

Teaching years one and two students who are text decoders, but have difficulties in comprehension to use synonyms and paraphrase text increases their reading comprehension

Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to improve young student's reading comprehension by teaching the strategy of paraphrasing. Six year one and two students (three year one girls and three year two boys) were withdrawn from their normal classes and taught the strategy of paraphrasing within a small group. The students have learnt to be text decoders however they were chosen because of their E.S.L. background and they experienced difficulties in comprehension. The paraphrasing strategy is teaching the students to restate what is being read in their own words while retaining the meaning of the initial sentences.

The method used was the experimental O X O method. The students were pre tested using the synonyms word test, a paraphrasing sentence test and a Pat R comprehension test. Following that the students participated in ten lessons, each 30-40 minutes in length, during which they were taught the paraphrasing strategy. The students were then post tested using the same tests as used in the initial pre test. The findings of this study showed that all six students improved in their reading comprehension. The hypothesis that using synonyms and teaching the paraphrasing strategy to year one and two students will improve their reading comprehension was supported by the results. It was concluded that the educational implications for teaching of young students is for them to begin explicitly teaching comprehension strategies such as paraphrasing to students to support and improve their reading comprehension.

To help the students remember the strategy, the students read texts, asked questions before, during and after and put ideas into their own words then changed as many words while still maintaining the meaning. The study compared the results of two groups of students; a control group and an intervention group. Results indicate support for the hypothesis as the comprehension scores of most students indicated some improvement, along with gains in the synonyms and paraphrasing post tests. The results suggests that teaching synonyms and paraphrasing is a successful strategy and should be explicitly taught to assist students to improve in their reading comprehension ability.

Introduction

Many students in junior primary level who have learnt to be good text decoders experience difficulties in comprehension. They are often able to read a text at an age appropriate level however when asked to retell or answer questions in full sentences they are not able to demonstrate understanding of the text. The difficulties the students have in understanding texts impacts on all areas of their learning. The students demonstrate low vocabulary skills and difficulty in saying sentences in their own words.

In order to enable students to comprehend texts Irene C. Fountas and Gay Sue Pinnel (2006) suggests a number of general principles such as selecting texts carefully, surround all text experiences with meaningful talk, provide many opportunities for group support, e.g. the scaffolding offered by others enables them to try out the language. They note the importance of visual images and providing several ways to access meaning such as using simpler words and sentences. By building on what they already know, students can gradually take on new ways of using language. It is necessary to teach paraphrasing so students become very flexible accessing meaning in more than one way. They continue to also say to repeat, repeat and repeat which enables them to attend to new elements of language and meaning, explain and demonstrate to expand and improve strategic processes and engage students to repeat the vocabulary and structures of English, so they try them out for themselves.

Sharon B Kletzien (2009) examines paraphrasing as an effective comprehension strategy that students can use to monitor and increase their comprehension. It is putting the context into one's own words. It has been found to help special education students increase their comprehension. Students must engage the content if they are paraphrasing. It encourages the students to make connections with prior knowledge to access what is already known about the topic and to use words that are part of the reader's knowledge. It helps the students establish retrieval cues that enable integration of what is previously known with what is being read an important part of comprehension according to Kintsch 1998. In teaching students to use paraphrasing to monitor comprehension, make certain that they understand the purpose of the strategy, as well as how to do it. Narratives are used and modeling by using think-alouds with texts that are on an instructional level because we want to make sure that students understand how the strategy works. As students become more comfortable with paraphrasing we gradually reduce the number of ideas that we give. Paraphrasing helps students monitor their understanding and encourages them to access what they already know about a topic. It makes it clear to them that understanding is the goal of reading. Students benefit from practice. With careful instructions, modeling, focusing on what the strategy is, how to do it, when it is useful and why it is important, students can learn to monitor their comprehension and take steps to correct it if needed.

Sue Shirley (2004) states that the art of paraphrasing is difficult. Many students understand summarizing and retelling however paraphrasing escapes them. The students went through some exercises to translate more than one word. They identified key words, answered questions, inserted appropriate words and checked with the original.

Debbie Miller (2007) discusses that students have some basic comprehension but they don't think deeply. They decode and don't seem to be thinking about what they've reading. She adds that questions support students, inferences, she invites her students to predict and make personal connections. Comprehension is understanding. It involves thinking and can be likened to a conversation between the reader and the text. She models visualizing, inferring, determining importance and making generalizations. Her students read texts that are easy enough for them to decode so they can use more of their mental energy to understand or comprehend what they read. Comprehension is important because it is the goal of reading. All texts we ask students to read

should make sense so they get used to thinking about everything and anything they read. Chosen texts based on students interests and background knowledge improves comprehension. Along with comprehension we must also consider vocabulary. Through explaining what they've read to each other in their own words can increase students' comprehension. Klingner, Vaughn and Schumm (1998) suggest possible foci for teaching comprehension that may include understanding text structure, asking and answering questions, summarizing, making use of prior knowledge, using visual imagery, inferencing and monitoring.

The present investigation aimed to examine the effect of teaching the paraphrasing strategy to a group of six students in years one and two with a particular focus on the use of synonyms as a skill to develop their understanding of the meaning of key words within a text.

The hypothesis is that teaching years one and two students who are text decoders but have difficulties in comprehension to use synonyms and paraphrase text increases their reading comprehension.

Method

Design: The study uses a naturalistic design in the context of a 'real' classroom, in which the gain in paraphrasing ability and reading comprehension following explicit teaching of synonyms are monitored for junior students who have reading difficulties. The study compares two groups of students, a control group and an intervention group. Both pre and post tests were administered. The O X O design (pre, intervention, post) was conducted.

Participants: The participants chosen in the study are twelve year one and two students with ages seven and eight years who have a history of reading difficulties, e.g. a low understanding of what key words mean. They have limited comprehension and low vocabulary skills. All participants attend a school that is in a contemporary and open learning environment. The students identified are all of an E.S.L. background. (This is known through the interviews held with parents prior to entry of school) They were also selected based on their pre tests held at the beginning of the school year. They were chosen because they could benefit from additional assistance to work on developing strategies to assist them at reading at a sentence level. The students can decode when reading but experience difficulty understanding. Naplan results showed low figures in reading comprehension. This proved to be a school need. Their age and entry reading ability are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Student Age and reading ability

Student (Intervention)	Age	Reading Level
A	6 yrs and 8 months	9 (also on reading recovery)
B	6 yrs and 4 months	8 (also had intervention during term 2)
C	5 yrs and 10 months	13
D	7 yrs and 7 months	28
E	7 yrs and 6 months	22
F	7 yrs and 6 months	22
(Control)		
G	6 yrs and 2 months	5
H	6 yrs and 4 months	2
I	6 yrs and 6 months	8
J	6 yrs and 9 months	7
K	7 yrs and 3 months	12
L	7 yrs and 2 months	20

Materials: Materials used include the following –

- Synonyms teaching tasks
- Paraphrasing teaching tasks
(includes ten sessions together)
- Ten fiction picture books were selected based on students interest, they were appropriate to the level, they were visual, engaging and students could relate to them

The formal assessments the student researcher used for pre and post were:

- Synonyms Test (John Munro)

As a group (year 2's) students read words, translated orally and wrote other words that say the same thing. Individually, (year 1's) the words were said to the students and they repeated them, translated orally while the student researcher scribed them. The target number of words were three.

- Paraphrasing Test (John Munro)

As a group (year 2's) students read sentences and tried to say them in their own way and change as many words as they can. Individually, (year 1's) the sentences were said and the students orally translated them into their own words

- PAT- R in Comprehension for years one and two
Reading passages and answering questions

The pre tests were used for data collection. The post tests measured if there was an effect after ten sessions.

Procedure: The ten tasks were administered to all students, teaching synonyms and paraphrasing together. The teaching sessions ran for 30-40 minutes each. The student researcher conducted two-three sessions per week(close and continuous) over a period of four weeks. They were held in a small withdrawal room. The teaching sessions were carried out by the student researcher. Each session introduced a new picture story book that entertained and were loved by the students and had common / everyday synonym words. Each session re-capped on the previous session and the focus was always stated clearly and the purpose / aim was always explained at the end of every session. The student researcher coached, modeled, scaffolded, directed each session and supported each student. The students responded as a group in the first few sessions, then in pairs, then individually during the ten sessions.

The responses were always scribed on charts for the group to visually see. Words (from simple to complex) were presented to the group at the beginning, then words were given to pairs, then each student would be given words. The students paraphrasing ability was tested by reading sentences out aloud, reading quietly and writing them in their own words. The students ability in using synonyms was established to determine whether or not by improving paraphrasing, comprehension is, in turn improved. For the year one students the synonyms and paraphrasing tests were conducted individually where the students responded orally and the student researcher scribed. For the year two students the synonyms and paraphrasing tests were conducted as a group. The Pat R in Comprehension tests were all done as a group. The data was analyzed through: the pre and post tests in Synonyms, Paraphrasing and Pat R in Comprehension. They were individually scored and analyzed. There were many observations made during the pre and post tests and the ten sessions. (Refer to Results Table 2 for each student) The student researcher analyzed the pre tests data and was able to use it to direct and plan some intervention sessions beginning with synonyms, using familiar / easy words. Each session outlined re-visiting the students knowledge. The student researcher faded the support in the last two sessions. From the post tests data, the student researcher will continue explicit teaching

synonyms and paraphrasing with the whole class.

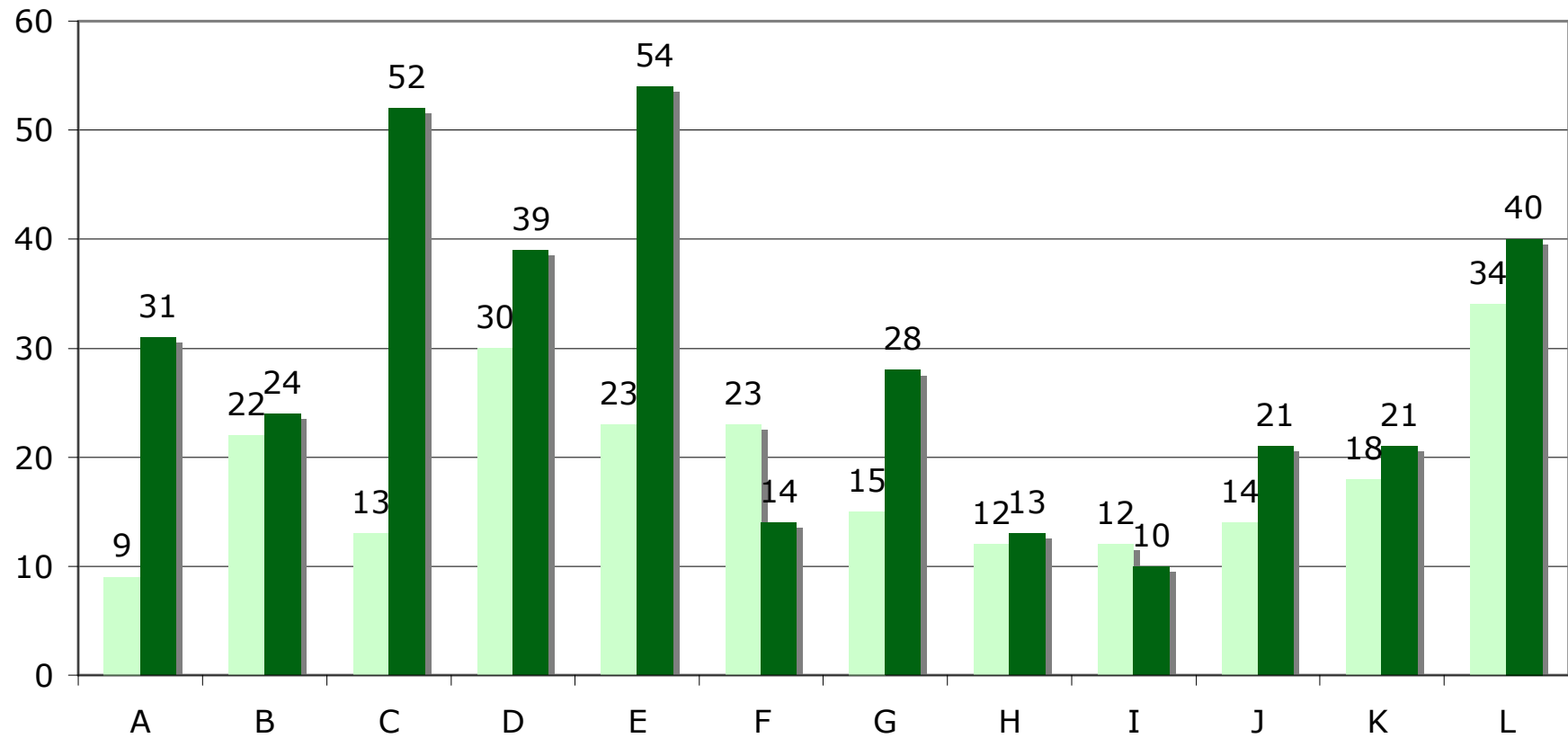
Results

Results indicate support for the hypotheses that teaching years one and two students who are text decoders but have difficulties in comprehension, to use synonyms and paraphrase text increases their reading comprehension. The comprehension scores of almost all students except for one in the intervention group indicate improvement. Gains made by the intervention students were greater than those of the control group.

Table 2 Pre and Post Tests on Synonyms, Paraphrasing and Pat R Comprehension

Name	Control= 0 Teaching=1	Age in months	Gender	Yrs of school	E S L	Earlier Intervention	Attendance Of sessions	Syn PRE	Syn POST	Para PRE	Para POST	Par R PRE	Par R POST
A	1	80	F	2 yrs	Yes	Reading Recovery	8	9/60	31/60	19/34	17/34	5/18	13/18
B	1	76	F	2 yrs	Yes	Language During T 2	10	22/60	24/60	7/34	17/34	9/18	10/18
C	1	70	F	2 yrs	Yes		10	13/60	52/60	18/34	19/34	17/18	15/18
D	1	91	M	3 yrs	Yes		10	30/60	39/60	9/34	20/34	19/25	22/25
E	1	90	M	3 yrs	Yes		10	23/60	54/60	11/34	23/34	14/25	16/25
F	1	90	M	3 yrs	Yes		9	23/60	14/60	12/34	20/34	12/25	18/25
G	0	74	F	2 yrs	Yes			15/60	28/60	20/34	19/34	14/18	12/18
H	0	76	F	3 yrs	Yes	Reading Recovery		12/60	13/60	13/34	15/34	17/25	12/25
I	0	78	M	2 yrs	Yes			12/60	10/60	24/34	27/34	16/18	17/18
J	0	81	F	2 yrs	Yes			14/60	21/60	7/34	19/34	13/18	14/18
K	0	87	F	3 yrs	Yes			18/60	21/60	9/34	11/34	12/25	19/25
L	0	86	F	3 yrs	Yes			34/60	40/60	13/34	12/34	22/25	18/25

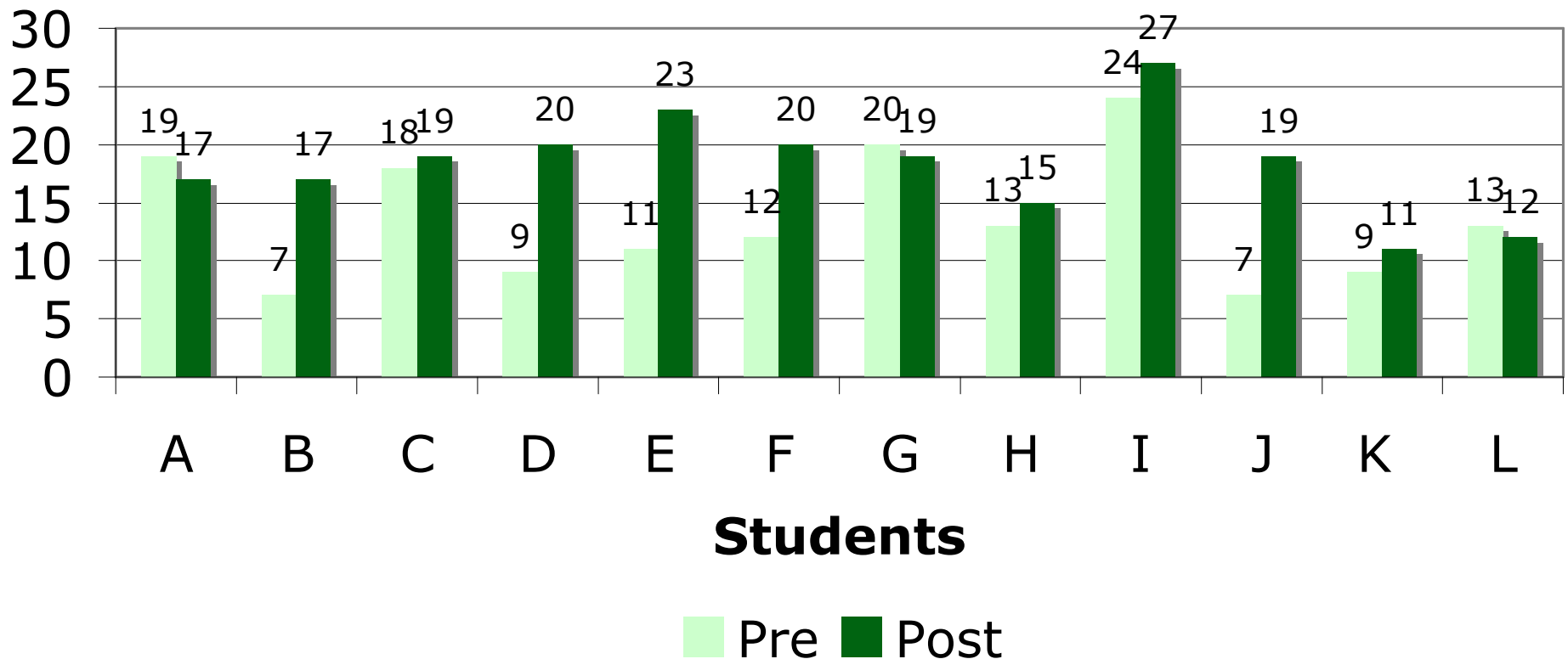
Synonyms Pre & Post Testing (/60)



Pre Test Post Test

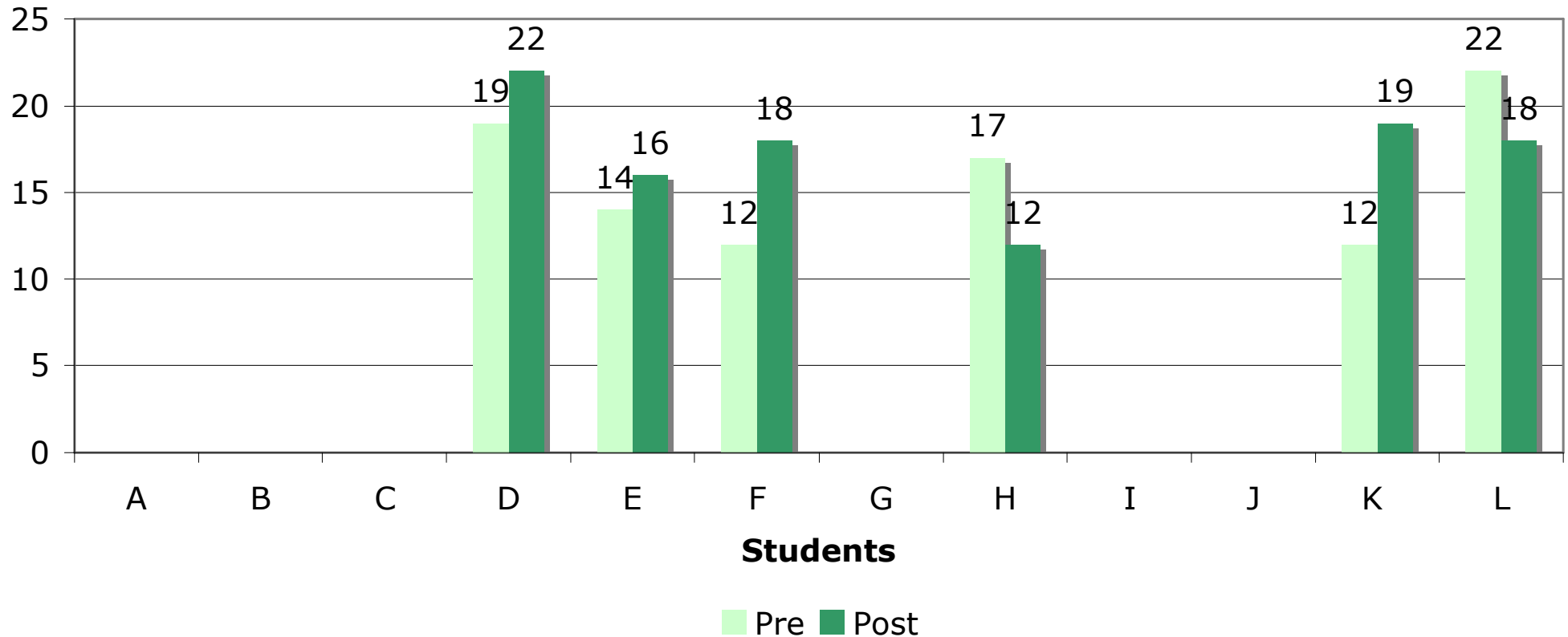
Results indicate that students in the intervention group (Students A B C D E F) had made progress in the post synonyms test. Most students but one in the control group Students (G H I J K L) also made gains but not as great. Students A, C and E made considerable progress in the use of synonyms throughout the teaching sessions. At the beginning Student A was confused with summarizing but then gained an understanding of how synonyms work. Student B always demonstrated confidence in the sessions, she participated enthusiastically, however it did not correspond with the outcomes. Student C participated well in the sessions but had to be reminded to use sentences. Her scores for the post were very high. Student D was not a confident participant in the group, however showed improvement. Student E also scored very high in the post test. He did get confused at times during the sessions and needed to trust his attempt. Student F recognized his own errors when a sentence did not make sense. He was absent for the last session and results show a drop in the post testing, possibly due do the holiday break in between. The overall results of the intervention group was very pleasing and satisfying.

Pre & Post Paraphrasing (/34)

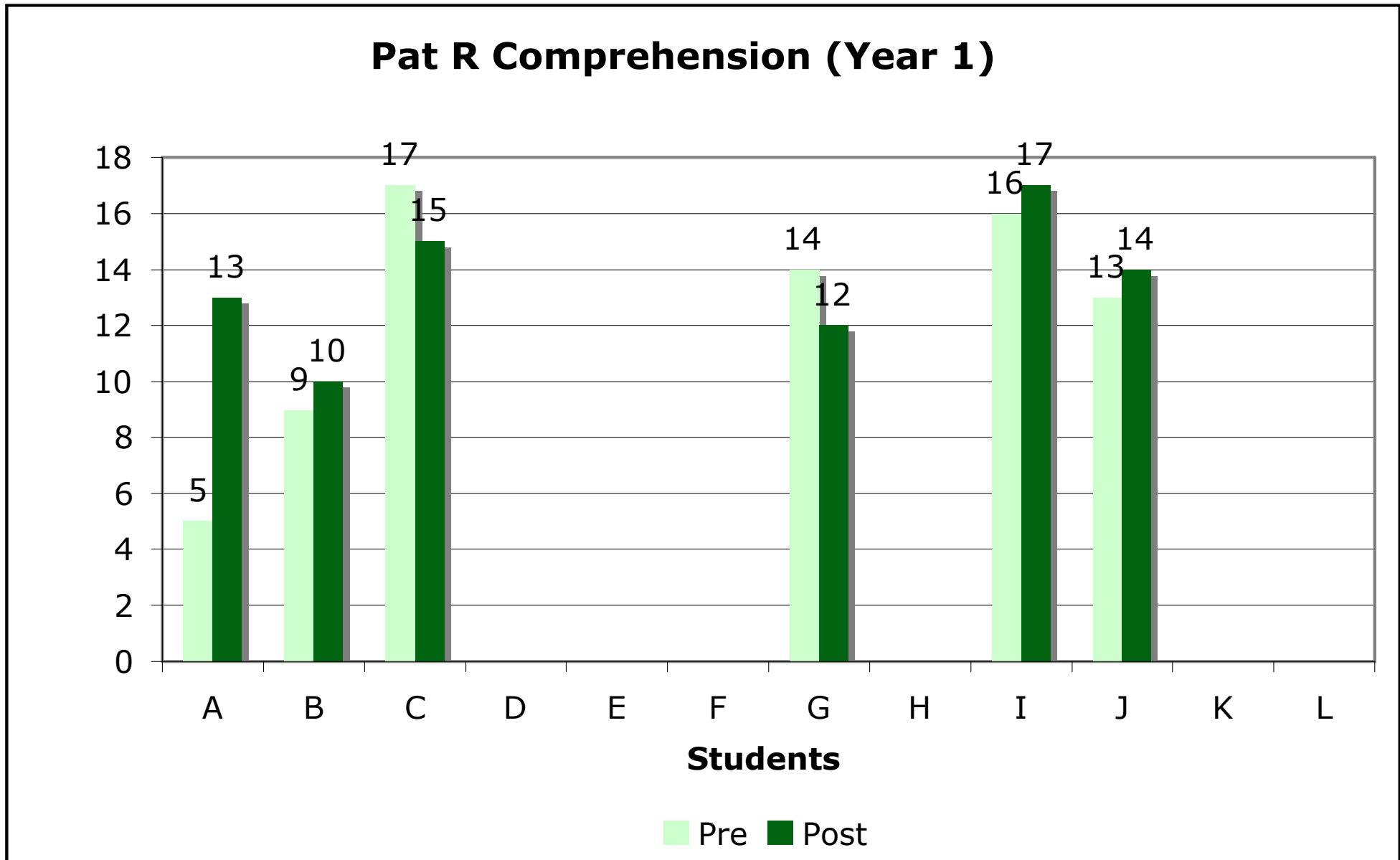


Students B C D E and F showed improvement in the post paraphrasing test except for student A. This could be due to her absence for two sessions and the holiday break in between. Most students in the intervention group (A B C D E F) made gains. In the control group Students H I J and K made small gains while students G and L's scores fell lower. Overall, the students replaced one or two words with a synonym. The errors made where meaning was lost reflects their ESL background and vocabulary difficulties. Both groups sometimes used incorrect grammatical structures when paraphrasing.

Pat R Comprehension Test (Year 2)



The reading accuracy of students D E and F had a positive change. Each student made some progress in the post comprehension test. The difficulties the students experienced were recognizing when the sentences did not make sense and their limited knowledge of vocabulary. In the control group, student K was the only one who made a positive change. Students H and K did not make any progress in the post. Overall the student researcher was pleased with the results of the intervention group and the students showed a better understanding of reading comprehension.



Most students in the intervention group demonstrated an improvement with reading comprehension while one student did not achieve a higher result after the teaching sessions. Student A's results were great which was also reflected in the synonyms test. She demonstrates gains in reading questions and answering them. She worked carefully and slowly during the post test. Student B had only made a small improvement, with the gain only an increase of one question answered correctly. Student C did not achieve any gain and it is interesting to note the drop of results. Students I and J performed a small improvement in the post test while student G made no improvement.

Discussion

In reflecting on the results of this study there is support for the hypothesis and the research, which suggests that, teaching students strategies to use when reading improves their comprehension ability. Students improved in the use of synonyms and paraphrasing and demonstrated some gains in reading comprehension. The intervention group would need to have an extended period of time to bring about a greater improvement. However the student researcher is pleased with the whole group findings and the trends indicate the results to be positive. Students in the control group generally made small gains in the synonyms, paraphrasing and reading tests.

The ten sessions taught was beneficial in helping students in the intervention group to remember the steps of the strategy. The student researcher would get the students ready (prior knowledge) and ask questions before, during and after. The student researcher also targeted vocabulary, encouraged the students to say, read, use 'mmm' and link ideas. When asked why we paraphrase, students responded with enthusiasm, " we paraphrase to try and remember what we read". They were able to articulate the steps to follow when paraphrasing at a sentence level. When students reflected and pinpointed on what they learnt, they stated that they were able to change keywords in more than one way, paraphrase a sentence/s while still making sense. Since then the student researcher is coaching the whole junior community on teaching and learning synonyms and paraphrasing. The students in the intervention group have been wonderful models for their peers with their knowledge and experience. The student researcher has taught with much more substance.

The results lend support for the work of D Miller (2007) who recommends that comprehension should be taught from the start, through modeling how to comprehend , think about everything and anything we read. Along with comprehension, vocabulary must also be considered. This was particularly demonstrated by small improvements made by some students in the intervention group (during the ten sessions)on the reading comprehension test. Van den Broek and Kremer (2000) noted that comprehenders use their background knowledge to identify or make connections among ideas in what they are reading. This was noticeable in the intervention group of students who asked questions before reading and used their prior knowledge which helped them generate words.

The National Reading Panel Report (NICHD 2000) recommends the following to help students comprehend:

- Monitoring comprehension
- Using cooperative learning
- Answering questions
- Generating questions
- Making use of prior knowledge

It was interesting to note that through working with each student individually, the student researcher was able to modify or extend. The shared group situations gave the opportunities for students to work together, talk and help each other. Utilizing questions before, during and after during the teaching

sessions provided the students to be more active and become more purposeful. Finally, commenting on the students prior knowledge empowered them to succeed and believe that they can do it.

During the early teaching sessions, students were using synonyms enthusiastically. This skill continued to be applied throughout the sessions, as the group then got into paraphrasing at the sentence level. The importance of maintaining meaning was often discussed in the group. The students were stronger orally when using synonyms and paraphrasing rather than in writing. They were able to generate more accurate ideas as a whole group and when working in pairs however the challenge was using this strategy independently.(with the support of the student researcher) The student researcher linked the teaching to each individual's pathway every few minutes to make sure each student was moving. The students self efficacy, attitude and belief that they can do it continues to grow. They can now use the strategy automatically, independently without me cueing since the study. Explicit feedback was given during and after each teaching session.

As the student researcher mentioned early about modeling and explaining the strategy from the beginning, then as the students were able to practice and work independently during the ten sessions, the support could fade. Roehler and Duffy (1984) also stated to model the strategy with explanations at the start. As the students adapt at using the strategy, they provide less support, thus reducing the number of ideas that they give. The student researcher felt that the students in the intervention group still required support.

S. Shirley(2004) states that effective paraphrasing is the most difficult, thus the ten teaching sessions in this study proved not be sufficient to have a great effect.

There are a number of factors that would need to be addressed if repeating this study. The student researcher would re-use the picture story texts rather than use a new story for each session for the students to better understand and increase the possibilities for generating more synonyms and paraphrasing a few sentences successfully. Some students need more explicit teaching of skills in generating questions, getting the knowledge ready, transferring knowledge to new, understanding new words and using paraphrasing. Looking at the data it appears that students would also benefit from modeling and using the 'mmm' strategy more explicitly.

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The National Reading Panel Report (NICHD 2000)

Direct acknowledgement

- Fountas & Pinnel (2006) discuss the general principles of comprehension
- Furthermore Miller (2007) supports the notion of comprehension and vocabulary
- Klingner, Vaugh and Schumm (1998) explain the foci for comprehension
- Both Kletzien (2009) & Shirley (2004) identify what paraphrasing is
- Broek and Kremer (2000) has indicated the importance of prior knowledge
- The National Reading Panel Report (NICHD 2000) states comprehension guidelines

Indirect acknowledgement

- The MLOTP model of reading (Munro, 1985; cited in Munro 2010)
- There is evidence to show that explicit teaching, modeling and scaffolding improves comprehension (Kletzien,2009)
- Similar findings in thinking out aloud and understanding what students increases comprehension (Miller,2007)
- In more recent years, it has been noted to teach comprehension earlier (Miller, 2007)

Resources

Munro, J (2005) Synonyms Test

Munro, J (2005) Paraphrasing Test

Pat Reading Tests in Comprehension Booklet 1 & 2 (2008) Australian Council for Educational Research

Appendix

Table 3

The intervention Program with ten sessions on Comprehension –Paraphrasing and Synonyms

Session	Student Activity
1 (whole group)	<p>Introduce the strategy: I am going to teach you something that you can do that will help you to remember what you read. It is called paraphrasing. You will be reading words, reading sentences and saying them in your own words. We will be using a different text each time.</p> <p>Text: ‘The Very Hungry Caterpillar’ (fiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Student researcher reads aloud words from the text (modeling changing words)• Students read aloud words and translate them• Student researcher scribes responses on chart• Students ask questions• Student researcher reads aloud a sentence by sentence on chart• Students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence• Student researcher scribes the paraphrasing• Review the session / actions (Display students responses) <p>Record observations</p>
2(whole group)	<p>Text: ‘The Fly’ (Petr Horaced 2010) (fiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose• Tell the students to put ideas into your own words and try to change as many words• Student researcher reads aloud words from the text (modeling changing words)• Students read aloud words and translate them (brainstorm)• Student researcher scribes responses on chart• Students ask questions• Student researcher reads aloud a sentence by sentence on chart• Students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence• Student researcher scribes the paraphrasing• Review the session / actions (Display students responses) <p>Record observations</p>

3 (in pairs)	<p>Text: 'Grandpa Baby' (Margaret Wild 2009) (fiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose • Tell the students to put ideas into your own words and try to change as many words • Today we will be working in pairs • Student researcher reads aloud words from the text (modeling changing words) • Students read aloud words and translate them (brainstorm) • Student researcher scribes responses on chart • Students ask questions • Student researcher reads aloud a sentence by sentence on chart • Students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence • Student researcher scribes the paraphrasing • Review the session / actions (Display students responses) Record observations
4 (in pairs)	<p>Text: 'Grandad Billy' (Julie Kingston 2004)(fiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose • Tell the students to put ideas into your own words and try to change as many words • Student researcher reads aloud words from the text (modeling changing words) • Students read aloud words and translate them (brainstorm in pairs) • Student researcher scribes responses on chart • Students ask questions • Student researcher reads aloud a sentence by sentence on chart • Students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence with guidance • Student researcher scribes the paraphrasing • Review the session / actions (Display students responses) Record observations
5 (individually)	<p>Text: 'I found a friend and my friend found me' (Beth Norling 2010) (fiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose • Tell the students to put ideas into your own words and try to change as many words • Student researcher reads aloud a sentence by sentence on chart (modeling) • Individually students read aloud sentence by sentence • Individually students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence with guidance • Student researcher scribes the paraphrasing for each student • Students ask questions(before, during and after) • Repeat with a new sentence and in pairs write a paraphrase • Review the session / actions (Display students responses) Record observations

<p>6 (individually)</p>	<p>Text: 'Unfortunately' (Alan Durant and Simon Rickerty 2010) (fiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose • Tell the students to put ideas into your own words and try to change as many words while still making sense • Student researcher reads aloud a sentence by sentence on chart (modeling) • Individually students read aloud sentence by sentence • Individually students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence with guidance • Student researcher scribes the paraphrasing for each student • Students ask questions (before, during and after) • Repeat with a new sentence and in pairs write a paraphrase • Review the session / actions (Display students responses) <p>Record observations</p>
<p>7 (individually)</p>	<p>Text; 'Angelica Sprocket's Pockets' (Quentin Blake 2010) (fiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose • Tell the students to put ideas into your own words and try to change as many words while still making sense • Student researcher reads aloud a sentence by sentence on chart (modeling) • Individually students read aloud sentence by sentence • Individually students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence with guidance • Students ask questions (before, during and after) • Repeat with a new sentence and write a paraphrase individually with support (link the teaching to the students pathway every few minutes) • Review the session / actions (Display students responses) <p>Record observations</p>
<p>8 (individually)</p>	<p>Text: 'My dad thinks he's funny' (Katrina Germein 2010) (fiction)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose • Student researcher reads silently (modeling) • Individually students read silently sentence by sentence • Individually students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence with guidance • Students ask questions (before, during and after) • Repeat with a new sentence and write a paraphrase individually with support(link the teaching to the students pathway every few minutes) • Review the session / actions (Display students responses) <p>Record observations</p>

<p>9 (individually)</p>	<p>Text: 'A bit Lost' (Chris Haughton 2010) (fiction) Support fading</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose • Student researcher reads silently (modeling) • Individually students read silently sentence by sentence • Individually students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence • Students ask questions (before, during and after) • Repeat with a new sentence and write paraphrase individually(link the teaching to the students pathway every few minutes) • Review the session / actions (Display students responses) <p>Record observations</p>
<p>10 (individually)</p>	<p>Text: 'Shrieking Violet' (Emma Quay) (fiction) No support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Re-view previous session and repeat the purpose • Individually students read silently sentence by sentence • Students ask questions (before, during and after) • Individually students say a paraphrase sentence by sentence • Repeat with a new sentence and write paraphrase individually (link the teaching to the students pathway every few minutes) • Review the session / actions (Display students responses) <p>Record observations</p>