

Teaching Year 5/6 students to use synonyms whilst paraphrasing improves comprehension

Abstract:

Many students experience comprehension difficulties at one stage or another. Year 5/6 students may encounter such difficulties, perhaps particularly due to the increased quantity and complexity of text types. In order to best prepare these students for secondary school, it is vitally important that they comprehend what they read.

With all this in mind, three year 5/6 male students were explicitly taught to use synonyms whilst paraphrasing, with the aim of improving their comprehension. The students were pre-tested on their ability to:

- use synonyms
- paraphrase
- comprehend non fictional texts

The students then participated in 10 lessons, all aimed at furthering their understanding of the above three mentioned skills. The students were then post-tested, using the same synonyms and paraphrasing test, and two matched comprehension tests.

The results clearly suggest that the explicit teaching of using synonyms whilst paraphrasing does in fact improve comprehension, therefore the hypothesis is supported.

Thus, an educational implication of this might be that senior primary school teachers should plan a synonyms/paraphrasing task prior to a comprehension activity. Given the successful results of the three participants, implications for future research might include the testing of the hypothesis on an entire grade 5/6 class, to see if the results are reproducible.

Introduction:

In the past, a 'good reader' may have been defined as somebody who could decode most words accurately. Nowadays current thinking suggests that a student's ability to understand and comprehend what they have read is equally important as the skill of decoding. Also, not only is it of vital importance that students comprehend the literal meanings in a text, they also need to have an understanding of the inferential and evaluative meanings embedded in a text.

Personal observation suggests that many 5/6 students would benefit from an increased vocabulary. Understandably, if a student has limited synonym knowledge, then this impacts upon their ability to restate ideas in their own words. Teaching year 5/6 students to use synonyms whilst paraphrasing is one way to improve comprehension.

All schools seek to improve their students' comprehension levels. Several professional development days and short courses are dedicated to assisting teachers reach this goal. In order to effectively participate in lessons across all subject areas, students need to be able to comprehend a variety of content knowledge, and demonstrate this knowledge throughout a variety of scenarios and activities. "The ability to glean meaning from expository passages is arguably one of the most important skills for success in our secondary schools." (Katims & Harris, 1997 p.121.) This information is also pertinent to senior primary school teachers, as it is their responsibility to prepare students as best possible for the transition to secondary school.

Fisk & Hurst (2003) have composed a comprehension strategy that incorporates four modes of communication (listening, reading, writing, and speaking). First the students hear the text read aloud. Next, the students read the text to themselves and take notes. They then rewrite the text in their own words (paraphrasing). Finally, they discuss their paraphrased text with their peers.

Students need to ensure the voice of the author is maintained when they are paraphrasing. For example, if the original text is passionate or humorous, then the paraphrased text also needs to reflect these qualities. Consequently, it is imperative that students have the opportunity to identify the author's voice (the tone of the piece of writing) before attempting to paraphrase (Fisk & Hurst, 2003).

Fisk and Hurst (2003) also suggest that students will benefit from an understanding of why paraphrasing is helpful, and examples of when they might need to paraphrase in everyday life. Making notes for an assignment, or reporting back on a meeting attended are two such examples. In essence, "helping students see practical applications of accurately restating another person's ideas will motivate them to use paraphrasing" (Fisk & Hurst, 2003 p183.)

Schumaker, Denton and Deshler's (1984) suggest that the comprehension of students with learning disabilities can greatly be improved with the use of a paraphrasing strategy. This particular strategy is based on the acronym of RAP (**R**ead a paragraph, **A**sk yourself "what are the main ideas and details in this paragraph?" and **P**ut the main idea and details into your own words using complete sentences). Their research indicated that students that were taught the paraphrasing strategy improved their

ability to answer comprehension questions from 48%-84%. It must also be noted that the more paraphrasing a student did, the higher their comprehension score was.

This present study seeks to extend this research further, to see if the findings that applied to students with learning disabilities can also be applied to students of average intelligence. Similar to the paraphrasing strategy of RAP, (but less wordy!) the students will be taught the mantra "say it in your own words."

Method:

Design:

An OXO design was implemented in this study. The students were explicitly taught to use synonyms whilst paraphrasing, with the aim of improving their comprehension.

Participants:

All students chosen to participate in the study were in their final two years of primary schooling. All three students were male. Student A is in grade 5, Student B & C in grade 6. All three children have been identified as 'at-risk'. They will all benefit from the explicit teaching of strategies to aid their comprehension. Please refer to the table for further specific information:

Participants	Description of learning difficulties
Student A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 10 years, 5 months - poor concentration skills - has difficulty expressing himself
Student B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 11years, 9months - easily distracted - spelling difficulties - was receiving help for comprehension difficulties from Special Education Co-ordinator in 2004 & 2005, but has stopped as he despised the stigma attached to it
Student C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Age: 11 years, 3 months - ESL: Chinese language spoken at home (It should be noted that he presents with difficulties in Chinese as well as English. He attends Chinese school on the weekend) - often seems disengaged, poor concentration skills - has had support in the form of small group and one-to-one with the Special Education Co-ordinator, with the aim of developing his comprehension skills - had a Speech Pathology Assessment by the CEO in late 2005, due to concerns regarding his oral language development

Materials:

For pre and post testing:

- **Synonyms task** ©2005, John Munro.
- **Comprehension - Paraphrasing test** ©2005, John Munro.
- **Torch** (© 2nd Edition, 2003)
- **Neale Analysis of Reading Ability** (© 3rd Edition, 2002)

For 10 lessons:

- **Flash cards** with ten words for students to suggest synonyms for
- **8 short texts** from Tuffin & Henderson's Comprehend it:
Comprehension at 3 level using original fiction and non fiction
(used for lessons 3-10)
- **8 comprehension tasks** related to above short non fictional texts
- **Paper, pencils, whiteboard**
- **A teacher journal** used to monitor progress over the ten lessons

Procedure:

The participants were all individually pre and post tested. They were withdrawn from the classroom for the ten lessons. Each lesson went for 45-50 minutes, and was conducted in the Special Education room. The itinerary was as follows:

- Week 1: pre testing, Lesson 1 & 2
- Week 2: Lessons 3, 4 & 5
- Week 3: Lessons 6, 7 & 8
- Week 4: Lessons 9 & 10, post testing

Please see Appendix 1 for more detailed information about the teaching unit.

Results:

The results indicate support for the hypothesis that teaching Year 5/6 students to use synonyms whilst paraphrasing improves their comprehension.

Synonyms test: (©John Munro, 2005)

Student A		Student B		Student C	
Child's responses:		Child's responses:		Child's responses:	
Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
2	4	2	2	1	2
1	2	1	2	1	2
0	1	1	1	0	1
0	0	0	0	0	0
1	1	0	1	0	1
1	3	1	3	1	2
2	4	2	3	1	3
2	4	1	3	1	1
1	2	1	1	0	1
1	1	1	1	1	1
1	3	1	1	1	3
0	2	0	0	1	3
1	3	0	1	0	2
0	0	0	1	1	1
0	0	0	1	0	2
0	0	0	0	0	1
0	1	0	1	0	2
0	1	0	1	0	1
1	4	1	2	1	2
1	3	1	1	1	3
0	0	0	0	0	1
0	0	0	1	0	2
0	0	0	0	0	0
1	1	1	1	1	1
0	1	0	0	0	1
0	0	0	0	0	1
0	1	0	0	0	0
0	2	0	0	0	2
1	1	1	1	1	1

The results from this test suggest that the ten intervention lessons were beneficial to all participants. Student A was able to think of 17 synonyms during the pre test and 45 synonyms when post tested. Student B thought of 15 during the pre test and 29 when post tested. Student C thought of 13 during the pre test and 43 when post tested.

[Comprehension- paraphrasing test: \(©John Munro, 2005\)](#)

(Please see Appendix 2 for copy of)

Student A		Student B		Student C	
No. of ideas/points:		No. of ideas/points:		No. of ideas/points:	
Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1	5	0	3	0	1
2	4	2	4	1	3
1	2	1	3	1	1
2	3	2	3	1	3
1	3	1	2	0	1
0	2	0	1	0	0
1	3	1	4	1	2
2	4	1	4	0	2
2	3	1	3	1	2
1	3	1	3	1	3
1	3	1	2	0	2

Similarly, the results from this test also support the hypothesis. Student A was able to paraphrase 14 out of a possible 41 words in the pre test (34%), and 35 in the post test (85%). Student B paraphrased 11 words in the pre test (26%), and 32 in the post test (78%). Student C paraphrased 6 words in the pre test (14%), and 20 in the post test (48%).

[Torch: \(©, 2003\)](#)

	Student A		Student B		Student C	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Raw Score	18	18	6	20	5	16
Percentile	77%	84%	13%	66%	10%	34%
Stanine	6	7	3	6	2	4

The Torch test was administered to decipher the participants' raw score, percentile and stanine, prior to, and at the completion of the ten intervention lessons. Student A showed a little improvement. His raw score remained the same, his post test percentile improved by 7, from 77% to 84%, and his stanine improved by 1, from 6 to 7. Student B's raw score improved by 14, from 6 to 20, his percentile increased by 53, from 13% to 66%, and his stanine improved by 3, going from 3 to 6. Student C's raw score improved by 11, from 5 to 16, his percentile increased by 24, from 10% to 34%, and his stanine improved by 2, from 2 to 4.

[Neale Analysis: \(© M.D. Neale, 2002\)](#)

Participants	Student A		Student B		Student C	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Age	10.5yrs	10.6yrs	11.9 yrs	11.10yrs	11.3yrs	11.4yrs
Accuracy:						
• Raw score	77	97	61	75	77	69
• Percentile ranking	46%	95%	18%	32%	36%	27%
• Stanine	5	8	3	4	4	4
• Reading age	12.0yrs	13.0yrs	9.6yrs	12.1yrs	12.0yrs	10.11yrs
Comprehension:						
• Raw score	23	29	14	25	15	14
• Percentile Ranking	26%	55%	4%	31%	5%	5%
• Stanine	4	5	1	4	2	2
• Reading age	9.8yrs	12.2yrs	7.11yrs	10.8yrs	8.1yrs	7.1yrs

Using the Neale Analysis, all three students were pre tested to assess their raw score, percentile ranking, stanine and reading age. Whilst it was the comprehension results that were particularly prevalent to this study, it is interesting to also view the student's accuracy results.

Student A and B's post testing results indicate support for the hypothesis. However Student C's results indicated no improvement, and some pre testing results were higher than post testing.

Student A's accuracy reading age was 19 months above his age at the time of pre testing, and 31 months (2yrs, 7mths) above his age during post testing. His comprehension reading age was 9 months below when pre tested, and 20 months (1yr, 8mths) above his age when post tested. In the area of comprehension, Student A's raw score went from 77 to 97, his percentile ranking went from 46% to 95%, and he went from stanine 5 to 8.

Student B's accuracy reading age was 27 months (2yrs, 3mths) below that of his age when pre tested. Remarkably, when post tested, Student B was 3 months above his accuracy reading age. His comprehension reading age was 46 months (3yrs, 10mths) below his age when pre tested, his post test scores indicate that he is now 14 months below his age. In the area of comprehension, Student B's raw score went from 14 to 25, his percentile ranking went from 4% to 31%, and his stanine improved from 1 to 4.

Student C's accuracy reading age was 9 months above his age at the time of pre testing. However when post tested, his results indicated that he was 5 months below. Similarly, Student C's comprehension reading age was

38 months (3yrs, 2mths) below when pre tested, and 51 months (4yrs, 3mths) below when post tested. In the area of comprehension, Student C's raw score went from 15 to 14, and his percentile ranking and stanine remained the same.

Discussion:

The synonyms, paraphrasing and Torch tests are all easily interpreted and all support the hypothesis, however the Neale Analysis results require further discussion.

Student A's comprehension reading age was 9 months below when pre tested. This was not surprising, as Student A reads extremely fast, often ignoring punctuation that cues him to pause. Interestingly, his comprehension reading age was 20 months (1yr, 8mths) above his age when he was post tested (an overall improvement of 30 months {2yrs, 6mths} between pre and post testing). All of this indicates that synonyms and paraphrasing activities related to the text can greatly enhance comprehension.

Student B also made significant gains in comprehension, as although his comprehension reading age was a staggering 46 months (3yrs, 10mths) below his age when pre tested, his post test scores indicate that he is now 14 months below his age. Although Student B is obviously still at risk, it is pleasing to note that he has improved his comprehension age by 33 months (2yrs, 9mths). This could be attributed to the intervention, and also perhaps to the fact that the subject matter in the post testing (form 2 of Neale) seemed to appeal more to the student.

Student C's Neale Analysis results were particularly perplexing. The assessor noted that he had "problems with memory recall." It is also possible that his ESL background and oral language difficulties inhibited him from reaching his full potential.

The students' self efficacy was also monitored throughout the ten intervention lessons. It was interesting to note that the students were unusually shy in the beginning, and were reluctant to "have a go". However as they became more comfortable with the mantra "say it in your own words," and confident in their own abilities, their responses became more frequent and accurate.

Furthermore, the results of this study also suggest that the use of intervention lessons, (based on explicit teaching), can greatly increase skills and knowledge. In terms of future research, it would be interesting to see if other learning deficiencies could be improved through well planned small group interventions lessons. This idea is supported by Katims & Harris (1997, p.122), who suggest that "as the world's classrooms become more diverse in terms of the types of learners served in general education, instructional procedures that benefit all students will be invaluable to regular classroom teachers. Gains in student reading comprehension have the potential for even greater growth when all teachers actively support the use of instructional interventions."

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Appendix 1:

Teaching unit: John Munro's Comprehension- Paraphrasing Strategy (2005)

Lesson 1:

Introduce the strategy: We are learning things you can do to help you read. One thing you can do is to make a picture in your mind. Today we are going to learn another thing you can do. What you do is tell yourself what you have read. After you have read a sentence, you say it to yourself, in your own way. You try to change as many words as you can. Let's practice it.

Teacher models paraphrasing and cues student activity: Look at the first sentence. I will read it and I want you to read it to yourself with me. Then I will try saying it another way. Then I will ask you to try.

(Read some sentences that have accompanying pictures with the child. After each sentence, you model paraphrasing it and then have the student practice it. You may need to begin with changing individual words in sentences first (that is, the students suggest synonyms).

Teacher reviews the action: Let us look at what we did here. We read each sentence and then said it in other ways. See how it helped you to understand what the text said. Do you have any questions?

Teacher models and students practice: Let's do this together with another paragraph.

Read this text.

Teacher reviews the action: What do you tell yourself to do when you paraphrase?

Student transfers the action to other texts

Students paraphrase texts individually: Now you are going to practise doing this to some sentences all by yourself. Try to think of a different way of saying each sentence. Read each sentence. Say it to yourself in another way and write down what you thought of. Try not to use words that are in each written sentence.

Students review what they did. Teacher says: At the end of our first session can you tell me what you know about paraphrasing and what steps you should follow to paraphrase a text.

(Students' possible answers:

1. The first step in paraphrasing is to read a text.
2. The second step is to ask yourself questions about the main idea and details.
3. The third step is to put the main ideas and details into your own words using complete sentences).

Lesson 2:

During this session, the student consolidates the use of the strategy. The student reviews the steps involved in paraphrasing and the teacher gives additional practice in paraphrasing single sentences and paragraphs. Monitor the students work and give appropriate feedback. Pupils transfer the strategy to new texts by being shown a text and saying what they will do.

Lessons 3-10:

Comprehension - paraphrasing ©John Munro (Copy of table to be posted in mail along with parental permission slips).

Appendix 2:

Copy of paraphrasing test used for pre and post testing:

COMPREHENSION - PARAPHRASING (©John Munro, 2005)

At the completion of reading (or listening to) a story/passage, ask the student to paraphrase each sentence of the story/passage in his/her own words. Give 1 point to each word substituted in the text. Make sure the meaning of each sentence is maintained.

Passage sentence	Paraphrased sentence	No of ideas/ points
"No matter where you are on these islands,	No <u>worries</u> <u>wherever</u> you <u>be</u> on <u>those</u> <u>atolls</u> ,	5
Sam said, "the beach is never far away".	Sam <u>stated</u> , "t he <u>seashore</u> is <u>by no means</u> <u>too distant</u> ."	4
"But some are better than others", Tom said.	<u>Except a few</u> are <u>more superior</u> than <u>another</u> , Tom <u>alleged</u> .	5
Yes, that's right, Pat agreed.	<u>Okay</u> , t hat 's <u>correct</u> , Pat <u>recognized</u> .	3
"Some are good for swimming.	<u>A few</u> are <u>fine</u> for <u>bathing</u> .	3
Others, the ones with big waves, are great for surfing".	Others, <u>those</u> with <u>huge</u> waves, are <u>good</u> for surfing.	3
"How is the beach we are going to?" Rob asked.	<u>What</u> is the <u>seashore</u> like, that we are <u>visiting</u> ? Rob <u>inquired</u> .	4
"I've seen a lot of pictures of your beaches".	I have <u>observed</u> <u>a great number</u> of <u>photos</u> of your <u>seashores</u>	4
You'll like this one", Tom said.	You will <u>love</u> this <u>beach</u> , Tom <u>stated</u> .	3
The road went over a hill.	The <u>street</u> went <u>on top of</u> the <u>crest</u> .	3
Rob could hear the sound of the waves and smell the sea.	Rob <u>heard</u> the <u>noise</u> of the waves and the <u>odour</u> of the <u>ocean</u> .	4

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