

## **ABSTRACT**

The goal of this project was to improve the reading comprehension levels of a group of Grade 3 / 4 children through teaching the strategy of paraphrasing.

Concern had been expressed by the middle primary teachers and the literacy coordinator regarding some students who could effectively decode text but who had difficulty with comprehending. When required to verbally represent ideas or facts from what had been read, they struggled to retrieve the information.

Their ability to decode accurately at an appropriate level but without the understanding, inhibited them from making the necessary links to be able to perform related tasks.

As these students progress through senior primary levels and into secondary school they will be required to access more complex information from texts. If this problem is not rectified they will face escalating difficulties with their learning.

By teaching these students paraphrasing skills it is hoped that they will be more able to express ideas in their own words making more valid links with the texts they read.

The hypothesis to be investigated in this study is:

**Teaching paraphrasing to grade 3 / 4 students with explicit instruction in the use of synonyms improves reading comprehension.**

This study uses the OXO model with comparisons being drawn between two groups of students from separate classes. The Intervention Group comprised of four students whilst the Control Group comprised of three students. (The imbalance of student numbers in the groups was due to written permission to be involved in the study not being granted for a selected student in the Control Group.)

The children in the Control group received five one hour lessons over a period of two weeks during which time they were specifically taught paraphrasing with explicit instruction in the use of synonyms Throughout the sessions the students were given both oral and written practice in this skill working individually, with a partner and as a whole group.

Students from both groups displayed varying degrees of an increase in their reading comprehension levels on post-testing. However on the post-testing of synonyms and paraphrasing the intervention group obtained significantly accelerated scores compared with the control group whose scores remained similar to the pre-testing.

While it can be substantiated that the explicit instruction on synonyms was shown to increase their performance at the synonyms and paraphrasing tasks, the equable gains made by the control group on the comprehension tasks renders the findings for this study inconclusive.

## INTRODUCTION

Intensive and focused literacy instruction in the early years of primary schooling is producing seemingly efficient readers. The students present on day one in uniforms that reflect expectations of rapid physical growth, supporting backpacks containing lunch-boxes that reflect expectations of an impending famine and, concealed in their hearts and minds, a burning desire and expectation that they will learn to *read*.

Most of these children will have their personal expectations satisfied but for some it can be the entrance to a long and tough road as they seek to become readers. For those who are readily identifiable as struggling with the task, the Reading Recovery net is unfurled. All manner of follow up support programs and on-going monitoring cradles their progress. To some extent they are the lucky ones. They have been identified.

It is often not until some children enter the middle years at primary school that the 'cracks' appear. Decoding efficiently at levels of twenty eight and beyond there has been no real concern regarding their performance. It is when they are confronted with more complex tasks, and texts that require multiple levels of interpretation and understanding, that a problem is evident. Somewhere on the reading journey there are strategies they haven't caught.

For these students the risk of the problem increasing as they progress through their schooling is great if not attended to and remedied.

As identified by (Munro, 2008) in his model of reading, known as the 'Multiple Levels of Text Processing, (MLOTP), effective readers process text at a number of levels; sentence level, conceptual level and topic level, and employ a variety of

strategies in doing so.

Reading is an active process and learners need to be aware of the range of strategies at their disposal as they seek to understand a text. Some students learn these automatically but many students require explicit instruction.

As cited in (First Steps. 1997) 'One of the most crucial elements of supporting reading development is the explicit teaching of reading strategies so readers are able to access their prior knowledge during reading.'

Reading comprehension in simple terms relates to understanding written text but the process of comprehending is a complex task involving the synthesis of existing knowledge with organization, interpretation and the ability to make appropriate links with the text. It is integral to reading not a consequence of having read.

Many students have automated the necessary strategies, but there are some who battle to gain the appropriate meaning from print. They lack the necessary skills that effective readers use and apply to a diversity of texts and a variety of genres.

They fail to grasp the key words and elements causing them to demonstrate poor comprehension skills.(Parker, Hasbrouck and Denton, 2002)

These are the students for whom we must extend the net that caught the noticeable strugglers in their junior primary years,

Many researchers have explored the reasons why some readers fail, their investigations leading them to scrutinize the reading behaviours of the successful.

It is the good readers who are able to actively integrate a vast range of strategies.

In explaining reasons for poor comprehension, (Munro, 2008) cites that some students working at the sentence level experience difficulty interpreting sentences with the resultant outcome of poor comprehension at literal, inferential and critical levels.

According to (Munro, 2008), paraphrasing is an important strategy that effective readers use whereby the reader translates text into their own words enabling them to internalize the message. It is agreed by (Fisk and Hurst,2003) that paraphrasing is an effective strategy as it integrates and promotes a deeper understanding of text allowing the reader to become text decoder, user, participant and analyst.

In describing the teaching of paraphrasing we are told by (Fisk and Hurst 2003) that it should be conveyed as an expression of the main ideas and substantiated in the students words rather than a literal word by word translation.( Harris and Sipay,!990, Katims and Harris,1997, Shugarman and Hurst,1996; in Fisk and Hurst, 2003) give further support to the value of paraphrasing for comprehension as it enables the reader to clarify main ideas and author intention.

(Munro, 2008 ) states that working on synonyms prior to paraphrasing supports students re-telling and allows for the conceptual linking of what is known with the unknown and allows them to extend and build networks of vocabulary.

In this study I aim to further investigate the effect that the teaching of paraphrasing has for reading comprehension, combined with explicit instruction in the use of synonyms. The students for the intervention are from a composite year 3 / 4 class who decode well but who are experiencing difficulty with reading comprehension.

The teaching will focus on improving understanding at sentence level through the identification of key words from a text and in the application of synonyms for paraphrasing. The students will be given practical activities and experiences and the opportunity to collaborate and reflect on their learning.

My hypothesis is that **teaching paraphrasing to grade 3 / 4 students, with explicit instruction in the use of synonyms improves reading comprehension.**

## METHOD

### Design

Using the OXO design, this study draws comparisons between two groups of Middle Primary School students, one group receiving intervention instruction and the second being monitored for control purposes.

The intervention group are taught to paraphrase along with explicit instruction in the use of synonyms.

## PARTICIPANTS

Name	Intervention or Control Group	Sex	Age in Years	Age in Months	ESL.	Reading Text Level	Previous Intervention	EMA	Grade Level
Student A	I	F	8.7yrs	103 months	N	26	Reading Recovery Year1.60 lessons. Bridges 64 lessons.	N	3
Student B	I	M	8.6yrs	102 months	N	28+	Bridges 55 Lessons	N	3
Student C	I	F	9.6yrs	114 months	N	28+	Literacy Support Year 1. Bridges 40 lessons	N	4
Student D	I	M	8.5yrs	101 months	N	25	Literacy Support Year 1. Bridges 60 lessons.	N	3
Student E	C	M	9.8yrs	116 months	Y	28+	ERIK Comprehension. Year 4	N	4
Student F	C	F	9.6yrs	114 months	N	28+	Bridges 68 lessons.	N	4
Student G	C	M	9.6yrs	114 months	N	28+	Reading Recovery 59 lessons.	N	4

The students selected for the study are from composite Grade 3 / 4 classes with an age range from 8.3years to 9.8years. They were identified for the study by their class teachers and the literacy co-ordinator both of whom had concerns regarding their comprehension standards. It was considered that additional instruction aimed at raising their levels of understanding of text would be of benefit. Examination of these student's personal data revealed a history of concerns regarding literacy.

## **Materials**

### **Assessment**

**Pre-intervention-testing and post-intervention-testing employed the instruments outlined below:**

TORCH: 'Lizards Love Eggs'

Paraphrasing Test, (John Munro)

Synonyms Test (John Munro)

The Self Efficacy Test

### **Texts used for teaching purposes**

'Fast Food Felicity' by Hargreaves and Hill.

'Shipwrecked' by Pedersen & Beckett

'Australian Sea Life' by Steve Parish

'Australian Bird Life' by Steve Parish

### **Additional Materials**

Teacher and student devised flashcards for synonym games.

## **PROCEDURE**

All students in this study were assessed prior to receiving the intervention using the following instruments and in the order outlined:

TORCH – Tests of Reading Comprehension, (Mossesnon et al), The Paraphrasing Test, (John Munro) and The Synonyms Task, (John Munro).

The TORCH Test provided knowledge of the student's reading age and reading accuracy as well as their comprehension level, while Munro's tests assessed their ability to paraphrase and use synonyms.

The reading comprehension test was administered in a group situation while the other tests were given individually.

Prior to testing the students had been divided into the group for intervention instruction, (4 students), and the control group, (3 students). This decision was based on class-room placement which affected their availability and accessibility for the intervention instruction.

( Initially, eight children were selected for the study, however the parents of one student did not grant permission for their child to participate.)

Following the initial testing, the intervention group received a series of five one hour lessons, extending over a two week period. These were conducted during their regular, morning, literacy sessions within their classroom, and involved explicit instruction in using synonyms and in applying this knowledge to assist with paraphrasing. Instruction for this was given within the context of guided reading texts appropriate to their reading ability and included both fiction and nonfiction genres.

In the week ensuing the completion of the lessons, post- testing was conducted repeating the same tasks and format as for the pre-testing.

**For lesson procedure see appendices 1-3.**



## RESULTS

The following table contains the results of Pre-Testing and Post-Testing for both the Intervention Group and the Control Group as set out in Table 1.

Student	Torch R/S Pre-test	Torch R/S Post-test	Torch Score Pre-test	Torch Score Post-test	Paraphrasing Pre-test	Paraphrasing Post-test	Synonyms Pre-test	Synonyms Post-test
A	3	5	18.2	23.4	1	15	12	22
B	5	10	23.4	32.8	7	36	15	34
C	6	10	25.5	32.8	6	35	16	36
D	4	6	21.0	25.5	2	18	11	23
E	3	5	18.2	23.4	4	8	13	8
F	6	9	25.5	31.0	11	13	11	13
G	4	5	21.0	23.4	12	12	14	12

Table 1.

Post testing results indicate an upward trend in performance with the comprehension task in both groups. However, the most significant improvement across the range of tasks was with the students receiving the intervention instruction. While this supports the hypothesis that teaching paraphrasing to Grade 3 / 4 children, with explicit instruction in the use of synonyms, improves reading comprehension, it could also be viably argued that the study is inconclusive.

The time span between pre and post testing covering a mere six week period, the gain in scores across the board exhibited by students B and C of the intervention group, demonstrates the rapidity of learning that occurred for them. Both almost doubled their raw scores on the Torch test, and demonstrated steep increases in the paraphrasing and synonym testing.

Student F of the control group produced an equable result in the post-testing on the TORCH task, however, it should be noted that prior to, and during the length of the project, she had been receiving private reading tuition.

Student A of the intervention group presented as the least confident of the group from

the onset and throughout the teaching sessions, initially unwilling to share her attempts at both paraphrasing and with the synonym tasks. As the sessions progressed and she experienced degrees of success which were acknowledged and celebrated by her peers, she sought practice tasks for homework. These were completed in written form and eagerly produced at the commencement of the next session. As a student with oral languages issues considered sufficiently severe to receive integration funding, the gains she made in scores for all testing, while seemingly less significant than the other group members, are perhaps the most demonstrative in supporting the hypothesis.

Student D of the intervention group, whilst having scores indicating improvement in understanding, remains a concern with regard to future performance in literacy. It was noted that during reading aloud tasks, visual tracking presented a problem for him as did spelling for written tasks.

It was also observed that on tasks where he was read to, his comprehension and recall of main ideas was far greater.

Students E and G of the control group improved their scores on the TORCH test but gains were less evident with the paraphrasing and synonym tests. Whilst not having been exposed to the intervention procedures, it should be noted that these children had recently experienced cloze procedure as a teaching technique during literacy activities. As the TORCH test uses this format, their improved performance, though only marginal, could be attributed to increased familiarity with the technique.

All students in the control group, with the exception of student D, described an increased ability in their understanding of texts and enthusiastically related it to report writing tasks they were required to do in class. They articulated that learning to paraphrase helped them to write in their own words the information they researched.

Whilst student D was pleased with his improvement in understanding what he read, he indicated that he believed he was still inefficient at reading.

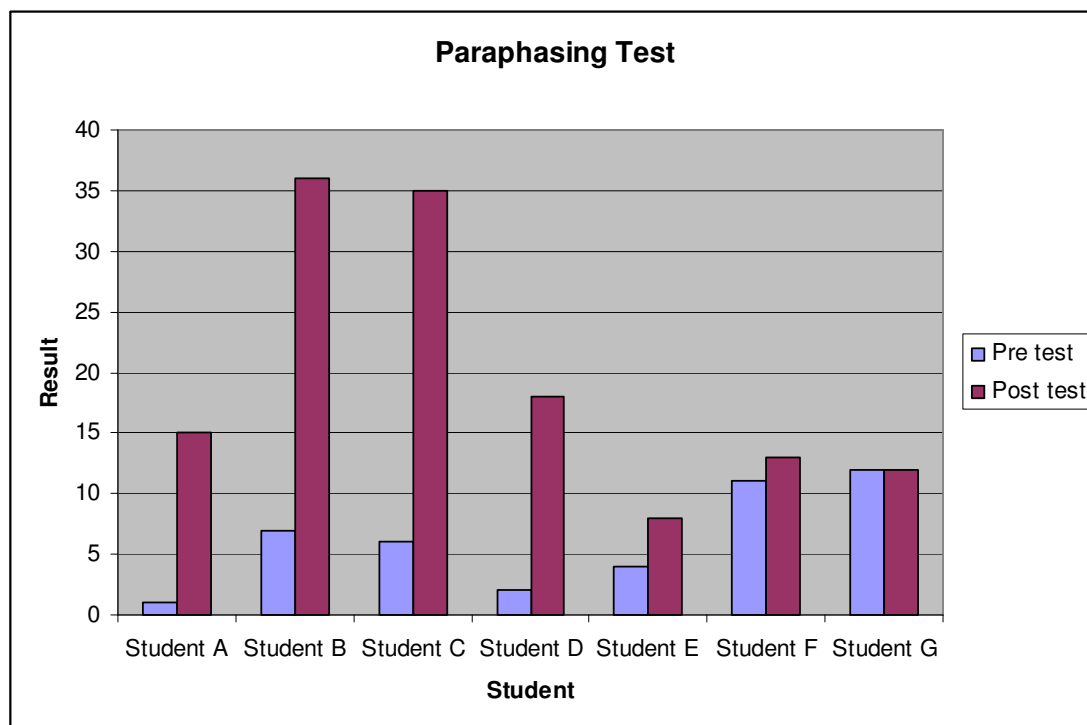


Figure 1.

Figure 1 above, shows that all students from the intervention group performed poorly in pre testing on Munro's Paraphrasing test ( 2005), with students A and D respectively producing only one and two synonyms for use in their paraphrase. Students B and C used seven and six synonyms respectively in their paraphrases. The control group results for this were equable or better on the pre-testing task, but remained at similar levels for the post- testing. Student E showed an increase of four words, Student F, two words and Student G remained the same with a score of twelve words.

In contrast to this all students from the intervention group markedly outscored them on the post-testing implying that the explicit instruction in the use of synonyms was attributable to their much increased performances.

Student A showed an increase of fourteen words, Students B and C twenty nine words, and Student D, sixteen words.

Both Students B and C appeared to readily take on the learning while Students A and D portrayed less confidence, initially prone to giving antonyms rather than synonyms for the tasks. As the lessons progressed and they experienced success they, displayed an increased enthusiasm for the given tasks, and their was a notable improvement in self efficacy. All effectively demonstrated their ability to produce and articulate synonyms within their personal vocabulary range.

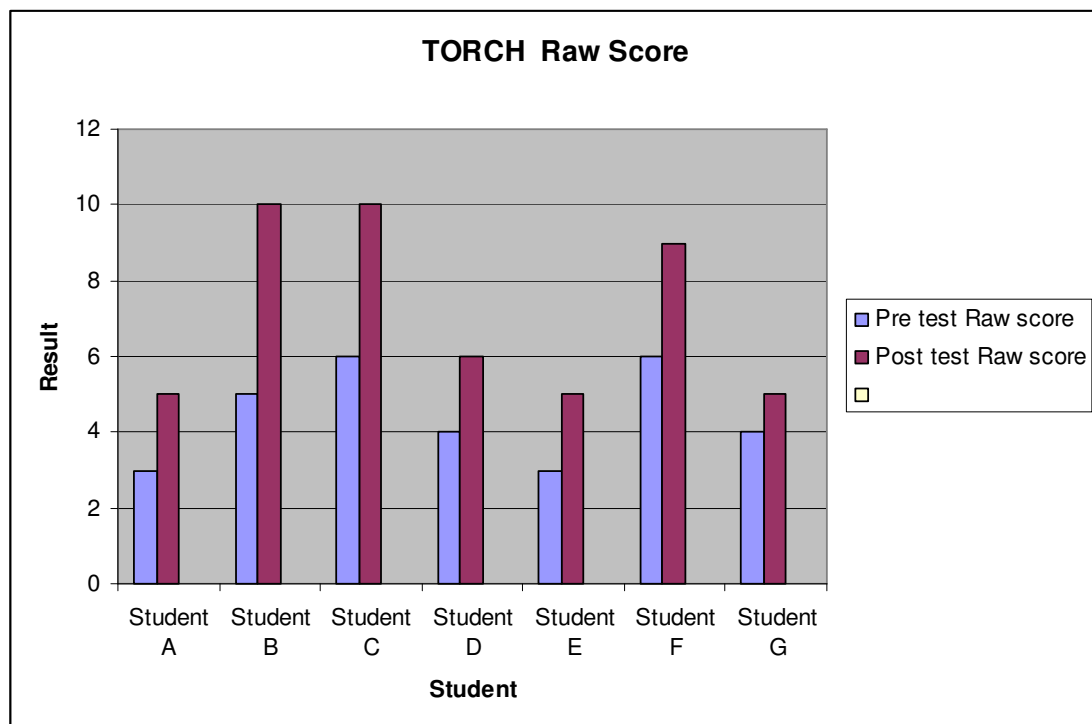


Figure 2

Pre- test and Post –test scores for reading comprehension are shown in Figure1 The test used was TORCH, ‘Lizards Love Eggs’ and results displayed are for both the intervention group and the control group. Increases in performance are observable in both groups of students, the greatest being with Students B and C from the intervention group who achieved raw scores five and four more respectively than on

the initial testing. This finding is supportive of the hypothesis for this study.

Student F of the control group also performed at a much improved level than she did initially, but as noted earlier in this report she had been receiving private reading tuition which could have been a contributing factor. The class from which the intervention group were drawn had also been exposed to instruction using cloze procedure, the format used in the test. This could explain the improved performances of Students E and G.

Students A and D from the control group both improved their raw scores by two marks. Given the oral language difficulties of Student A this finding is indicative of the success of the intervention for her.

Having observed Student D displaying a higher level of understanding on texts which were read to him and noting his difficulty with visual tracking when required to read large slabs of text, he was retested. In this instance the passage for comprehension was read to him prior to completing the cloze test. While the result is not formally recorded for this study, he produced eight correct responses, double his pretest score .

Figure 3 illustrates the ability of all students in this study to produce synonyms, on the pre-test, scoring within the range of eleven to sixteen.

Post-test results display major differences in scores between the groups with the intervention group performing at a significantly higher level than the control group. The score for Student A showed an increase of ten words, Student B improved by nineteen words, Student C produced twenty more words and Student D raised his score by twelve. Increases in the control group were less creditable with only Student F showing a marginal gain of two words whilst both Student E and G produced less than at their previous attempt. Examination of these results in relation to the hypothesis for this study would acknowledge that the explicit instruction

on synonyms was cause for the acceleration in the performance of the control group.

Whilst it would be plausible to argue that these students are better equipped to be able to paraphrase text than the control group it is not a conclusive result for the hypothesis.

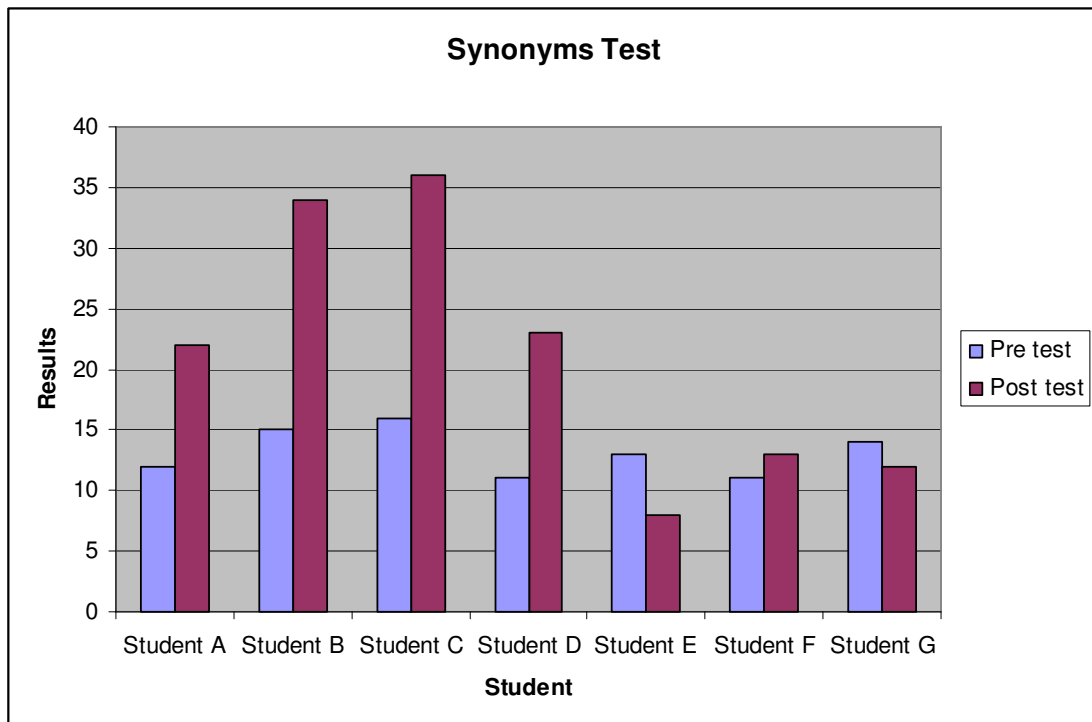


Figure3

## **DISCUSSION**

This study investigated the hypothesis that **teaching paraphrasing to grade 3 / 4 students, with explicit instruction in the use of synonyms, improves reading comprehension.**

While increased levels of comprehension were achieved by all students in the intervention group, indicating that the instruction had been effective, the results are not conclusive as members of the control group also increased their performances on the written comprehension task. Possible reasons for this have already been cited and relate to the cloze format for the TORCH test and classroom practice with the technique.

There was an accelerated ability in all members of the intervention group in contrast to the control group, to produce and use synonyms more effectively. As demonstrated in the testing on both the synonyms and paraphrasing, the students who received the explicit instruction clearly outperformed the others.

Given these results one of the key factors in learning to paraphrase is the use of synonyms. Throughout the teaching sessions the students became increasingly more engaged with the synonym tasks and demonstrated progressively, the ability to paraphrase text. They were 'catching on' and exuded a desire to learn more.

Student C began seeking homework tasks and Student A began bringing lists of words from her home reading that she had found synonyms for. This student had initial difficulty with the concept of a synonym, as did Student D, offering antonyms in some instances.

When applying their synonym knowledge to paraphrasing tasks familiarity with the text employed was of paramount importance. This enabled them to link their prior knowledge of a subject with new learning. The level of scaffolding required, differed

for each student but particularly for Student A who has oral language problems. It was for this reason that much discussion took place prior to the reading of each text. The RAP strategy was a useful tool and assisted the students with focusing and staying on task when recalling the facts or main ideas from text. When applying this strategy they were, in fact, 'in rehearsal' for later paraphrasing, building to a level that conveyed 'the meaning of the original document using the students' own vocabulary and phrasing' (C.Fisk, B.Hurst.2003).

Further to this the students became increasingly aware of the finer nuances of language. In seeking synonyms for paraphrasing they initially had to be referred back to the reading to check that the synonyms they were choosing remained within the context of the story, but soon did this automatically. Student B was vigilant at noting when a given synonym was inappropriate. This demonstrated a growing engagement with text for him and enabled natural discussions regarding the author's intention or purpose to take place.

At the commencement of this intervention I had expected that the hypothesis would be proven, having read widely on the subject and through discussion with other investigators. It was surprising to observe the equable improvements on the TORCH test for the control group given the short time span between pre-testing and post-testing. Discussion of the results with their class teacher as previously noted, revealed that he had been recently using the cloze procedure as a teaching technique in small group situations which could explain their improvement in performance as Torch uses this format.

He attributed the improvement in comprehension for Student F to tutoring she had been receiving stating there had been observable improvements with reading tasks in class.



During the initial group testing for comprehension Students A, D and E found it difficult and had to be encouraged to persevere. Student D articulated on occasions that he had forgotten where he was up to or had lost his place. These students failed to complete all questions in the pre-test. It was evident that in post-testing all students from the control group approached the testing with increased confidence with all students completing all tasks. For this session Student D was given a sheet of paper to cover the text as he read. When questioned he said that it had helped.

The accelerated scores of the control group on the post-testing with both synonyms and paraphrasing partially supports the hypothesis in that the explicit instruction they received for this demonstrated noteworthy growth. Gee. H. 1998 states that not all readers 'acquire strategies automatically and need explicit instructions, while Harvey and Goudvis tell us of the teacher's role in 'Strategies that Work- Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding' is that it should 'provide explicit instruction in reading strategies that help students better understand what they read'. A more exact finding from this study is that the overt attention to synonyms enabled the students to paraphrase more effectively.

It is worthwhile to consider whether conducting the session over a lengthier period of time would have shown a higher correlation with comprehension.

A key observation throughout the intervention was the ready development of a learning camaraderie within the group. Students engaged in conversations relating to the text, author intentions and their understanding of the content. They supported and challenged one another and celebrated each others achievements. They were keen to learn and sought me out to see when I was coming to take them.

It is worthwhile to observe the findings of Almasi and Gambrell 1997 who indicate

that in providing the opportunity for students to interact and to challenge each others ideas during discussions supports thinking at a higher level.

Further credence is given to this by Wade, Buxton and Kelly, 1999, as quoted in McCrudden, Perkins and Putney.( 2005) that ‘students who are interested in a task are more likely to use effective learning strategies such as elaboration of ideas, which in turn increases cognitive engagement and promotes understanding.’

As a result of this project on-going instruction and support for these students has been established within the whole class context. Weekly guided reading sessions are conducted by me or the class teacher to explicitly teach paraphrasing. At least one member from the intervention group participates as the *synonym* or *paraphrasing* ‘expert’

It has been an interesting and rewarding project for both students and teacher alike.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

#### Lesson Format for Teaching Sessions 1 and 2

Discussion with students regarding what they do to help themselves understand when they read.

Introduce and explain the purpose of learning to paraphrase, (ie. Read and then say it in your own words.), highlighting the importance of synonyms in the process.

STEP	PROCEDURE
1	Discussion of selected text to familiarize students with content and make predictions as to likely outcomes.
2	Read aloud text together
3	Identify words from selected pages of text to find synonyms for and record the responses on a chart.
4	Teacher demonstrates reading a sentence from the text and then, using words from the list of synonyms, says it in another way
5	Students practice paraphrasing individual sentences from the text and shares with the group. Introduce RAP strategy.
6	Review- The purpose of learning to paraphrase and discuss steps 1-6.
7	Students identify more words from the text to find synonyms for and these are written onto flashcards
8	Students work with a partner to write synonyms for each word
9	Students share the words they have written with the group. (Teacher records these on flashcards using a different colour pen and retains for subsequent lessons.) Examine words in relation to the context of the text and have students examine the accuracy with regard to the intended meaning.
10	Summarize and review the lesson. (eg. What did we do? What is that helping you to do? Did you better understand the text?)

## Appendix 2

### Lesson format for teaching sessions 3-5

STEP	PROCEDURE
1	Review the purpose of learning to paraphrase. (What did we do? What does that help you to do? Is it helping you to better understand the texts you read?)
2	Introduce the flashcards from previous session and have students work together to match the text words with the synonyms.
3	Using RAP strategy and students retell main ideas from text used in the previous lesson.
4	Students silent read new text
5	Students and teacher take turns to read new text aloud, one paragraph or section each.
6	Students discuss the main ideas from the text in their own words and are reminded to use the RAP strategy.
7	Discuss synonyms used and add to the synonym chart. Record on flashcards for matching in subsequent sessions.
8	Students answer questions about the text. (literal, evaluative, inferential)
9	Students select sentences/paragraphs from the text to retell in their own words. They are reminded to change as many words as they can but to retain the meaning. Whole group share and discuss each student's attempt.
10	At the end of each session students are given five words each from the text to write their own synonyms.

### **Appendix 3**

#### **RAP comprehension strategy**

(Adapted from *Triadic Approach to Reading Comprehension Strategy Instruction – A Sorrell*)

## **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.**