Teaching an effective self instruction strategy (paraphrasing) enhances reading comprehension ability of Year 8 boys with learning difficulties

Abstract

The hypothesis of this study is that teaching an effective self instruction strategy (paraphrasing) may enhance reading comprehension ability of Year 8 boys with learning difficulties.

The study compared two groups, a control group of twelve students and a treatment group of twelve students. The post test outcomes indicated that the hypothesis was supported. Two students showed improvement in the control group whilst six improved in the treatment group. The results of the post vocabulary testing were also similar.

All students in both groups have been identified as having learning difficulties in literacy. Research indicates that teaching paraphrasing does improve reading comprehension, the purpose of this study was to see if that was in fact the case in this particular context.

A great deal of time was spent getting both verbal and written feedback from the students during the sessions.

The results indicate that teaching the skill of paraphrasing does improve students reading comprehension.

Introduction

A great deal of students who are competent decoders have difficulty with reading comprehension. Seeking clarification of what students have read often results in students looking for visual cues within a text (literal comprehension), rather than an inferred or evaluative response. It is vitally important for students to have some level of reading comprehension, not solely from an English viewpoint, but the ability is needed in all curriculum areas.

Paraphrasing is a powerful tool because it enables students with learning difficulties an access point. It does not just involve reading, it can be accessed in a number of ways. Fisk and Hurst (2003) point out that 'One of the reasons paraphrasing for comprehension works so well is because it integrates all modes of communication-reading, writing, listening and speaking – which leads to a deeper understanding of the text'(p.2). This is vitally important for those students that are not necessarily proficient in all areas, but may be strong in some.

Students who are able to decode a text are granted access to the meaning of text, through the unpacking of main ideas. 'Paraphrasing is not intended to be a word-for-word translation, but rather a genuine rewriting, concentrating on expressing main ideas and supporting evidence in the students own words'(p.2). The teacher is able to lead a discussion with the student, without directly giving the student the meaning. Good questioning and accessing the students vocabulary bank can lead to a student ascertaining meaning of the text. This becomes more and more difficult in relation to the complexity of the specific piece.

Paraphrasing also focuses on the mood of the text. 'If the text is humorous, the paraphrase should be, too' (p.2). This is often a difficult aspect for students to understand. Although, it is not always the best readers who can tap into the mood of a piece.

McCrudden et al. (2005) highlight the point that structured modeling and clear explanation will enhance students interest, this in turn will improve there comprehension. (p.9).

The structured nature of the process is vitally important for students with learning difficulties, in order for them to be able to access information and achieve success.

The research gathered in this project is aimed at improving the students reading comprehension. The model used in the sessions is very similar to that used in Fisk and Hurst (2003).

1 ~ Initial reading of text followed by discussion.

2 ~ Second reading of text followed by note taking.

3 ~ Written paraphrasing.

4 ~ Sharing of the written paraphrase.

The Year 8 boys in this study have been identified as students with learning difficulties in both reading and writing. Within the group abilities are mixed, but on the whole they are below expected levels for their ages. The hypothesis is that teaching an effective self instruction strategy (paraphrasing) may enhance reading comprehension ability of Year 8 boys with learning difficulties.

Method

Design

The study compares two groups of students. A control group and an intervention group. The intervention group were given explicit teaching in terms of the a paraphrasing strategy and the use of synonyms. The OXO design was used in terms of pre testing the students, teaching the strategy and post testing the students.

Participants

The students who took part in the study are all in Year 8. They have been identified as having learning difficulties in literacy. At the beginning of Year 7 all were tested according to the Pat R reading comprehension test. Those students who were in the bottom bracket in terms of results were then tested with the SRA Corrective Reading Decoding test. These students were offered places in the Corrective Reading class in Year 7 and did not do mainstream English. In Year 8 these boys do not do a LOTE, but instead do another English class which focuses predominately on writing.

These boys can all decode, they have all completed the Corrective Reading program. The control group consists of 14 boys, whilst the treatment group consists of 13 boys. For the purpose of the study the results from 12 boys were used from each group.

Procedure

All students were pre tested at the beginning of the year in the following areas. Paraphrasing, comprehension, vocabulary and spelling. The paraphrasing test used was the one developed by John Munro (2005), whist Pat R was used for comprehension and vocabulary and the SAST (South Australian Spelling Test) was used for spellingStudent. The results and age of the students are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Pre-test scores ~ all students.

Student	Age (1/05/07)	Paraphrasing Raw Score	Pat R Comprehension		Pat R Vocabulary		SAST
Control Group	Yrs.Mths		% Rank	Stanine	% Rank	Stanine	Yrs.Mths
A	13.3	2	31	4	35	4	9.7
B	13.8	11	57	5	39	4	10.2
C	13.8	6	4	1	4	1	7.8
D	13.8	10	60	6	8	2	12.2
E	13.9	12	57	5	40	5	7.5
F	13.7	9	17	3	3	1	11.7
G	14.0	16	60	6	45	5	11.7
H	13.3	7	8	2	26	4	11.4
I	13.8	8	24	4	4	1	11.2
J	13.9	7	24	4	8	2	13.0
K	13.5	11	53	5	6	2	9.7
L	13.5	12	46	5	19	3	10.9
Average	13.6	9.25	34.7	4.16	19.75	2.83	10.58
Intervention Group							
A	14.0	10	35	4	10	2	11.4
B	14.2	5	14	3	26	4	10.5
C	13.11	5	24	4	2	1	10.0
D	14.0	7	38	4	40	5	10.7
E	13.9	4	31	4	50	5	10.5
F	13.4	7	24	4	13	3	9.0
G	13.1	12	24	4	13	3	10.9
H	13.8	15	50	5	19	3	10.5
I	14.1	9	35	4	26	4	10.9
J	13.5	15	63	4	15	3	13.8
K	14.1	9	42	5	26	4	10.0
L	14.1	8	57	5	15	3	10.7
Average	13.7	8.83	36.41	4.16	18.58	3.33	10.6

The teaching was done over a period of five weeks. The sessions were based on John Munro's (2006) Comprehension- Paraphrasing teaching strategy. In all there are 9 scripted sessions. Some sessions were broken into two, whilst others were not. On average students, were taking part in two to three forty minute sessions per week. Thus, total explicit teaching time was very close to ten hours.

Students were not withdrawn from the group. Because both classes are special education classes, the number of students in each one is limited. Thus the skill of paraphrasing was taught to the whole intervention group. The results of twelve students from each group have been used to make them equal and also the fact that some consent forms were not received.

Each session opened with a reading of the specific text being used. The text was read as a group with individuals reading approximately one paragraph at a time. One the entire text had been read as a group, the text was then looked at in more detail. Each session was very similar in the format followed. Very prescriptive and specific.

Sentences were looked at individually and then oral responses were shared amongst the class. Highlighting positive responses and looking at ways to make improvements for errors.

Materials

Seven different texts were used as foci. The texts corresponded with the lessons in Munro's (2006) Comprehension- Paraphrasing strategy.

Table 2 Post-test scores ~ all students.

Student	Paraphrasing Raw Score	Pat R Comprehension		Pat R Vocabulary		Age (1/05/07)
Control Group		% Rank	Stanine	% Rank	Stanine	Yrs.Mths
A	10	32	4	31	4	13.3
B	14	39	4	31	4	13.8
C	7	4	2	13	3	13.8
D	8	39	4	26	4	13.8
E	17	51	5	41	5	13.9
F	9	15	3	1	1	13.7
G	14	67	6	26	4	14.0
H	12	39	4	26	4	13.3
I	9	26	4	17	3	13.8
J	12	23	4	13	3	13.9
K	15	29	4	26	4	13.5
L	10	35	4	17	3	13.5
Average	11.41	33.25	4	20.16	3.5	13.6
Intervention Group						
A	15	54	5	26	4	14.0
B	16	13	3	31	4	14.2
C	12	51	5	7	2	13.11
D	18	91	8	36	4	14.0
E	13	47	5	36	4	13.9
F	16	32	4	31	4	13.4
G	11	39	4	26	4	13.1
H	17	59	5	41	5	13.8
I	13	32	4	41	5	14.1
J	23	71	6	46	5	13.5
k	10	46	5	13	3	14.1
L	13	51	5	51	5	14.1
Average	14.75	48.83	4.91	32.08	4.08	13.7

Results

The results of the research indicate that teaching an effective self instruction strategy (in this case paraphrasing) does enhance ones comprehension ability. Although the numbers do not indicate dramatic improvement, the interesting point is the patterns of improvement.

In the treatment group a total of five students made progress with their comprehension, whilst only one did in control group. Similar results occurred in the vocabulary test, eight improving in the treatment group and five in the control group.

The actual paraphrasing test showed marked improvement with the treatment group and slight improvement with the control group. These results were as expected.

References

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

McCrudden et al. (2005) Self-efficacy and interest in the use of reading strategies. Journal of Research in Childhood Education 119