

## **Abstract**

The specific hypothesis tested in this study is that the **explicit teaching of synonym use and paraphrasing skills will lead to improved reading comprehension in a group of Year 7 boys.**

The participants in this study were two classes of Year 7 boys, a control class and an intervention class. The intervention class were taught to use synonyms and to paraphrase through a sequence of 10 lessons. The control group did not participate in these lessons. All instruction took place as part of the regular teaching program on a whole class basis.

The results from the study support the hypothesis. The reading comprehension skills of the intervention group showed significant improvement compared to the control group. This was measured through pre and post intervention TORCH tests. The most significant gains were made by the boys who had shown through the pre-test to have a reading comprehension level at stanine less than 6. Students in the control group did not demonstrate any significant gains in reading comprehension.

The results from this investigation suggest that reading comprehension can be improved in Year 7 boys through the explicit teaching of skills in paraphrasing and synonym use. The explicit teaching of these skills on a whole class basis has been shown to lead to significant improvement, indicating that intervention does not have to be in small groups to be effective.

## Introduction

In secondary schools dealing effectively with literacy issues is a challenge facing many school communities. Students who have a low ability in reading and writing are disadvantaged in the school system that relies heavily on the written word. One key element of literacy is comprehension, or being able to demonstrate understanding of text. If a student has difficulties with comprehension this is likely to influence learning across many learning areas. It is therefore likely that enhancing literacy will also lead to improvement in learning outcomes across various subject areas.

The primary focus of this study is to determine if explicitly teaching skills in paraphrasing, incorporating the use of synonyms, will lead to improved reading comprehension in a group of Year 7 boys.

A great deal of research has been conducted into the various aspects of reading comprehension. Katims and Harris (1997) acknowledge the difficulties faced by classroom teachers when trying to accommodate the diverse learning needs of their students. Despite the debate at political or administrative levels quite often teachers are left to their own devices when high need students appear in their classrooms. It is therefore important to have strategies that can be implemented on a whole class basis.

Earlier studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of various teaching strategies on enhancing comprehension. Various studies have shown that one skill that can be taught to improve comprehension of text is paraphrasing. In a paraphrasing exercise the text is rewritten, concentrating on expressing the main ideas in the student's own words (Fisk and Hurst, 2003). This study also acknowledges that paraphrasing works effectively to improve comprehension because it integrates all modes of communication (reading, writing, listening and speaking) leading to a deeper understanding of the text. It is also noted by the authors that paraphrasing for comprehension is an effective reading strategy that help students process and comprehend what they are reading and learning.

In the study by Katims and Harris (1997) mixed ability groups of students were taught how to paraphrase using the "RAP" strategy developed by Schumaker, Denton and Deshler (1984). In this study the students were taught only three steps: **R**ead a paragraph, **A**sk yourself questions about the main ideas and details, and **P**ut the ideas into your own words using complete sentences. The use of this paraphrasing strategy led to significant improvement in the reading comprehension scores of the participating students.

Onofrey and Theurer (2007) note the importance of seeking out authentic classroom learning experiences that encourage the development of skills and strategies that are independently transferable. It is also stressed in this article the importance of explicitly teaching skills and strategies in comprehension.

Munro (2003) conducted an investigation into the effectiveness of including literacy-teaching procedures as part of a regular teaching program across various subject areas. In this study seven teaching procedures were targeted. Students received explicit instruction on: 1. Getting knowledge ready; 2. Synonyms; 3. Reading aloud; 4. Paraphrasing; 5. Saying questions 6. Summarising; 7. Review by reading silently.

These teaching procedures had earlier been identified by Munro (2002) as being those that the students could learn to use through direct instruction and then be able to be utilised independently and drawn upon when needed. The findings of the study support the claim that reading comprehension at the secondary level can be enhanced through the implementation of systematic and consistent teaching procedures.

Kissner (2006) outlines three main strategies for teaching paraphrasing; changing the words, changing the order and changing the structure of the author's words. She also emphasised the importance of explicit instruction and modelling in developing these skills. The author also emphasises the importance of vocabulary instruction in effective paraphrasing. Making vocabulary an integral part of lessons in ways such as identifying key words, linear arrays, semantic mapping and having a word-a-day are some suggestions for vocabulary enhancement.

Harmon (1998) points out that those students who know many words are more likely to be competent readers than those with a limited vocabulary. The need for a rich vocabulary becomes more important as a student moves through the secondary years. She also suggests that direct instruction is an important aspect of vocabulary acquisition. The students were then able to apply the strategies learned through direct instruction to other situations. The use of teaching of vocabulary through synonyms was also evident in this study.

Mountain (2007) discussed the improvement in students' vocabulary through activities using synonyms. Similarly, Smith (2008) and St. Claire Otten (2003) encourage vocabulary development through the use of repeated, integrated and meaningful opportunities to use words. The teaching of skills, rather than drills is the emphasis.

Deanna and Nelson (2008) discussed the importance of direct instruction of strategies that can be used to improve vocabulary. Bromley (2007) emphasises the importance of independent word learning strategies that can empower them for lifelong learning. Nelson and Stage (2007) report that those students who received contextually based multiple meaning vocabulary instruction had statistically significant gains in their vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension compared to those students who did not.

This present study draws upon the previous research and investigates the effectiveness of explicitly teaching skills in paraphrasing on comprehension. One key aspect of the study is to incorporate the use of synonyms to assist in paraphrasing. As discussed in the literature above the ability to paraphrase is enhanced through an increased vocabulary. All instruction will take place as part of the regular English teaching program to a class of Year 7 boys.

The specific hypothesis tested in this study is that the explicit teaching of synonym use and paraphrasing skills will lead to improved reading comprehension in a group of Year 7 boys. In addition this present investigation will outline the teaching procedures that can be used as a model to teach paraphrasing across a range of curriculum areas.

## Method

### Design

The study uses an OXO design, in which comprehension of prose is measured before and after the students have been exposed to explicit teaching of paraphrasing skills and the use of synonyms. The study compares two classes of Year 7 boys, a control group and an intervention group. These classes are both mainstream (mixed ability) groups.

### Participants

The students chosen are from two mainstream classes of Year 7 boys. All participants attend a catholic boy's secondary school in metropolitan Melbourne. Their age, PAT-R (Progressive Achievement Tests in Reading) are shown in table 1.

Control Group				Intervention Group			
ID	PAT R	years	months	ID	PAT R	years	months
C1	3	12	10	I1	6	12	6
C2	3	12	10	I2	6	12	8
C3	6	12	4	I3	6	12	9
C4	9	12	11	I4	6	12	11
C5	4	12	3	I5	7	13	4
C6	6	12	11	I6	6	13	2
C7	4	12	9	I7	6	12	5
C8	6	13	0	<b>I8*</b>	2	13	1
C9	3	12	9	I9	4	12	4
C10	7	12	11	I10	5	12	11
C11	4	12	5	I11	4	12	9
C12	5	12	9	I12	3	12	4
C13	5	12	10	<b>I13*</b>	3	12	7
C14	6	13	1	I14	5	13	2
C15	8	13	2	I15	6	12	11
<b>C16*</b>	1	13	1	I16	7	13	1
C17	3	13	4	I17	7	12	9
C18	4	12	10	I18	5	12	10
C19	4	13	0	I19	7	12	10
C20	9	13	0	I20	9	12	9
C21	3	13	4	I21	5	12	7
C22	4	13	1	<b>I22*</b>	3	12	7
<b>C23*</b>	1	13	0	I23	4	12	5
C24	7	13	0	I24	8	13	2
C25	5	12	8	I25	5	12	7
C26	8	12	9	I26	6	12	7
C27	4	13	4	I27	6	12	11

- these students have been identified as having specific literacy needs.

### Materials

The lessons were based around the regular text being studied in English classes by all Year 7 students – *Don't Call Me Ishmael* by Michael Gerard Bauer. The Fry readability Procedure was used to determine the level of the text to be at Year 7 level. Reading comprehension was tested using TORCH (Test Of Reading Comprehension). Synonym and paraphrasing tasks followed the procedures outlined by Munro (Appendix 1).

### Procedure

The two groups of students were pre-tested using the TORCH test “The Accident”. The results from these tests were compared to the PAT- R test data obtained through testing in February. All students’ age at the time of the first test were also recorded.

The teaching procedure was based on Munro’s (2005) Comprehension-Paraphrasing teaching strategy with an emphasis on teaching students to recognise interesting words in the text and suggest synonyms for these words.

Explicit teaching of the process of paraphrasing was taught to the students. The teacher modelled the process with the students working towards completing the tasks independently as the series of lessons progressed. An example of a lesson is as follows:

- Students read the text, and then asked to identify and underline words that they found interesting or challenging from the text.
- Students were invited to place a word on the board. From the words written up by the students 10 were chosen for synonym work.
- The definitions of these words were clarified by through class discussion.
- The students then wrote the words on their synonym sheet and spent 5-10 minutes writing down as many words that have a similar meaning as possible.
- The teacher modelled the paraphrasing process using the synonyms already identified, providing an example for the students to follow.
- The students were asked to write their own paraphrased paragraph and then to share what they had written with the class.

The lessons took place as a whole class activity over a 3-week period. Twelve x 50-minute lessons were used (including the testing). Students in the control group did not participate in any paraphrasing or synonym lessons. The control group students undertook the same TORCH tests on the same day as the intervention group.

The data obtained was analysed using appropriate statistical analysis, including a non-parametric rank sum test used to determine differences between the control and intervention groups for a given scenario (all calculations and plots were done in Matlab).

### **Results**

The raw scores obtained by each of the control and intervention groups on each of the PATR and TORCH 1 and TORCH 2 tests are shown in Fig 1 and Fig 2 respectively.

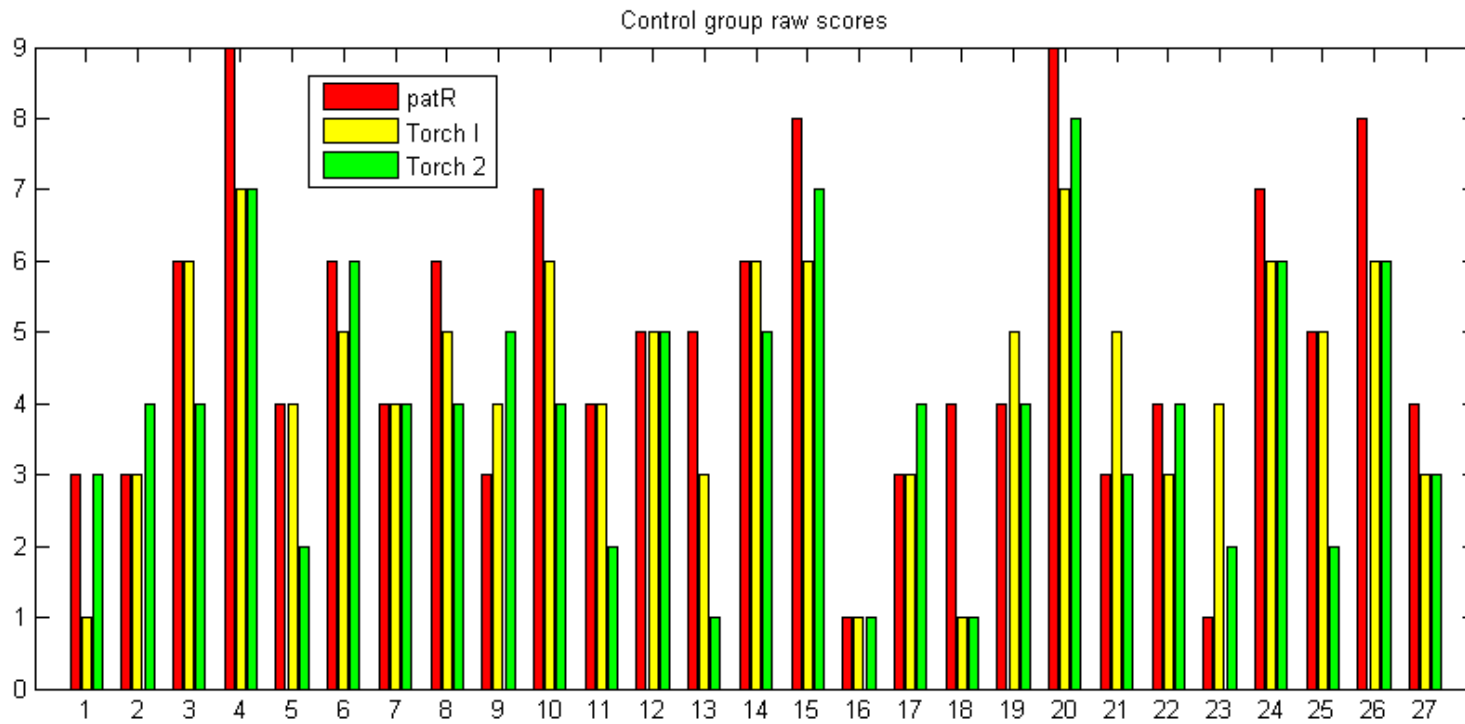


Fig 1: Control group scores for PAT R, TORCH 1 and TORCH 2.

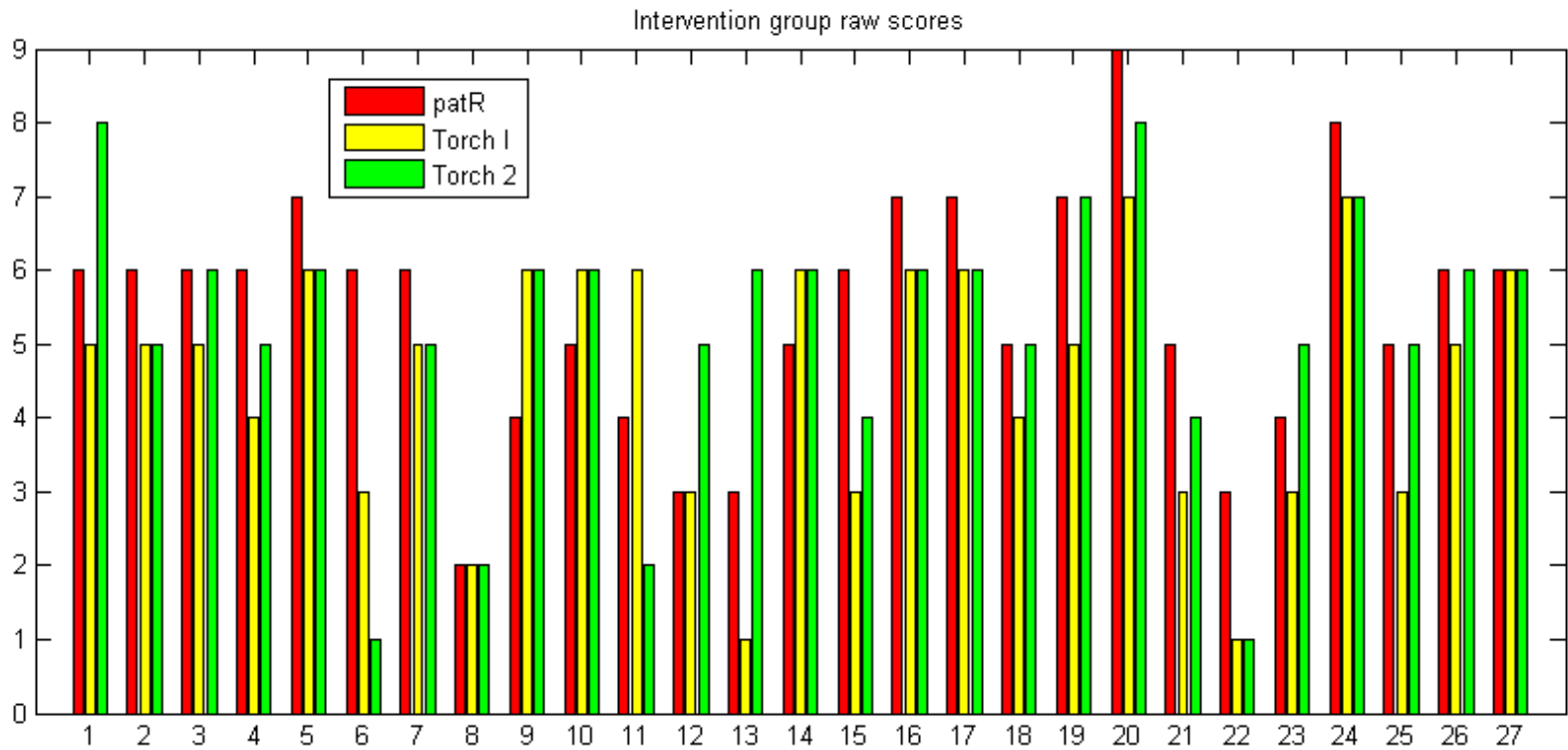


Fig 2: Intervention group scores for PAT R, TORCH 1 and TORCH 2.

Before discussing individual student scores in detail, summary statistics and statistical analysis is provided below.

In Fig 3, a box plot is used to compare the PAT R scores for the control and the intervention groups. It can be seen from this data that there is no significant difference ( $p>0.05$ , rank sum test) between the two groups prior to the intervention. This is further supported by looking at Fig. 4. This plot compares the results on TORCH 1 of the control and intervention groups. Once again, there was no significant difference between the control and intervention group. The PAT R and TORCH tests are both measures of reading comprehension and it would be expected that the results should follow a similar pattern.

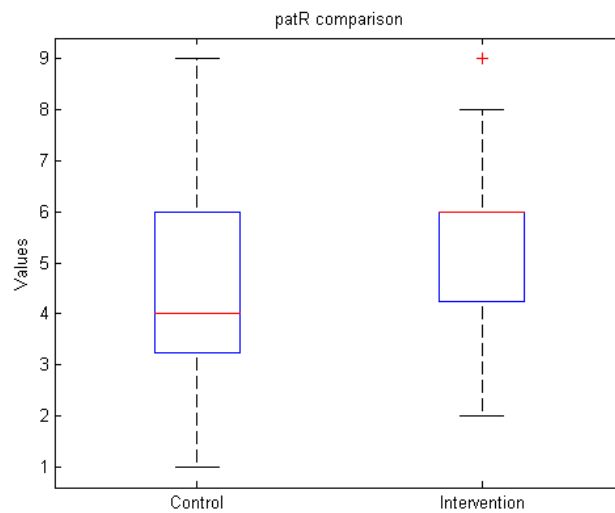


Fig 3: PAT R comparison. The box plot for the control and intervention groups are listed. The values (y axis) are the PAT R scores range.

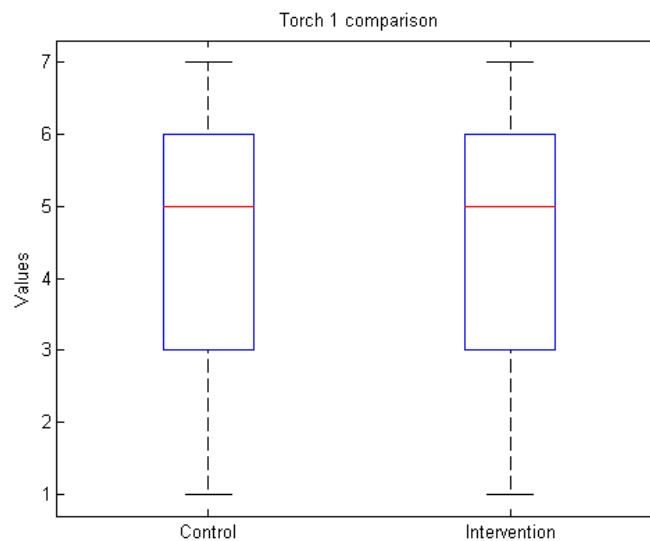


Fig 4. TORCH Test 1 comparison. The box plot for the control and intervention groups are listed. The values (y axis) are the Torch test 1 scores range.



A comparison of the TORCH 2 scores for the control and intervention groups can be seen in Fig. 5. It is in this plot that the difference between the 2 groups after the intervention can be observed. It can be seen that there is a significant ( $p=0.0136$ , rank sum test) difference in the stanine scores recorded between the groups. The improvement in TORCH scores achieved by the intervention group can be attributed to comprehension strategy experienced by the intervention group.

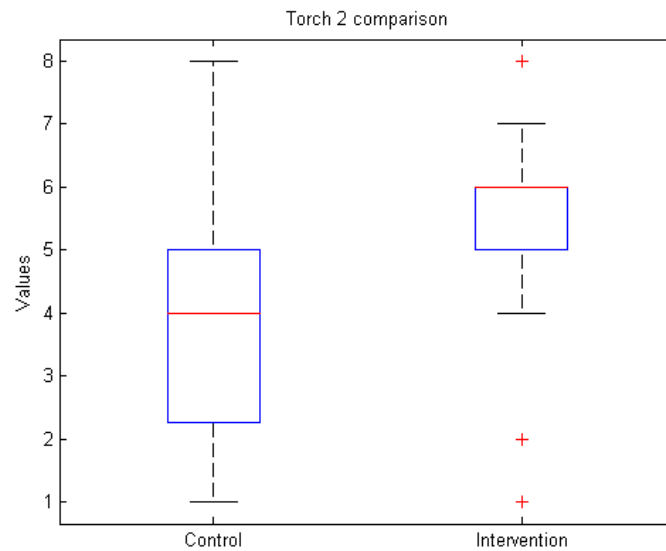


Fig 5: TORCH Test 2 comparison. The box plot for the control and intervention groups are listed. The values (y axis) are the TORCH test 2 scores range

Looking closely at the intervention group it can be seen that the most significant gains have been made by the 17 students of the class of 27 students whose results for TORCH 1 were shown to be at stanine 5 or lower. Fig. 6 plots a comparison between the TORCH 1 and TORCH 2 scores for this selected group of students. There was a statistically significant difference between the scores obtained by the control and intervention groups ( $p=0.04$ , rank-sum test). This is in contrast to the control group (Fig. 7) who have not shown an improvement in these scores. This lends weight to the assertion that the comprehension skills of the students have been improved through the paraphrasing and synonym work.

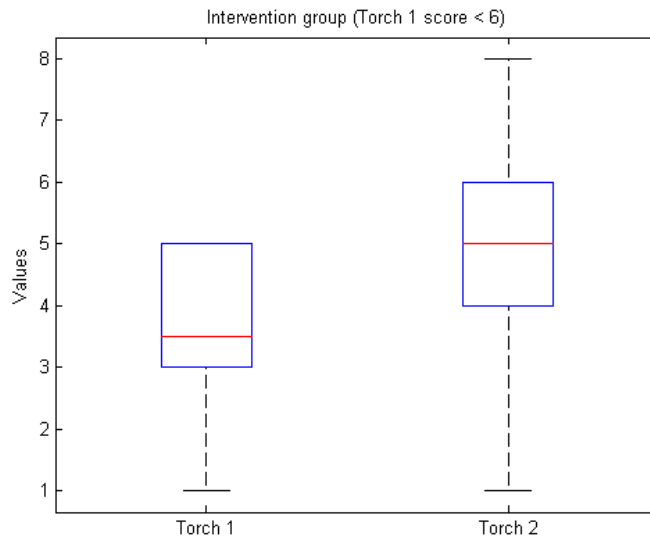


Fig 6: Comparative TORCH test scores for the intervention group when their TORCH 1 score was at stanine 5 or lower. The values (y axis) are the TORCH test scores range.

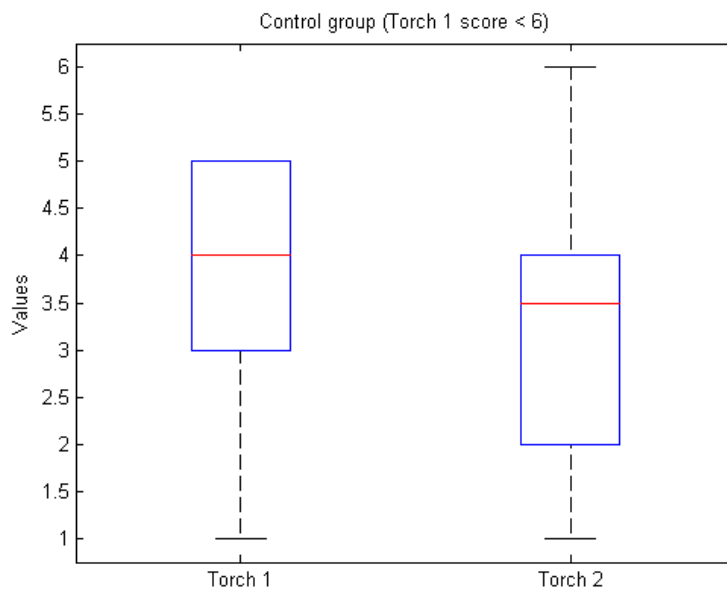


Fig 7: Comparative TORCH test scores for the control group when their TORCH 1 score was at stanine 5 or lower. The values (y axis) are the TORCH test scores range.

Now that overall trends and differences between the control and interventions have been established, a closer analysis of individual student scores will now be presented: using the raw scores described in Fig 1 and Fig 2.

It is interesting to note that of the 17 students who were shown to be at stanine 5 or lower on TORCH 1, 12 students demonstrated improvement in their reading comprehension as shown by their TORCH test 2 result (see Fig 2) . Four students showed no change and 1 student achieved a lower score. Six of these 12 students showed an improvement of 2 stanines or more. With one student making a gain from stanine 1 to stanine 6. Another student, made a significant gain from stanine 5 to

stanine 8 indicating improvement in his reading comprehension as shown in the TORCH 2 result compared to TORCH 1.

In the control group 19 of the 27 students achieved a stanine of 5 or lower on TORCH 1 (see Fig 1). Six of these students showed improvement in their TORCH 2 scores. The biggest gain was a 2 stanine gain. All other gains were 1 stanine. Of this group of students 8 of the group showed a lower reading comprehension score in TORCH test 2 and 5 students made no change. These results are significantly different to those of the intervention group, which suggests that the synonym and paraphrasing intervention strategies had a significant influence on the reading comprehension ability of these students.

Of the 10 students from the intervention group who received a result of 6 or more on the first TORCH test it can be seen that 8 students made no change, 1 student received a lower score and 1 showed improvement. This can be seen in Fig. 2. These results are significantly different to the group of students who started from a lower stanine. It appears that the students who already have good reading comprehension skills and the intervention did not make a significant difference to their skills as shown in TORCH 2. Compare this to the control group with 3 students making no change, 3 a lower score and 2 with improved results. Of all students who received a stanine of 6 or higher from both the control and intervention group there was no improvement greater than 1 stanine.

Of those students in the intervention group it is interesting to note the significant individual drop in stanine scores by 1 student, I11. This student dropped their stanine scores by 4.

Looking at the individual results of those students in the intervention group who had a stanine score of 5 or lower on TORCH 1 it is interesting to look closely at the results of the 3 students who achieved a stanine score of 2 or lower on TORCH test 1. It can be seen that 2 of the 3 students made no change and 1 student showed improvement.

Student I13 showed improvement in his reading comprehension as shown in fig. 2. He responded very positively to the paraphrasing and synonym lessons. His proficiency in paraphrasing and confidence grew markedly as we moved through the lessons. This confidence and proficiency was also shown in the improvement in the significant gain in his stanine scores. His pretest indicated a comprehension level at stanine 1 and post test score of 6.

Student I8 showed no change in his pre and post test scores, both at stanine 2. A score at this level indicates very poor comprehension skills. Whilst he was enthusiastic during the lessons, participated in all activities and appeared to show improvement in his paraphrasing skills this was not reflected as a change in TORCH 2 scores. It would have been more effective to assess this student using a lower level TORCH test.

Student I22 showed the same pattern as student I8. His stanine scores did not change from pre to post testing, remaining at stanine 1. A lower level TORCH test for this student would have been more effective to assess this student.

## Discussion

The results of this study support the hypothesis that the explicit teaching of synonym use and paraphrasing skills will lead to improved reading comprehension in a group of Year 7 boys. It appears that those students who were initially measured to have lower reading comprehension levels benefited the most from the intervention. This finding is similar to Munro (2002) who also found in his study that the greatest gains in reading comprehension were from the in the initially less able readers. This could be because the students who are competent in their reading comprehension already have effective strategies in place to assist them in their understanding of text and did not rely on these new skills to enhance their reading comprehension.

An important aspect of this study was that the fact that the intervention took place as part of the regular teaching program to a whole class. Similarly, Katims and Harris (1997) used explicit teaching of paraphrasing strategies to classes of 20 or more mixed ability students in a mainstream classroom led to improvement in comprehension performance. Typically, in many school settings intervention happens in small groups. While, as shown in a study by Kamps and Greenwood (2005), this has benefits it is not always possible to do. It is therefore important to have strategies that can be implemented on a whole class basis and to improve instruction and curriculum for all students.

The intervention strategies utilised in this study can be easily adapted and modified to suit a range of subject areas, year levels and text types. Munro (2002) found significant improvement in reading comprehension was gained through the explicit instruction of 7 high reliability literacy teaching procedures across a range of subject areas. This study has implications for teaching practice across the school. It is interesting to note that when working as a support teacher in a humanities class of the intervention group I observed the students being asked to paraphrase during a geography lesson. The students were able to articulate effectively the paraphrasing process to the teacher. Onofrey and Theurer (2007) note the importance of seeking out authentic classroom learning experiences that encourage the development of skills and strategies that are independently transferable. It appears that the students who received the intervention in this study were able to transfer their skills from English to other subject areas.

Fisk and Hurst (2003) acknowledge that paraphrasing works effectively to improve comprehension because it integrates all modes of communication (reading, writing, listening and speaking) leading to a deeper understanding of the text. Paraphrasing as a strategy in the current study has led to improvement in reading comprehension improvement in the participants in the intervention group as shown by the TORCH tests.

Vocabulary instruction through synonym work was a large part of the intervention in this study. The outcomes from this study support the findings of Kissner (2006), Harmon (1998), Smith (2008), St Claire Otten (2003) and Nelson and Stage (2007) who also emphasise the importance of contextually based and meaningful vocabulary instruction in effective paraphrasing.

This paraphrasing lessons were conducted as part of the regular English classes through the very popular book, "Don't Call Me Ishmael". The students involved in the study were keen to participate in the lessons and eager to read and understand the text. Ambe (2007) discusses the importance of choosing interesting reading material to motivate reluctant

adolescent readers. The use of an engaging text certainly sustained the interest of the students and may have influenced the motivation of the students to participate in the paraphrasing and synonym lessons.

Following this idea the subject of the two TORCH tests may have influenced the results. TORCH test 1 “The Accident” was about a young person sustaining an injury whilst trying to do bike trick and TORCH test 2 “She’s Crying” was about a woman walking through the city crying. The material contained in the first test appeared to be much more appealing to the boys who took the tests. This factor could have influenced the outcomes of the two tests.

The TORCH scores of one of the students in the study, I11, went from a stanine 6 to a stanine 2. This dramatic drop in performance on the second test could be directly attributed to his inability to concentrate on the task due to the death of a grandparent on the day before the second test. It is therefore important to be mindful of issues outside the classroom and their implications on a student’s ability to focus. If his results followed the trend of the other members of the intervention class it would be expected that he would have achieved the same score as in TORCH 1 (6) or a slight gain.

Outside factors could also be influencing the results of student I13. This student showed a dramatic rise in his stanine score from stanine 1 to stanine 6. He did respond positively to the intervention classes he also suffers from personal health issues and is quite erratic in his ability to focus in class. It is possible that I13 was not focussed during test 1 and that his PAT R result of 3 would be a more accurate guide to his true reading comprehension level. Therefore, the 5 stanine increase was not a true reflection of this student’s improvement. It would be expected that he would have made a gain of around 3 stanines not 5 as shown in the data.

To investigate the extent to which reading comprehension is affected by explicitly teaching paraphrasing and synonym use across a range of subject areas could be the focus of a future study. A larger sample of students and extending the intervention to the explicit teaching of a range of skills could also be included in future research. To conduct the study over a longer period of time and to track students over a number of years would provide a good picture of whether the intervention strategies had long term impact on literacy outcomes for the students.

To investigate if the improvements in reading comprehension experienced by the intervention group had been retained, a third TORCH test could be conducted after a period of 6 weeks.

This study was conducted on 2 classes of Year 7 boys, in a boys’ school. A study to compare the outcomes of this study to those of a girls’ school could be the topic of a future study.

In this present study the students with a stanine lower than 6 made the biggest gains in reading comprehension. A larger and longer-term study focussing on this group could lead to strategies to further enhance literacy.

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## **Resources**

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1

#### Teaching sequence paraphrasing.

#### Using Paraphrasing strategy (Munro 2006).

##### Session 1.

**Teacher script:** *I am going to teach you something that you can do that will help you remember what you read. It is called paraphrasing. This is what you do. After you have read each sentence, you say it in your own words. Today we will do this with sentences, then move on to pairs of sentences then with paragraphs.*

Teacher/ students read aloud the first paragraph.

*Now will we look at some of the words in the paragraph and try and think of some words that have a similar meaning to the words. These words are called synonyms.*

Students use the worksheet provided to suggest some synonyms for the words provided.

*Look at the first sentence. I will read it and I want you to read it to with me. Then I will try saying it another way. After that I will ask you to try.*

Sentence 1. *“There is no easy way to say this, so I’ll just say it straight out.” Could be changed to “this is not simple to say, so I’ll just get to the point.”*

Students to provide their own suggested paraphrase.

Sentence 2.

*I am fourteen years old and I have Ishmael Leseur’s Syndrome. Could be changed to; I am fourteen I have a condition called Ishmael Leseur’s Syndrome.*

Students to provide their own suggested paraphrase.

Sentence 3.

*“Now as far as I know, I’m the only recorded case of Ishamael Leseur’s Syndrome in the world”. Could be changed to; “To my knowledge, I am the only person who has ever had this condition.”*

Students to provide their own suggested paraphrase.

Sentence 4.

*“In fact, the medical profession has probably never heard of Ishmael Leseur’s Syndrome.” Could be changed to; “Doctors don’t even know about this condition.”*

Students to provide their own suggested paraphrase.

Sentence 5.

*“But it’s real believe me.” Could be changed to; “It really is a true problem.”*



Students to provide their own suggested paraphrase.

Sentence 6.

*“The Problem is, though, who would believe me?” Could be changed to; “Trouble is everyone thinks it is not true.”*

Students to provide their own suggested paraphrase.

In small groups of 2 or 3 students, write a paraphrase of each sentence.

**Using a similar script and teaching program to above the following sessions will be modified as follows (based on John Munro’s paraphrasing strategy).**

**Session 2.**

Teacher/student read aloud each paragraph.

Identify key words and suggest synonyms.

Teacher/student paraphrase sentence by sentence in whole group activity

In groups of 2 or 3 write a paraphrase of each sentence.

**Session 3.**

Teacher/student read aloud each paragraph.

Identify key words and suggest synonyms.

Teacher/student paraphrase pairs of sentences in whole group activity

In groups of 2 or 3 write a paraphrase of each sentence.

**Session 4.**

Students read aloud each paragraph.

Identify key words and suggest synonyms.

Students paraphrase pairs of sentences in whole group activity

In groups of 2 or 3 write a paraphrase for pairs of sentences.

**Session 5.**

Students read aloud each paragraph.

Identify key words and suggest synonyms.

Students paraphrase paragraph in whole group activity.

In groups of 2 or 3 write a paraphrase of each paragraph.

**Session 6.**

Students read aloud each paragraph.

Identify key words and suggest synonyms.

Teacher/student paraphrase sentence by sentence in whole group activity

Each student individually writes a paraphrase of each sentence.

**Session 7.**

Student read silently each paragraph.

Identify key words and suggest synonyms.

Teacher/student paraphrase paragraph in whole group activity

In groups of 2 or 3 write a paraphrase of each paragraph.

**Session 8.**

Student read silently each paragraph.

Identify key words and suggest synonyms.

Teacher/student paraphrase paragraph in whole group activity

Each student individually writes a paraphrase of each paragraph.

**Session 9.**

Student read silently each paragraph.

Identify key words and suggest synonyms.

Each student paraphrases each paragraph silently

Each student individually writes a paraphrase of each paragraph.

# Synonyms task

class:

date:

name:

First word	Additional words					
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						
5.						
6.						
7.						
8.						
9.						
10.						