonym Task (Munro, 2005) pre-testing results. Once a common definition was established the students were then able to suggested more plausible responses or identify that they did not know a synonym for the word. The post-testing results of the Synonyms Task shows that the experimental group, particularly Student B (an increase of 15 out of the 29 words) and Student C (an increase of 12 out of the 29 words), showed a significant improvement in suggesting alternative words that mean the same.

More substantial was the improvement of the experimental group's skills in paraphrasing. Student A and Student C showed an improvement of 92% and 100%. The students required a lot of modelling of this skill by the teacher and once the paraphrasing strategy RAP (Schumaker, Denton & Deshler, 1984) was introduced the students began to show an improvement during the last three sessions. Katims & Harris (1997, p.117) supports the notion that "The paraphrasing strategy has been demonstrated to significantly increase the reading comprehension of students with and without learning disabilities." With more practice with this strategy a greater impact would be made on the student's literal comprehension. This is due to the students demonstrating a real understanding of paraphrasing and its purpose during the final session. They were also able make successful attempts at paraphrasing independently rather than relying on the support of the teacher. This is particularly true for Student B who was making great gains and this is evident in her comprehension post-testing results.

Overall the experimental group showed some improvement with their literal comprehension but so did Student D and Student F. The post-testing results could have been influenced by each of the students in the experimental group being absent from school between the time the intervention session were complete and the post-testing begun. Student C in particular was

called in after school to complete the Reading and comprehension assessment after being absent on that day. This may explain the reason his reading accuracy decreased for the same text level and also the less substantial improvement of his literal comprehension. This noted, Student B did show a remarkable improvement but did so in all areas post-tested.

Other factors that could account for the results in post-testing could be contributed to the environment the intervention session took place. Each of the 10 sessions and all pre and post testing took place within the classroom. The duration of majority of the sessions was 20 minutes and took place during the Literacy Block, while the rest of the class worked independently at Learning Centres or Teacher Directed Writing Tasks. This was not always ideal as it was a Year 1/2 classroom and a lot of these students require support and find it difficult to remain focused for long periods of time. Students of this age are not normally required to work independently for this period of time without assistance, particularly the Year 1 students. Ideally, these sessions would have been more beneficial if they took place outside of the classroom environment but this was not physically possible.

Implications for teaching practice

- Explicit teaching of synonyms to all students. This will help to build their vocabulary networks and oral language.
- Introduce the paraphrasing strategy RAP to students to use when reading to gain information from texts. Encourage students to self question 'What is the author's message?' 'How could I put this in my own words?'
- Create opportunities for students to identify and discuss key ideas and details in their own words.
- Expose students to a variety of comprehension tasks that require the students to answer through meaning gain from the text. For example retelling, cloze activities, multiple choice questions or illustrations.

Directions for future research

- Create or locate a test that accurately demonstrates the students paraphrasing skills rather than adapting Clay et al (1999) ROL.
- Conduct a study that tests the students Fiction and Non-fiction literal comprehension.
 The PM Benchmark Kit (Nelley, & Smith 2000) and PM Benchmark Kit 2(Smith & Nelley, 2002) limited this study to fictional comprehension. This may be improved by locating two suitable non-fiction and fictional text that can be used during pre and post testing. This would then require comprehension assessment to be devised whereas the PM Benchmark kits do provide comprehension questions that can be answered orally.

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APPENDIX – Lesson Plans

These lessons have been designed to use with Year 2 students with a high reading accuracy for their age but poor comprehension. They should be conducted with small groups of children for approximately 20 minutes at a time.

Lesson Plan One

	Description	Approximate Time
Focus	Synonyms – What are synonyms?	
Introduction	What are synonyms? Record definition	3-5mins
Activity	Can you think of synonyms for BIG, BRIGHT? Record list of synonyms. Discuss children's responses. Explain why any incorrect responses aren't a synonym. Eg. May be an opposites, tenses etc.	7-10mins
Plenary	When could you use synonyms?	2mins

Lesson Plan Two

	Description	Approximate Time
Focus	Synonyms – Where can we find Synonyms?	
Introduction	Revisit definition from session 1. Ask "Where can we find Synonyms?" Introduce a thesaurus. How does a thesaurus work? Let each student look through a thesaurus. Discuss how the word in a sentence helps us to know which synonym to choose.	5-10mins
Activity	Read selected text to students. Choose a word from the text to look up in the thesaurus. Decide which words are appropriate synonyms and list. Re-read sentence using the different synonyms. Does the sentence/story still make sense?	5-8mins
Plenary	Discuss synonyms for tired, hungry and happy. Students to practise at home using synonyms for tired, hungry and happy and see if anyone at home notices. Students then to discuss what a synonym is with someone at home.	5mins

Lesson Plan Three

	Description	Approximate Time
Focus	Synonyms – Using synonyms in a sentence,	
Introduction	Revisit definition of synonym. Discuss what synonyms students tried at home. Did they try any others words and their synonyms? What can we use to help find synonyms for words?	4mins
Activity	Read short sentences to students. Ask them to think of alternative words to use in sentences. Record responses. Re-read sentences with listed synonyms. Look words up in the thesaurus. Try using synonyms from the thesaurus in the sentences. Which would be the best replacement?	5-10mins
Plenary	What are some new 'words' (synonyms) are you going to use when talking and in your writing?	2mins

Lesson Plan Four

	Description	Approximate Time
Focus	Synonyms and Paraphrasing – What is paraphrasing?	
Introduction	What is paraphrasing? What might it mean? Write definition together to establish a common meaning for group. Why would paraphrasing be useful when reading?	5mins
Activity	Read sentences from a chosen text to students. Ask them to repeat in their own words? What were they doing while they were listening to the sentences? Where they thinking of the meaning of the sentence? Could they identify alternative words help them remember or interpret the sentence?	10mins
Plenary	How might synonyms help us to paraphrase? Record response.	4mins

Lesson Plan Five

	Description	Approximate Time
Focus	Synonyms and Paraphrasing – How do synonyms help	with paraphrasing?
Introduction	Revisit/explain how synonyms can help students to paraphrase. Establish that students still have a clear understanding of what synonyms and paraphrasing are.	4mins
Activity	Read short story or paragraph from selected text to students. Discuss possible synonyms that could be used to keep the meaning. Record these. Test suggestions. Re-read random sentences and ask student individually to paraphrase verbally.	10mins
Plenary	How might paraphrasing help you with your reading? Ask students to reflect on this question. They may have suggestions so record these.	2mins

Lesson Plan Six

	Description	Approximate Time
Focus	Synonyms and Paraphrasing – How will paraphrase help	when reading?
Introduction	Revisit the question - How might paraphrasing help you with your reading? When would we use paraphrasing as a strategy?	4mins
Activity	Read short story or paragraph from selected text to students. Ask students to think of synonyms in their head, picture story taking place. Re-read a sentence. Ask them to paraphrase this sentence. Record synonyms used. What other synonyms could be used? Are they the best options?	10-15mins
Plenary	What strategies did you use while you were listening to the story/paragraph/sentence? Record responses	3mins

Lesson Plan Seven

	Description	Approx. Time
Focus	Paraphrasing – What does paraphrasing help us do?	
Introduction	Revisit synonyms. Play Synonyms Memory Game. Students match cards with the same meanings. Read short sentences to students and they fill in the gaps with an appropriate synonym for the word in brackets.	8mins
Activity	Read short story or paragraph from selected text to students. Modelled writing alternative words then re-reading to check meaning is maintained. Ask students to continue through text and at the end of each sentence ask students to paraphrase. Discuss how it helps us to remember what the author is telling us. Why is it important for us to understand what the author is telling us? Discuss how the author is giving us a message through the text. Share passages completed independently.	10mins
Plenary	What strategies did you use to help you in this session? How do you feel about your reading? Has this session helped you? Record students' responses.	3mins

Lesson Plan Eight, Nine & Ten

	Description	Approx. Time
Focus	Paraphrasing – How does paraphrasing help with comprehension?	
Introduction	Revisit synonyms. Play 'Yes/No' game where teacher reads two words and the students hold up yes or no if the words have a similar meaning. Students complete a matching sheet where they draw lines between words that have similar meanings.	5mins
Activity	Introduce RAP – Read the paragraph, Ask yourself "What are the main ideas/details?', and Put into your own words. Have displayed on a poster for reference. Read short story or paragraph from selected text to students. Underline, using highlighters, main/ key ideas in the text. Suggest possible synonyms. Modelling writing a paraphrased sentence. At the end of each sentence ask students to paraphrase independently writing their suggestions then sharing and discuss.	10mins
Plenary	What strategies did you use to help you in this session? How do you feel about your reading? How has this session helped you? Record students' responses.	3mins

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