**Abstract**

It appears that some late primary students’ reading difficulties are often related to problems with comprehension. Synonyms and paraphrasing are believed to help students with comprehension difficulties. Current research suggests the benefits of the paraphrasing strategy in tackling reading comprehension problems.

The hypothesis of this study is that teaching 'at risk' students in year 5/6, who have low accuracy levels but even lower comprehension levels, to use synonyms and to paraphrase, improves their level of comprehension.

This study compared two groups, a control group who received their usual literacy intervention program and the teaching group who were explicitly taught synonyms and paraphrasing, using various texts, over a series of ten sessions conducted two to three times per week for approx. 45mins in each session. Pre and Post testing of synonyms, paraphrasing and the Torch Test were used to show if there had been an improvement in the teaching group as well as testing done at the end of each session.

The results partly supported the hypothesis and the final testing did show that synonyms and paraphrasing is a useful strategy to teach to improve reading comprehension.

**Introduction**

For some students at the upper primary level, reading comprehension is a problem. Often students can decode the text but are not able to understand it. This becomes even more of a problem at this stage of their schooling as these students will soon be moving onto secondary school and 'as they progress through school, reading comprehension becomes increasingly important in many subjects' (Hagaman and Reid, 2008). Many secondary schools work out of text books and it is often assumed that students can read and comprehend these texts.

The present study examines students who are currently in year 5 or 6 and have received a considerable amount of literacy intervention over their years at primary school yet they continue to struggle and their comprehension is a major concern. As they will soon move onto secondary school these students need strategies that will help them now and in the future.

Many studies have shown that explicitly teaching students comprehension strategies, such as finding synonyms and paraphrasing, assist students to comprehend what they read. 'Paraphrasing for comprehension is an effective reading strategy that helps students process and comprehend what they are reading and learning' (Fisk and Hurst, 2003). Hagaman notes that 'there is evidence that there are comprehension problems that are independent of decoding' (Williams, 2005; cited in Hagaman and Reid, 2008). Further support for teaching comprehension strategies is supported by Munro where he states that 'the literacy skills more closely associated with comprehension, such as paraphrasing and summarising for the younger students, and vocabulary knowledge for the older students, were the best predictors of gains in comprehension' (Munro, 2003). 'When students are taught a technique for how to paraphrase a text, paraphrasing can strengthen comprehension of both fiction and non-fiction' (Fisk and Hurst, 2003). Fisk and Hurst go on to say that 'in our efforts to help students better comprehend text, we have found paraphrasing for comprehension to be an excellent tool for reinforcing reading skills such as identifying the main ideas, finding supporting details, and identifying the author's voice’ (Fisk and Hurst, 2003).

Students with low comprehension need to get a feel for what they are about to read before they read it. They need to be tuned into the front cover, the title, talk about the illustrations, be made aware of words that may come up in the text and to relate it to their own experiences. The initial part of teaching students to paraphrase involves teaching them to find synonyms for words in the text. Munro talks about a part of the 'getting ready' for any topic they will read about is that one of the things to do is to suggest synonyms for key concept words in the text (Munro, 2003). Finding
synonyms before students actually paraphrase helps students understand the vocabulary that they are going to be reading and paraphrasing. It allows the students to link words in the text with what they know. They link it directly with their own language. There is a perception that if key words are learnt explicitly the students are more likely to comprehend the topic in the reading content (Munro, 2002). In the present study the teaching does focus on synonyms at the beginning of each lesson as a means of ‘tuning into’ the concept words.

Once students learn to find synonyms for key words they can then go on to paraphrasing, starting at sentence level. Paraphrasing allows the student to break down the text into sentence level and then say it another way. Students need to read the sentence, think about what it means and then say it in their own words but the meaning must be retained. By doing this they come to get a much clearer picture of what the text is saying. Paraphrasing directs students to focus on the main idea. The process that they do in their head while paraphrasing helps them to grasp the meaning. Paraphrasing helps students to learn to link new ideas and they get to talk about these ideas and it helps students keep it in their short term memory. Working with synonyms first usually assists paraphrasing (Munro, 2003).

Many studies of improving comprehension rates refer to the acronym 'RAP' to help teach paraphrasing. RAP is simply: 'Read the text, Ask yourself questions about the main idea and details, Put the ideas into your own words, Try to change as many words as you can' (Schumaker, Denton and Deshler, 1984; cited in Hagaman and Reid, 2008). Hagaman and Reid's results of their study 'indicate that the RAP paraphrasing strategy paired with strategy instruction utilizing Harris and Graham's Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD) model can improve the reading comprehension scores of struggling readers (Hagaman and Reid, 2008). Their study also indicated that 'all students increased the amount of text for both main idea and detail and suggests that strategies such as the RAP strategy can effectively increase their recall of text in content areas'. For paraphrasing to be an effective strategy the lessons need to be scaffolded. In other words, 'the responsibility for the use of the strategy is gradually shifted from the instructor to the student' (Hagaman and Reid, 2008). Paraphrasing is modelled by the teacher at first but as students learn to be able to do it themselves the student drives the learning, not the teacher.

Paraphrasing is a strategy that can be taught to underachievers in literacy as well as to students who are working within the desired levels for their age group. It is a cognitive strategy that allows the learner to look at the task (in this case, read the information they are presented with) and then use a strategy to help them gain meaning (in this case the strategy being changing the words but keeping the meaning). The RAP allows students to talk to themselves as they read and to apply the strategy. This involves metacognition. Comprehension can be taught to underachievers if it is taught in a way that enables them to use a strategy to help them make sense of it. The Sim model (Strategic Instruction Model) is discussed by Katims and Harris (1997) for teaching students with learning disabilities. 'The idea behind this approach is that disabled and low-achieving adolescents can learn content area information presented in general education classes when taught how and when to process this information in a strategic and active manner' (Katims and Harris, 1997). Katims and Harris (1997) refer to studies done by Schumaker et al, and Ellis and Graves that both show that 'using the paraphrasing strategy increased the comprehension of students with and without learning disabilities' (Schumaker et al, 1994, Ellis & Graves, 1990; cited in Katims and Harris, 1997). In Katims and Harris' (1997) research their findings showed that although there was not a significant improvement in comprehension for students with a learning disability the gains were far greater than those students with a learning disability who were not explicitly taught the paraphrasing strategy.

The present study aims to support the earlier research of Hagaman and Reid (2008) by showing that the explicit teaching of synonyms and paraphrasing will result in an increase in the teaching group’s comprehension levels through the post test results of the synonym and paraphrasing tests, as well as the students’ post Torch scores, and the results from written paraphrases done at the end of each session.
At the end of the study it is hoped that the students in the teaching group will be able to find synonyms for key words in a text and be able to paraphrase parts of a text, both orally and in written form. It is thought that eventually students will tell themselves to do this automatically when they come across a text that presents them with comprehension difficulties. Through the teaching of paraphrasing, it is anticipated that the teaching group’s comprehension levels will improve.

The hypothesis for this study aims to show that teaching ‘at risk’ students in year 5/6, who have low accuracy levels but even lower comprehension levels, to use synonyms and to paraphrase improves their level of comprehension.

**Method**

**Design**

This study uses a real life study in a primary school in metropolitan Melbourne. The study uses a case study OXO design in which the gains in synonym, paraphrasing and reading comprehension ability, following explicit teaching of the use of synonyms and paraphrasing, are monitored for upper primary school boys who have had considerable reading and comprehension difficulties throughout their schooling. The study compares two groups of students, a control group and a teaching group.

**Participants**

The participants of the study are year five and six primary student boys who have had reading difficulties throughout their years of schooling. All participants attend their local co-educational Catholic primary school and are aged between 10 and 11.75 years. All students involved were given a Neale’s Analysis Reading Test (Neale, 1999) and it revealed that these students were all well below their reading age for reading accuracy and reading comprehension (Refer to Table 1). In fact, apart from Student C, all were two or more years below their reading age for comprehension compared to their biological age. Student C was 1.91 years below in his reading age for comprehension. With this in mind, and the fact that these students were in the bottom 25th percentile for reading compared with their classmates, these students were first priority for literacy intervention classes that exist in their school.

**TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Teaching Group</th>
<th>Year at School in 2009</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age in months</th>
<th>ESL No=0</th>
<th>Earlier Intervention No=0</th>
<th>EMA No=0</th>
<th>LNSLN Funding No=0</th>
<th>Neale’s Reading Age for Accuracy</th>
<th>Neale’s Reading Age for Comp.</th>
<th>Number of sessions attended. 10 sessions in total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yr. 6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2, 4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yr. 5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1, 2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yr. 5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yr. 6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>8.11</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yr. 6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1, 2, 3, 4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student F</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yr. 6</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1, 2, 4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student G</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yr. 5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2, 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student H</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Yr. 5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1, 2, 3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*RR=Reading Recovery  
ERIK=Enhancing Reading Intervention Knowledge  
GRREAD=Group Re-Reading Aloud Daily  
RAV=Reading Assistance Voucher  
**SE=Social Emotional  
SLD=Severe Language  
ID=Intellectual Disability  
CH=Chronic Health  
A,B,C,D Teaching Group  
E,F,G,H Control Group
The students chosen for this study have all had a great deal of reading intervention prior to the study as can be seen in Table 1 (for full table details see Appendix 1). It is clear from the table that all students involved in the study have decoding problems as can be seen by their Neale score for reading age accuracy. All students scored well below their biological age for reading accuracy. Students in the control group scored even lower for their accuracy levels than their comprehension levels. The teaching group students showed a slightly higher level for their accuracy than their comprehension. With this in mind, and the fact that the teaching group students would soon be moving onto secondary school, it was decided that they would be chosen for the study which was targeting comprehension. This skill would be vital for them in the secondary setting.

The students involved in this study were already receiving literacy intervention since the beginning of the year and were being taken out of their classroom twice a week for approximately 45 minutes to one hour for this intervention. The literacy co-ordinator of the school had referred them for intervention due to their low scores on literacy tests conducted at the end of the previous year and classed them as ‘at risk’. Both groups were receiving intervention on the ‘Sunshine Intervention Works Program’ (Scarffe, B. & Semple, C., 2006-2008) which targets decoding, comprehension and fluency.

Once it was determined that these were the students to be involved in this study, the teaching group was to receive ten explicit teaching sessions on paraphrasing while the control group would continue with their usual intervention using the ‘Sunshine Intervention Works’ Program (Scarffe, B. & Semple, C., 2006-2008).

**Materials**

To begin this study the teaching group and control group were both pre-tested using the grade appropriate Torch Tests of Reading Comprehension (Mossenson et al, 2003). The year 5 students completed the ‘Donna Dingo’ text as a measure of their comprehension. The year 6 students completed ‘Swamp Creature’ as a measure of their comprehension. The same texts were used for the post testing to compare the levels of comprehension after the ten sessions on paraphrasing were completed.

The second set of testing that was done before and after the teaching of paraphrasing was the Synonym Test designed by John Munro (Munro, 2005) and was scored according to Munro’s (2005) scoring system 1. Two points were given if the word was semantically and grammatically correct but only one point if it was only semantically correct. The synonym test consisted of 29 words and the students could list a maximum of 5 synonyms for each word. As each answer was worth 2 points the total score possible was 290 points but the score was converted to a percentage (See Appendix 2 for scoring system in detail). The purpose was to see if there had been a significant improvement in synonyms after explicitly teaching synonyms through the paraphrasing sessions.

The third test used to gather data was Munro’s Paraphrasing Test (Munro, 2005) which was also conducted before and after the paraphrasing sessions. It consisted of 16 sentences that had to be paraphrased. It was also scored according to John Munro’s scoring system 1 (See Appendix 2 for more detail). As each sentence was worth a possible 2 points the test was scored out of 32 but then converted to a percentage. The purpose of the text was to see if the paraphrasing sessions had resulted in an improvement of student’s paraphrasing ability and use of synonyms.
**Procedure**

Once the pre-testing was completed the ten paraphrasing sessions commenced. While they are called ‘paraphrasing sessions’ it should be noted that synonyms were an integral part of the sessions. The teaching group would come out of their classrooms for approximately 45 minutes, two to three times a week, and work in a separate room with the teacher. Sometimes the lessons were slightly shortened due to the Sacrament program running at the same time.

The paraphrasing sessions were based on Munro’s ‘Teaching a Paraphrasing Strategy’ (Munro, 2006) but modified with different texts for this particular group of students. The four texts chosen were used over the ten sessions and each text was finished before going onto a new text. This would enable sessions to flow more and students could draw on previous knowledge. The texts started with a fiction text that was suitable for their reading age and then non-fiction texts were chosen that were gradually more challenging but still within their reading ability (see Appendix 3 for list of texts).

The lessons followed a similar pattern in each session with the emphasis at first on the sessions being very teacher directed and then moving onto becoming more student directed. As this teaching group did have quite significant learning problems and some behavioural issues the sessions did have to be very teacher directed and the students were reluctant to take over the learning. The first lesson put a large emphasis on teaching what a synonym was so the students could then go on to choose key words and find synonyms in subsequent lessons. A thesaurus was given to each student in lessons 1-6 and then was taken away and they were asked to identify synonyms independently. The strategy of paraphrasing was introduced in the first session after the text had been read and the students were shown the RAP acronym (Appendix 4) to assist them recall what was needed while paraphrasing.

This RAP was always referred to throughout the sessions. Paraphrasing was done sentence by sentence and after reading a sentence the teacher would ask the students to say it another way, changing the words but not the meaning. Synonyms covered early in the lesson were always left on the whiteboard for students to refer to. The teacher modelled how to paraphrase and although this became less as the sessions came nearer to finishing it was still provided if students found it too difficult. The teacher encouraged other students in the group to model wherever possible. Each session would always review what action was done by revisiting the RAP or memorizing it.

To conclude each session and as a way of tracking the students’ progress, each student was given a few sentences from the text they had been reading and then wrote individual paraphrases for it. This was done without help from one another or the teacher. After doing this the students would share their work and the teacher would provide feedback. The feedback would either be praise for good examples of paraphrasing or help with how they could better paraphrase and use the suggestions from the group as well. The students would always review what they did and each student had to name one thing they had learnt before leaving the room (see Appendix 5 for ten sessions on paraphrasing. It should be noted that due to the nature of this group the sessions are extremely detailed).
Results

To begin this study both groups of students were given a Torch Test to measure their level of comprehension. As can be seen in Table 2, all students were then post tested on the Torch after the 10 sessions of paraphrasing for the teaching group had been completed (for complete table details refer to Appendix 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Teaching Group=1</th>
<th>Control Group=0</th>
<th>Age in months</th>
<th>Synonym Test PRE % score</th>
<th>Synonym Test POST % score</th>
<th>Paraphrase Test PRE % score</th>
<th>Paraphrase Test POST % score</th>
<th>TORCH Score PRE</th>
<th>TORCH Score POST</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>33.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student F</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student G</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student H</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In looking at the pre and post test scores on the Torch Test for comprehension (see Figure 1 below), they indicate a larger improvement in the teaching group (Students A-D) compared to the control group (Students E-H). All students in the teaching group made some gains, even if fairly small, ranging from a 1.7 increase (student C) to a 10.8 increase (student B) in their Torch score. The control group showed fewer gains with students E and H making no progress as their Torch score remained the same. Student G made a slight gain of 1.7 in his Torch score and Student F showed a decline of 11.8 on his Torch score.

Figure 1

Pre and Post Torch Scores for Teaching and Control Groups

[Bar chart showing pre and post Torch scores for each student in the teaching and control groups.]
In comparing both groups, the teaching group, as a whole, increased their performance on the Torch test after their ten sessions of paraphrasing whereas the control group’s performance on the Torch Test, as a whole, showed a decline (see Figure 2). Both groups started the testing with an average score very similar but by the post test, figure 2 clearly shows that the teaching group improved their comprehension levels and the control group had a decline in their comprehension results. Even though the increase is relatively small for the teaching group, it is a gain and does support that explicitly teaching paraphrasing does help improve students’ comprehension.

![Figure 2](image)

Comparison of Average Torch Scores for Teaching and Control Groups

After the Torch Test both groups were pre and post tested for synonyms and paraphrasing and by looking at Figure 3 it can be seen that, apart from student E, all students scored higher on the synonym test in the post test. It does show that the control group had a better knowledge of synonyms before this study began, and even after the study finished, compared to the teaching group, but it was the teaching group that showed higher gains with synonyms. Apart from student E, all other students made some progress but it is evident that the teaching group (Students A-D) made more significant gains compared to the control group (Students E-H) as shown in Figure 4. The teaching group gained an average of 10% in their overall scores for the post synonym test whereas the control group only improved by 2% in the post synonym test.

![Figure 3](image)

Pre and Post Synonym and Paraphrasing Tests for Teaching and Control Groups
Looking at Figure 3 it is also evident that the teaching group (Students A-D) all performed better in their pre and post paraphrasing tests compared to the control group. Students in the control group (Students E-H) show that their overall progress was not as good as the teaching group. Student E and H did improve on their paraphrasing score in the post test but student F performed lower on his post test and student G made no gains at all. Students A-D all made gains in this test and even though Student D’s gain was minimal it still showed an improvement.

Overall the teaching group performed better in paraphrasing as they showed a 12% increase in their average score compared to the control group who only improved their average score for the paraphrasing test by 2% (see Figure 5 below).

During the teaching of paraphrasing, students A to D (teaching group) were monitored throughout the sessions and data was obtained on each of the four students at the end of each session. Each student had to paraphrase some sentences in a written format without any assistance and the teacher recorded the results. The results of their paraphrasing efforts were up and down and not consistent as can be seen in figures 6-9. All the students involved in this study have significant learning difficulties and some have behavioral concerns. Ten sessions on paraphrasing really stretched their concentration limits. Student A, in particular, had issues with another student in the group and this did cause for a lot of disruption and difficulties which may have affected their scores throughout the teaching sessions.
As can be seen in Figure 6 Student A really didn’t start to make much progress until session 8. He had been very disruptive for most of the sessions and found synonyms and paraphrasing very difficult as can be seen by his low scores. He had to be sent out in session 7 due to his high level of disruption and he did a make-up lesson at lunchtime with the teacher. The group dynamics were very difficult for him. He really found it a challenge to find a synonym for a word and relied on the thesaurus but found that to be slow as he didn’t really have adequate skills to use a thesaurus. A quick session on how to look up words was given to this group early on. This student performed better orally but found the written task difficult. He responded better to the teacher writing his paraphrases on the whiteboard with help from the group or the teacher. He constantly needed feedback and working at an independent stage with paraphrasing was a struggle for him. His ability to paraphrase plummeted in session 5 as can be seen in Figure 6. In this session he worked only with Student D as these two students were preparing for a Sacrament and missed the session time. They were given a session together at another time so they would not be behind the others. Student A worked very well orally in this setting but struggled with the written component. While he seemed to grasp the concept of having to ‘say it another way’ he struggled with finding other words. His word bank was very sparse. Figure 6 shows that Student A did start to improve from session 8 which is most likely due to the fact that after such a lot of practise he was finally starting to develop his word bank and this made it easier for him to paraphrase.

Student B also varied in his performance on the written paraphrasing tasks, as can be seen in Figure 7. He certainly had a better grasp of paraphrasing and synonyms than Student A as his scores indicate, but his results did not show a steady pattern of growth. His scores rose from session 4 to 6 but then took a downward slide only to peak in session 9. His performance dropped again in the last session. Student B struggled early on with understanding meaning within the context but by session 6 he had grown very confident in suggesting synonyms and was very helpful when the other students had difficulty finding synonyms. He worked better orally than in a written format. His scores do not reflect his improved oral performance in the sessions where he showed a greater understanding throughout the sessions and was gaining confidence.
Student C started well but his results showed large variations. Session 4 showed low results and it was in this session where he had great difficulties coping with Student A, therefore his scores possibly reflect his mood. In session 7 he was finding synonyms but struggled with getting the grammar correct. While he did progress in the last 2 sessions he did not score as high as in some of the previous sessions. Student C could paraphrase in the sessions when it was done orally but he got distracted easily and often found it difficult to cope with these distractions. It was difficult for him to maintain concentration levels by the end of the session. It should be noted, however, that he did score the highest out of the teaching group with a 75% score in sessions 2 and 5.

**Figure 8**

![Student C's Performance on Paraphrasing Tasks over 10 Sessions](image)

Student D’s performance fluctuated over the 10 sessions. By session 5 his score dropped to zero but then he peaked at 66% in the following session followed by a decline and then a steady rise and a decline in the last session. This student struggled with synonyms from the first session and had to be taught to use a thesaurus. He performed better orally than on written tasks. He depended on a lot of teacher modelling and worked well when paraphrasing was recorded on the whiteboard as a group task but always found it difficult to put it into writing.

**Figure 9**

![Student D's Performance on Paraphrasing Tasks over 10 Sessions](image)

As shown earlier in Table 1, all the students in both groups have had intervention in the past and by looking at their Torch Pre-Test scores they are all quite low scores (see Table 2). While the teaching groups' results in the sessions were not consistent enough to show that their paraphrasing improved greatly over time, their Post Torch, Synonym and Paraphrasing Test scores all show an improvement. This indicates that there is a correlation between the test results and with explicitly teaching synonyms and paraphrasing. The control group, who received no synonym and paraphrasing teaching, on average performed worse in their Torch post test and had only 2% increases for their synonyms and paraphrasing tests.
Discussion

Upon reflection of the results of this study there is some support for the hypothesis that teaching 'at risk' students in year 5/6, who have low accuracy levels but even lower comprehension levels, to use synonyms and to paraphrase improves their level of comprehension. The Torch, synonym and paraphrasing post test results show that the teaching group did improve in comprehension more so than the control group as they had larger gains in all their post tests. As in keeping with Katims and Harris' (1997) study there was not a significant improvement in comprehension for the teaching group but it was better than the control group who were not explicitly taught the paraphrasing strategy. If the study was to continue for a longer time it may bring about more significant changes. It should also be noted that the Torch test that was conducted at the end of the paraphrasing sessions occurred three weeks after the sessions ended due to the Sacramental program commitments and a two week break for school holidays followed by two pupil free days and then a year 5/6 camp. These were not ideal conditions for the Torch Test as there was such a long break between the teaching and performing this particular test. In an ideal situation it would be better for the Torch test to have been completed at the same time the other tests were done. The Torch test scores may have been different in a more ideal situation.

The results partly support the study of Hagaman and Reid (2008) that 'the use of the RAP paraphrasing strategy increased reading comprehension'. While teaching paraphrasing to this group they not only had to read the text but think about the context and come up with suitable synonyms for key words, change words and write it a different way, just as the RAP implies. In all sessions the teaching involved a lot of talking and discussion from the students in their attempts to paraphrase. As Fisk and Hurst (2003) point out 'one of the reasons paraphrasing for comprehension works so well is because it integrates all modes of communication-reading, writing, listening, speaking-which leads to a deeper understanding of the text'. As the sessions progressed the students worked very well at the oral stage, especially when the texts were about the shoreline and the open sea (see Appendix 3) as they could relate this to their own experiences of swimming in the sea, fishing, going out on a boat and the like. However, it was the written paraphrasing task that the teaching group struggled with throughout the ten sessions. Their scores were very spasmodic and didn’t show a steady increase in the teaching groups' comprehension levels. The teaching group seemed to perform better orally as the sessions progressed and were responding with more synonyms but failed to put it into practise when it came to the written task. In this respect, the testing completed during the 10 sessions did not support that paraphrasing improves comprehension but perhaps with more practise and more focus on the written paraphrasing, this group may show more consistency in their results after each session. All students in this teaching group have difficulties with written tasks and avoid writing in the classroom setting. For this study to truly work it not only would be beneficial to have more sessions but also to focus more explicitly on writing paraphrases. For this group of students it seems that the oral stage is always needed before they can attempt the written task. In the testing at the end of each session there was no discussion as they only had to write their paraphrases. It may be beneficial for this group to discuss it first and then write and then once they were competent with that task, proceed onto being able to write paraphrases without the initial discussion.

Student B and C did show some quite positive results in some of their sessions but they weren’t consistent throughout the sessions. Students A and C also had very minimal increases in their Torch scores. With more time for practice and automaticity of the strategy this may lead to more consistent results. Students A and D were slower to generate synonyms and write their own paraphrases so they possibly would have benefitted from more sessions and even more scaffolding of the lessons. They would need to paraphrase orally within the group more and write paraphrases together as a group on the whiteboard before attempting their own written paraphrases. This may have given them a greater depth of knowledge before they did the writing and also given them more confidence to write themselves. The extra sessions and greater scaffolding of the lessons may not be necessary for other groups but as this group had high needs it would be relevant to them.
At the end of the written task in each session feedback was always given to the students. The students would share their paraphrasing attempts and as a group there was always discussion on how to improve on what they had written. In the following session the students would always go back to their assessment task they had completed in the last session and look at the teacher’s suggestions and they would read out the changes. This feedback seemed to work very well for this group as they could see what they did well and acknowledge the suggestions for what they needed improvement on. It also was a time to highlight good examples of synonyms. Feedback on teaching a strategy is vital to give students an indication of how they are going and also to gain ideas.

For the results to have been more significant in this study it needs to be mentioned that paraphrasing is just one strategy that has been found to improve comprehension. It is probably best taught alongside other comprehension strategies that can be used at the same time. Munro (2002) talks about rather than teaching one strategy at a time, various comprehension strategies should be taught simultaneously. In this way Munro says that students build a whole set of comprehension strategies which they pick and choose from (Munro, 2002). There would possibly be greater gains in comprehension if paraphrasing was integrated with other strategies.

If this study were to be repeated a number of changes would be needed. For this group of students there is a need for further sessions in synonyms and paraphrasing to see more of an upward trend in the teaching group’s scores during the sessions. This group depended on a lot of modelled teaching for longer than what other groups may need so the switch to independently using synonyms and paraphrasing may have worked more successfully if there had been more sessions, such as 15-20 sessions. The amount of sessions needed would really depend on the group of students but once paraphrasing is taught the student should be given further time to use it and the teacher should continue to refer to the strategy as one of the many comprehension tools that can be used.

Another suggestion for this group of students would be that synonyms and using a thesaurus may well have been better taught as a strategy in itself before paraphrasing was even introduced. It would also be beneficial to see synonyms and paraphrasing taught to this group of students within the context of the whole class as the more able students may have acted as role models for using the strategies and provided more encouragement for this group. A class group may have reduced the behavioural problems that occurred in this particular small group.

Matching the texts to the students reading level and gradually increasing their difficulty certainly worked well and made the task of paraphrasing more manageable. This group particularly enjoyed the texts to do with the sea and it generated much discussion within the group. As a starting point for teaching paraphrasing it is probably a good idea to find out what the students like to read about and use that for initial sessions where possible.

For groups such as the one in this study it may be more beneficial for the synonym test to be changed slightly. Instead of allowing for 5 possible synonyms for each word it may be better to limit it to two words so that the students would not be so disillusioned by not filling in all the blank spaces.

The results do suggest that explicitly teaching paraphrasing is a useful strategy to improve comprehension but further research on using other comprehension strategies taught alongside paraphrasing would be interesting to investigate. In teaching groups such as the one in this study, lessons for paraphrasing need to be carefully scaffolded to give students the time to practise and use the strategy before they are expected to paraphrase in written form. Further research may involve teaching paraphrasing over a greater number of sessions. Teaching synonyms may be better taught as a strategy in itself before paraphrasing is taught.
REFERENCES


Resources

**Tests**


**Texts**


**Programs**


## APPENDIX 1

### PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS AND PRE AND POST TESTING RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Teaching Group</th>
<th>Year at School in 2009</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age in months</th>
<th>ESL No=0</th>
<th>Yes=1</th>
<th>Earlier Intervention No=0</th>
<th>Yes=1</th>
<th>RR=1</th>
<th>ERIK=2</th>
<th>GRREAD=3</th>
<th>RAV=4*</th>
<th>LNSLN Funding No=0</th>
<th>Yes=1</th>
<th>Neale’s Reading Age for Accuracy</th>
<th>Neale’s Reading Age for Comp.</th>
<th>Number of sessions attended</th>
<th>Synonym Test PRE % score</th>
<th>Synonym Test POST % score</th>
<th>Paraphrase Test PRE % score</th>
<th>Paraphrase Test POST % score</th>
<th>TORCH Score PRE</th>
<th>TORCH Score POST</th>
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</table>

*RR=Reading Recovery
ERIK=Enhancing Reading Intervention Knowledge
GRREAD=Group Re-Reading Aloud Daily
RAV=Reading Assistance Voucher

**SE=Social Emotional
SLD=Severe Language
ID=Intellectual Disability
CH=Chronic Health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Group</th>
<th>Control Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A, B, C, D</td>
<td>E, F, G, H</td>
</tr>
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</table>
APPENDIX 2

SCORING SYSTEM 1 FOR SYNONYM TASK

John Munro’s Synonym Task Scoring Criteria (Munro, 2005)

Synonym/Depth: First Correct Response

2 points: Same meaning as the target word both semantically and grammatically
1 point: Has the same meaning as the target word semantically (not grammatically)
0 points: others

Additional Rules for Scoring

1. Only include the first five words that the child wrote for each item
2. If a child provides varied word forms as his or her response, e.g. leave: go / going / gone, only accept the root form “go”
3. Accept plural if the response is distinctly different from the target word e.g. child: children / little people, accept “little people” but not “children”

Test is out of 290 as for each word students can have up to 5 responses worth 2 points each therefore with a total of 29 words on the test the maximum score is 290.

SCORING FOR PARAPHRASING TASK

John Munro’s Paraphrasing Task Scoring Criteria (Munro, 2005)

Scoring System 1
At the completion of reading (or listening to) each sentence, ask the student to paraphrase the sentence in his/her own words.

Give 2 points for a sentence that has been reworded, and the student has substituted more than 50% of the words in the sentence (using synonyms).

Give 2 points for a sentence in which the order of the words within the sentence has been changed and meaning has been maintained. (Some synonyms may also be used.)

Give 1 point for a sentence that has had less than 50% of the words in the sentence have been substituted with synonyms.

Give 0 points if a sentence is complete, or does not maintain meaning.

Note: Students can only gain points if the meaning of the sentence is maintained.

There are 16 sentences to paraphrase therefore the maximum score is 32 (2 points multiplied by 16).
## APPENDIX 3

### Texts used for Paraphrasing Sessions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Fry's Readability Level</th>
<th>Series/Book</th>
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<td>1,2 &amp; 3</td>
<td>Bird and Caterpillar Fable</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Yr. 3</td>
<td>Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies, CARS Series C</td>
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<tr>
<td>4, 5, 6 &amp; 7</td>
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<td>Non Fiction</td>
<td>Yr. 4</td>
<td>Comprehensive Assessment of Reading Strategies, CARS Series C</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 &amp; 9</td>
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<td>Non Fiction</td>
<td>Yr. 5</td>
<td>Life in the Oceans, Rigby Heinemann</td>
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<td>Yr. 5</td>
<td>Life in the Oceans, Rigby Heinemann</td>
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APPENDIX 4

PARAPHRASING RAP CHART

Read the text.

Ask yourself questions about the main ideas and details.

Put the ideas into your own words and try to change as many words as you can without changing the meaning.
APPENDIX 5

Paraphrasing Sessions (Lesson Plans)

Outcome of Teaching Sessions: That the students will be able to find synonyms for words and be able to paraphrase.

Grade Level: Literacy Intervention group of 4 ‘at risk’ Yr. 5/6 students.

Session 1

1. Read the whole text to the students (‘Bird and Caterpillar’ fable) and then the students read it taking turns.

2. Get students to select some key words from the text and list them on the whiteboard.

3. Teach what a synonym is using the key words selected as examples. Students may use a thesaurus to help them if they wish. All students have a thesaurus each. Generate synonyms for the words suggested and write them on the whiteboard. Revise what synonyms are.

4. Introduce the strategy of paraphrasing. ‘We are going to learn something that can help you understand what you read. It's called paraphrasing. You can use the word RAP to remember it’. Show them the RAP chart displayed and explain it (see Appendix 4).

5. ‘Let us go back to the first paragraph and read it aloud and then students take turns to read it’. Students read it 2 times over. ‘Now, let's go back to the first sentence in that paragraph. Let's read it again together. Now I am going to say that sentence another way but keep the meaning. I am going to change as many words as I can but still keep the meaning the same’ (Teacher is modelling how to paraphrase). Ask each student to paraphrase it by changing more than one word in it. Record attempts on whiteboard but cue students into it the whole time and offer clues and synonyms.

6. Now the next student reads the next sentence and has a go at paraphrasing it. Each student takes turns throughout the passage. Anytime the students have difficulty the teacher models how to paraphrase it or the other students offer suggestions.

7. Review the action done to paraphrase (refer to the RAP chart).

Read the text.
Ask yourself questions about the main ideas and details.
Put the ideas into your own words and try to change as many words as you can without changing the meaning.

8. ‘Now you are going to practise it individually’. Each student has to read the next few sentences that the teacher reads with them and highlight them with a highlighter. The teacher asks students to paraphrase each highlighted sentence but this time students will write it themselves without any discussion with others in the group. Students write paraphrases in workbooks. Students may refer to the thesaurus if they wish.

9. Each student shares their paraphrasing attempts and teacher gives feedback such as more synonyms to use or modelling another way to paraphrase it. Use students' written task as the assessment for the session. After the session is finished score it according to ‘John Munro’s paraphrasing task scoring criteria’ using scoring system 1 (see Appendix 2).

10. Review what students did today and what students have learnt.
Session 2

1. **Review** what was done last session and **revisit synonyms and the RAP**. Look at the written task that was done at the end of the last session. Students refer to their workbooks and see ideas/corrections teacher added. Model on the whiteboard how to paraphrase it.

2. **Read the next part** of ‘The Bird and Caterpillar Fable’ that we got up to. Students take turns to read it.

3. Get students to **select some key words** from the text and list them on the whiteboard.

4. **Generate synonyms** for these words and write them on the whiteboard. Students may use a thesaurus if they wish.

5. **Revise the strategy of paraphrasing**. 'We are going to paraphrase so that it can help you understand what you read. You can use the word RAP to remember it'. Show them the RAP again and students say it back to teacher.

6. **Let us first read the next paragraph** aloud and then take turns to read it. Students read it 2 times over. ‘Now, let’s go to the first sentence in that paragraph. Let’s read it again together. Now I am going to say that sentence another way but keep the meaning. I am going to change as many words as I can but still keep the meaning the same’. **Ask each student to paraphrase** it by changing more than one word in it. Record attempts on whiteboard but cue students into it the whole time and offer clues and synonyms. Encourage the students to offer synonyms and suggestions to help the student that is paraphrasing.

7. **Review the action** students do to paraphrase (refer to the RAP chart). They say the RAP in chorus.

8. ‘**Now you are going to practise it individually**’. Each student has to read the next few sentences that the teacher reads with them and highlight them with a highlighter. The teacher asks students to paraphrase each highlighted sentence but this time students will **write it themselves** without any discussion with others in the group. Students write paraphrases in workbooks. Students may refer to the thesaurus if they wish.

9. Each student **shares their paraphrasing** attempts and teacher gives **feedback** such as more synonyms to use or modelling another way to paraphrase it. Teacher tries to highlight the positive things students have done in this sharing time. E.g. a good synonym they used or a good example of paraphrasing. Use students’ written task as the assessment for the session. After the session is finished score it according to ‘John Munro’s paraphrasing task scoring criteria’ using scoring system 1 (see Appendix 2).

10. **Review** what students did today and what students have learnt.
Session 3

1. **Review** what was done last session and **revisit synonyms and the RAP**. Ask them what we are doing in the sessions and they try and say the RAP without looking at the chart. Look at the written task that was done at the end of the last session. Students refer to their workbooks and see ideas/corrections teacher added. Model on the whiteboard how to paraphrase it with the help of their corrections/suggestions in students’ workbooks.

2. **Finish reading** the text ‘Bird and Caterpillar’ with the students. Students take turns to read it.

3. **Follow steps 3-10 in Session 2**. Encourage the students to paraphrase more themselves with less help from the teacher. If they are having difficulty try and get others in the group to assist but if it is still too difficult teacher needs to begin to model it and then encourage the student(s) to continue on.

Session 4

1. **Review** what was done last session and **revisit synonyms and recite the RAP**. Ask them what we are doing in the sessions and they try and say the RAP without looking at the chart. Look at the written task that was done at the end of the last session. Students refer to their workbooks and see ideas/corrections teacher added. Model on the whiteboard how to paraphrase it with the help of their corrections/suggestions in students’ workbooks.

2. Introduce the text ‘Owl’ to students and discuss what they know about owls. **Read the whole text** to the students and then the students read it taking turns. Discuss what the text is saying.

3. **Follow steps 3-10 in Session 2**. Encourage the students to paraphrase more themselves with less help from the teacher. If they are having difficulty try and get others in the group to assist but if it is still too difficult teacher needs to begin to model it and then encourage the student(s) to continue on.

Session 5

1. **Review** what was done last session and **revisit synonyms and recite the RAP**. Ask them what we are doing in the sessions and they try and say the RAP without looking at the chart. Look at the written task that was done at the end of the last session. Students refer to their workbooks and see ideas/corrections teacher added. Model on the whiteboard how to paraphrase it with the help of their corrections/suggestions in students’ workbooks.

2. Continue reading the text ‘Owl’ from where students were up to at the end of Session 4. Students take turns to read some of the text. Students are encouraged to discuss what the text seems to be saying.

3. **Follow steps 3-10 in Session 2**. Encourage the students to paraphrase more themselves with less help from the teacher. If they are having difficulty try and get others in the group to assist but if it is still too difficult teacher needs to begin to model it and then encourage the student(s) to continue on.
Session 6

1. **Review** what was done last session and **revisit synonyms and recite the RAP**. Ask them what we are doing in the sessions and they try and say the RAP without looking at the chart. Look at the written task that was done at the end of the last session. Students refer to their workbooks and see ideas/corrections teacher added. Model on the whiteboard how to paraphrase it with the help of their corrections/suggestions in students’ workbooks.

2. Continue reading the text ‘Owl’. Students take turns to read some of the text. Students are encouraged to discuss what the text seems to be saying.

3. **Follow steps 3-10 in Session 2**. Encourage the students to paraphrase more themselves with less help from the teacher. If they are having difficulty try and get others in the group to assist but if it is still too difficult teacher needs to begin to model it and then encourage the student(s) to continue on.

Session 7

From this session on the **thesaurus was taken away** as students were to become more responsible for generating synonyms themselves. This was clearly explained to the students. As the students were now very familiar with the format of the lessons they became less teacher directed to try and enable students to take over the learning with less input from the teacher.

1. **Review** what was done last session and **revisit synonyms and recite the RAP**. Look at the written task that was done at the end of the last session. Students refer to their workbooks and see ideas/corrections teacher added. Model on the whiteboard the students’ paraphrases from the last session with the help of their corrections/suggestions in students’ workbooks.

2. Finish reading the text ‘Owl’. Students take turns to read to the end of ‘Owls’. Students are encouraged to discuss what the text seems to be saying.

3. Get students to **select some key words** from the text and list them on the whiteboard. Students also write them in their workbooks.

4. Refer to the RAP and tell them that they will need to **paraphrase** what they have read. Students say what paraphrasing is.

5. Students take turns to read sentences from what was read at the beginning of the lesson. Each student takes a turn to paraphrase line by line. Encourage students to **change many words** and not just a few but remind them that the meaning must be kept. Work orally through this but if they are having difficulties use the whiteboard to write the paraphrase so other students can help each other along the way. Record good examples of synonyms on the whiteboard generated by the students. Praise students for their efforts and independence.

6. Towards the end of the session students **write their paraphrases** of the last few sentences the students got up to in the text. They do this without discussion.

7. Each student **shares their paraphrasing** attempts and teacher gives **feedback** such as more synonyms to use or modelling another way to paraphrase it. Teacher tries to highlight where students have changed many words but still maintained meaning or used great synonyms. Use students’ written task as the assessment for the session. After the session is finished score it according to ‘John Munro’s paraphrasing task scoring criteria’ using scoring system 1 (see Appendix 2).

8. **Review** what students did today and what students have learnt.
**Session 8 and 9**

1. **Review** what was done last session and **revisit synonyms and recite the RAP**. Look at the written task that was done at the end of the last session. Students refer to their workbooks and see ideas/corrections teacher added. Students read out good examples of paraphrasing from the last session with the help of their corrections/suggestions in students’ workbooks.

2. Teacher reads the text ‘The Shoreline’ to the students. Students take turns to read ‘The Shoreline’. Students are encouraged to share their knowledge of the topic and share their experiences. Question the students on what the text is saying.

3. **Follow steps 3-8 in Session 7.** The focus on these lessons is for the students to do most, if not all, of the paraphrasing and the teacher listens more but intervening if necessary.

**Session 10**

1. **Review** what was done last session and **revisit synonyms and recite the RAP**. Look at the written task that was done at the end of the last session. Students refer to their workbooks and see ideas/corrections teacher added. Students read out good examples of paraphrasing from the last session with the help of their corrections/suggestions in students’ workbooks. Reinforce how far they have come with their paraphrasing attempts and how much better they are at doing it themselves.

2. Teacher begins reading the text ‘In the Open Sea’ to students. Students take turns to read ‘In the Open Sea’. Students are encouraged to share their knowledge of the topic and share their experiences. Question the students on what the text is saying.

3. **Follow steps 3-8 in Session 7.**

4. Review what students have learnt from the whole 10 sessions and how they can apply it to any reading they do. Praise students on their learning. Revisit why they have been learning how to paraphrase.