

ABSTRACT

Many students in year 2 decode quite well, but experience difficulties in comprehension. In the early years at school they are taught to read the words on the page, but when questioned about the text, they have difficulties giving comprehensive answers.

Therefore the hypothesis of this study is that *explicitly teaching the use of synonyms and paraphrasing to year two students who are below average readers will improve their comprehension.*

The method used was based on John Munro's Paraphrasing sessions. There was a series of ten lessons taught within a three week period. The sessions were taught in a small group of seven of children within the classroom setting. A control group was used to compare the results of tests.

The results confirm the hypothesis, in that the results showed a good improvement in the teaching group, with only a couple of the children not showing a significant improvement. The control group showed very little consistent improvement.

These results would imply that teaching this strategy to children having difficulties with comprehension would be beneficial as a tool for them to use.

INTRODUCTION

Many children in year two have difficulty with comprehension. They are often able to read a text, but when asked questions about it, or asked to retell about the text, they have difficulties. The retell is often very short and simple, leaving out important information from the text.

There is evidence to show that good readers use synonyms and paraphrasing to aid comprehension (Harmon, 1999). As this is a strategy that is used by good readers, teaching it to learners at risk will improve their comprehension.

In the late nineties it was suggested that teaching the "drill and skill" method does not work for learners at risk (Katims et al., 1997). That teaching students a strategy and encouraging them to be active and thoughtful, while they are reading is far more successful. This study was conducted at a school which had a low socio economic base and was an inclusive school. The groups of students were a mixture of disabled, at risk students and those students who, while not being good readers, were coping more than the aforementioned. The success of paraphrasing was seen across the board, not just for the at risk students.

Parker (2002) noted that teaching learning strategies is beneficial to students as it is teaching them how to learn, rather than teaching specific content or curriculum. It is suggested that this then keeps the students motivated and concentration is maintained for longer in many learning situations (Clark et al., 1984; Nelson et al., 1992, cited in Parker, 2002). This is supported by Munro (2006), in the self management section of the MLOTP model. As I deal with children in the lowest reading group within the classroom, giving them strategies that they can use in a variety of situations will be of benefit to them. If it continues to keep them motivated and on task, this will also have ramifications for their self efficacy.

Using paraphrasing is beneficial in various ways, because it uses all modes of communication, ie reading, writing, speaking and listening (Fisk et al., 2003). This was beneficial for the students in my study, as there were some students who have English as a second language and the speaking and listening was great for them to hear how things are said correctly in English and to practise this themselves. It has been suggested that giving the students the opportunity to discuss and challenge each others'

ideas helps higher-level thinking (Almasi et al., 1997, cited in Fisk, 2003). It would follow then, that comprehension will increase and a higher level of comprehension will follow.

While the use of synonyms as an accurate means of substituting unfamiliar words is discouraged (Stahl, 1991, cited in Harmon 1999), it has been seen to be quite effective for some students (Harmon, 1999). Stahl suggests that if an inappropriate word is substituted, the meaning of the rest of the text may be misinterpreted. Harmon found that, in his study, admittedly with only two students, who were good readers, that they used synonyms quite effectively. He used a think aloud approach, which is very similar to paraphrasing. He asked the students to target unfamiliar words and to see how they would go about working out their meaning. On several occasions the students used their *Meaning Making Motors* (Munro 2006) to suggest a meaning for the word, providing a synonym or short phrase to suit. They relied on the context within which the word was used and they also used their own experiences. On occasion they resorted to a dictionary. This supports the contention that use of the *Meaning Making Motor* and synonyms assists children to work out unfamiliar words, leading to a better understanding of the sentence and ultimately aiding their comprehension.

This present investigation aims to continue earlier research by targeting younger children and examining the influence of use of synonyms and paraphrasing on comprehension.

Teaching year two students, in the bottom reading group, the use of synonyms and paraphrasing will improve comprehension.

METHOD

This study uses a case study OXO design, meaning that the students in the teaching group are pre tested, treated, or taught explicitly the strategy of paraphrasing and use of synonyms, and then post tested. The control group will be OO, meaning that they will be pre tested, taught the normal group work lessons, not the explicit teaching as in the first group, and then post tested. The gain in comprehension as a result of using synonyms and paraphrasing will be monitored for children in the bottom reading groups in year two.

The participants are year two students who have been placed in the bottom reading group for their class by their teacher. They were placed in this group as a result of collating information gained from beginning of the year testing. These children had the lowest reading level and their Burt test results were poor. All students attend a Catholic primary school in Melbourne's northern suburbs. The school has a very wide variety of nationalities represented. Their age, reading ability entry level and pre test scores are shown on table 1.

TABLE 1

Student	Age	Text Level Pre test scores			
		Synonyms	Paraphrasing	Torch	
INTERVENTION					
A	86m	14	10	5	24.1
B	89m	16	2	6	11.8
C	86m	14	2	5	17.8
D	94m	16	8	8	22.2
E	88m	16	6	2	17.8
F	93m	14	2	3	17.8
G	93m	13	3	2	15.5
Average		4.714286	4.428571	18.14286	
CONTROL					
I	87m	13	4	5	24.1
J	87m	14	1	3	15.2
K	86m	11	4	12	20.1
L	89m	16	6	0	15.2
M	87m	13	6	0	17.8
N	95m	14	14	10	31.2
O	84m	14	3	5	25.9
Average		5.428571	5	21.35714	

The pre-testing strategies used were two of John Munro's tests, the paraphrasing and synonyms tests, and the Torch test was used in a modified manner. Each of these tests was administered in a modified fashion, due to the children's reading level and age. I read each of the tests to the children and they then filled out the appropriate sheet. As the Torch test is designed for older children, a percentile score was not available to be used. The Torch score, however, was valuable as a gauge of how the children performed.

The tasks were administered to a small group within the classroom setting. It is my role to support the literacy program in year two. As I normally take a small group inside the classroom as part of their normal literacy rotations, this is how I conducted the sessions. The children were **not** withdrawn from their usual routine. The teaching group were taught explicitly about synonyms and paraphrasing, while the control group was taught the usual lessons, based on other needs identified by the classroom teacher and Literacy Co-ordinator. The 10 sessions were each 30 minutes long and were conducted within a 3 week time span. They were based on the Paraphrasing sessions devised by John Munro. A copy of these lessons is outlined in Appendix 1.

In the first session the notion of paraphrasing and what a synonym is were discussed. A format for how to paraphrase was written on a poster and was displayed at each session as a reminder of what we do and why we do it.

In each of the first 6 sessions the children were shown a photo with a sentence written at the bottom, an assortment was taken from the Reading with Strategies kit (Stegeman,D et al 1990). A word would be covered over and the students were asked to provide words that would be suitable to make sense in the sentence. These would be written on card and put into the sentence. The original word would be displayed. Discussion about the appropriateness of the words suggested was encouraged. A booklet called 'Another word for...!' was written in each session to add synonyms that had been generated during that session.

Each session offered a little more independence. Instead of working only in the group, the children were encouraged to work in pairs and ultimately independently. As the sessions progressed it was evident that the children were accepting the concept particularly well. It was my original

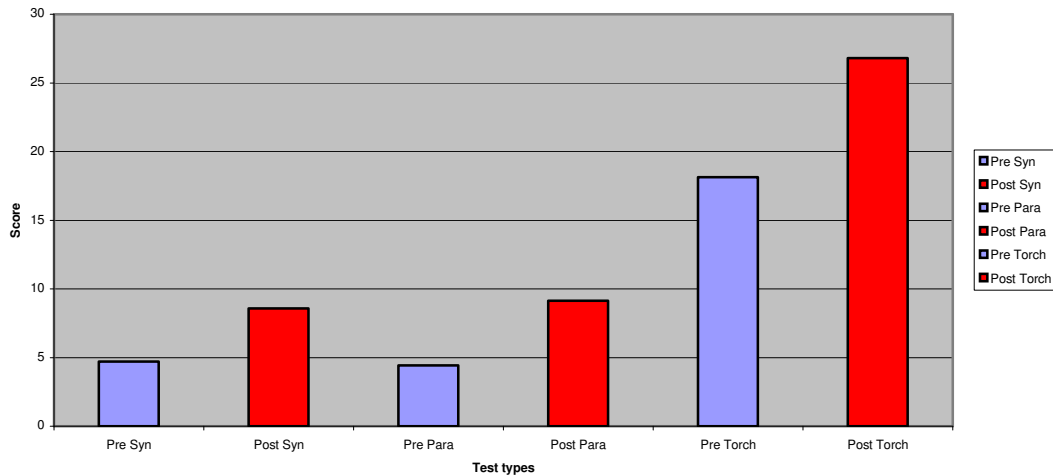
intention to only use the posters and introduce paraphrasing only a sentence at a time. I decided to increase this to a paragraph at a time, as the children seemed to be looking for more than just one sentence. (Appendix 2) They managed this, with a text at their level, very well. The Fry Readability Procedure was used to determine an appropriate text level.

PILOT STUDY

A pilot study was conducted before the actual teaching of the target group took place. This study was taken with a group of children of the same age as those being targeted, but they were in a higher reading group. I had a couple of sessions with these children, to "try out" the sessions. It was evident from this study that they had no real concept of what a synonym is, and giving another word for a particular word was difficult. They regularly gave words that rhymed with the target word. It is for this reason that I changed my original lessons to concentrate more on synonyms and an individual word within a sentence, before getting on to paraphrasing a whole sentence.

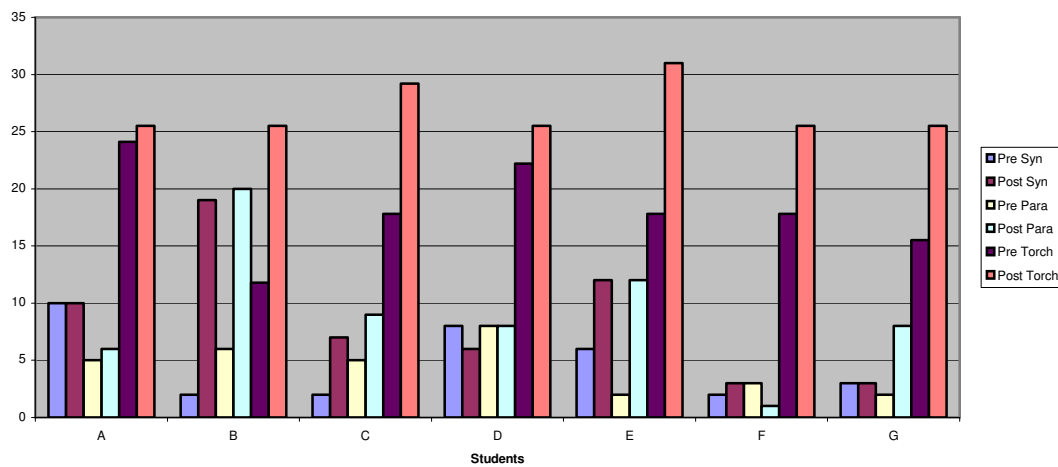
RESULTS

Average Results from Test, Teaching Group



As can be seen from the above chart, the trends for the group indicate that explicitly teaching paraphrasing and the use of synonyms to year 2 students has a beneficial effect. The averages show an increase in all three areas, those being the use of synonyms, paraphrasing and comprehension as tested by the Torch tests.

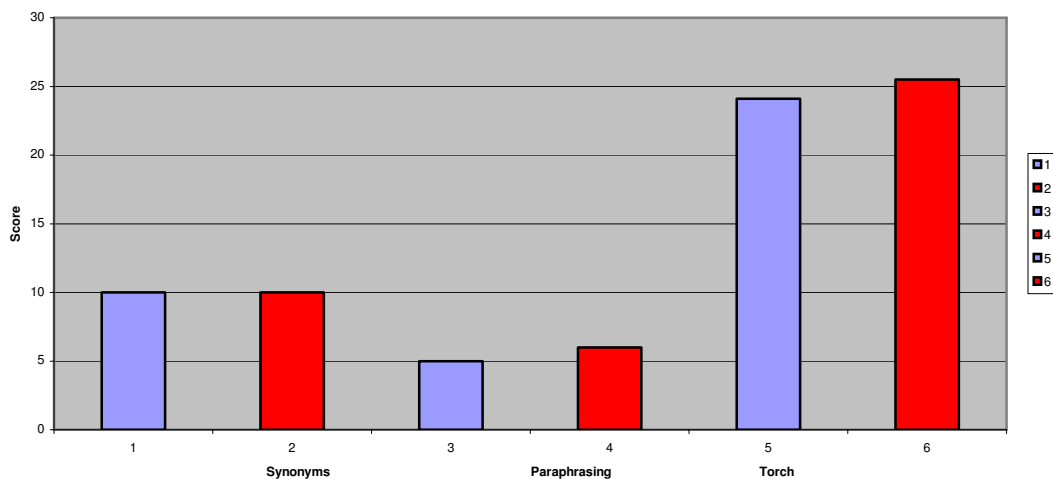
Pre and Post Testing for Teaching Group



The chart above is an indication of how each child scored on the pre and post tests. When looking at student D, it may seem that he didn't improve

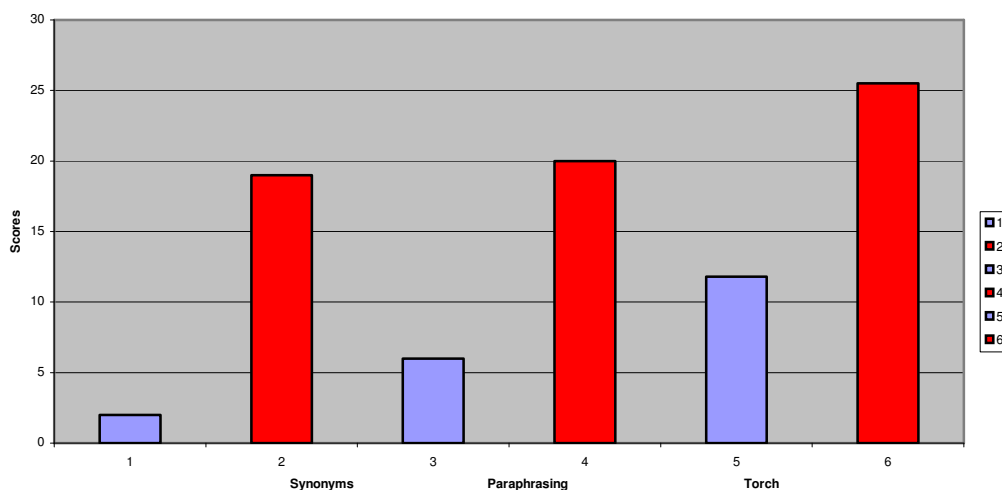
very much and in actual fact scored less on the synonyms post test than on the pre test. Attendance at school is an issue with this student and he missed two of the lessons. He then had more time off when the lessons had been completed and his testing was delayed and administered individually. This may have had an affect on his results.

Student A Pre and Post Testing



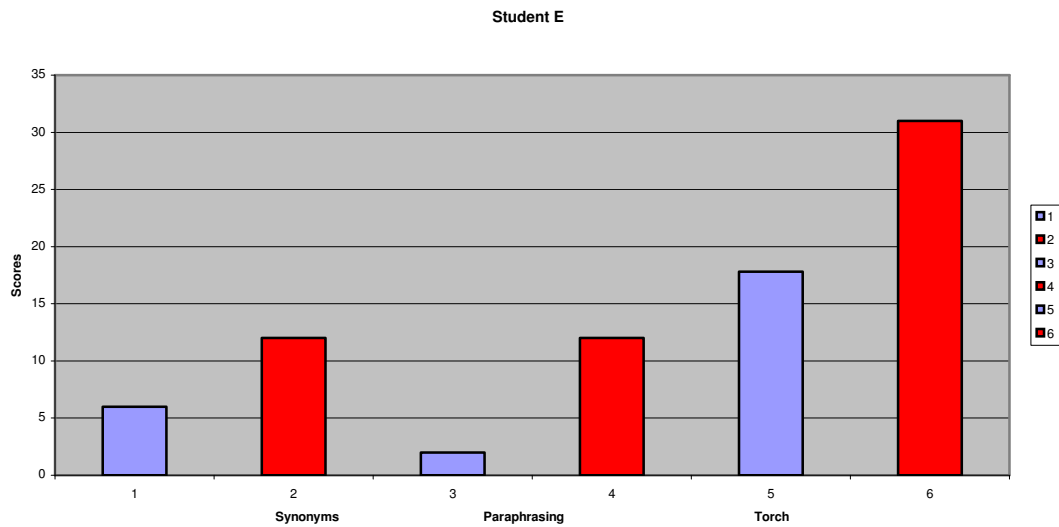
Student A did not have a great improvement either, but his scores were quite good to begin with. A possible reason for this could be that he was already using these skills. During the lessons, he was always confident and his responses accurate.

Pre and Post Test Scores Student B



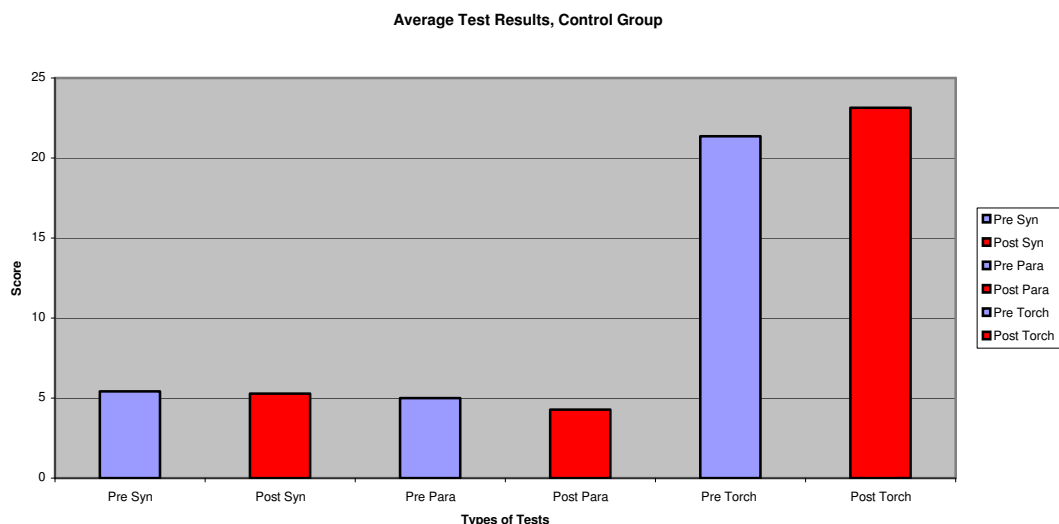
Student B showed great improvement in all tests administered. While I have not shown it on the chart, he provided 24 additional synonyms on the post test and did not provide any on the pre test. His synonyms pre test showed only 2 correct synonyms. He was very verbal in the group

situation and was happy to "have a go". He has shown that he was good at heeding the corrections and put them into practice.



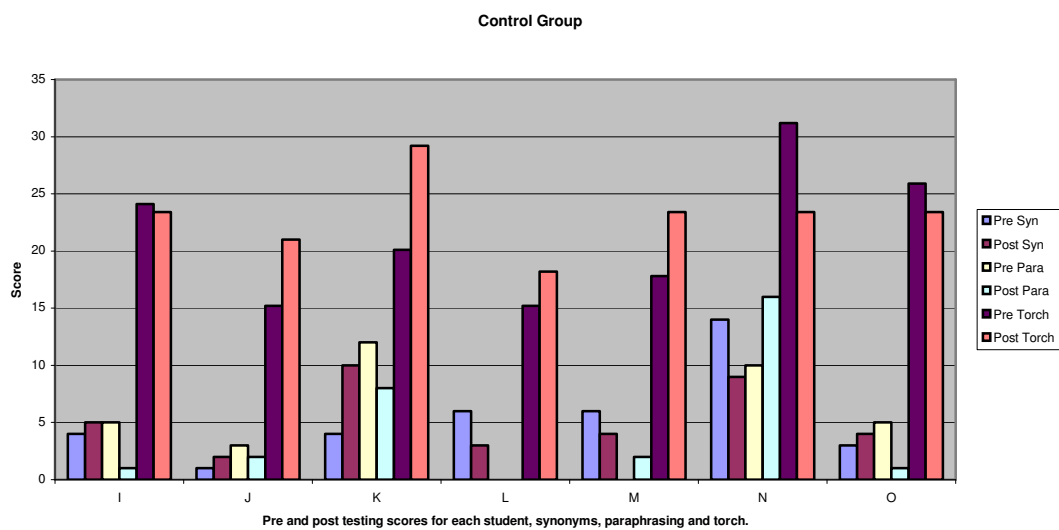
The other student who showed particularly good scores was student E. She has funding for her speech, so it is particularly pleasing to see her come so far with her comprehension. She was also very vocal during lessons, providing her with ample opportunity to practise her oral language in a comfortable setting.

Student G has English as a second language. This may be why she did not perform any better on the synonyms post test than the pre test. She may need extra work on the meaning of words in English.



The above chart supports the idea that the teaching had a beneficial effect, as the control group trends showed that for the synonyms test the average fairly well stayed the same for both the pre and post tests.

The paraphrasing tests actually showed a decline in the average score of the students who took the test. The Torch test showed a slight improvement. There are several possible reasons for this outcome. One possible reason is that there were two different texts used for the pre and post tests. The children may have felt more comfortable with the administration of the test, having done the pre test and had a better understanding of what was going to happen. The second possible influence is that they had been concentrating on reading for meaning in their general classroom and naturally improved in the comprehension area through the normal classroom activity.



As can be seen in the above chart, four of the seven students improved on the Torch test. The improvement for the group on average, however, was not as good as that of the teaching group. The teaching group average pre lessons was just over 18 on the Torch and increased to nearly 27, a difference of 9 Torch points. The control group started higher, ie 21 and post test was 23, showing a minimal improvement.

Student K showed quite an improvement in both the synonyms test and the Torch test. He is quite confident in the group dynamic and may have shown improvement as a result of being in a consistent small teacher group 3 times a week.

The bulk of the group showed some small improvements in some areas, but also showed some poorer results in some areas. This is what I would have expected given that children all learn and develop at varying rates, and without the explicit teaching, there would be fluctuations.

DISCUSSION

The results of the research support the hypothesis that explicitly teaching the students the use of the paraphrasing and use of synonyms strategy is successful.

While the students in the early sessions needed reminding that synonyms are words that **mean** the same, not **sound** the same, they were generally able to generate quite a few "another word for" words. This does, however, still remain an issue for student G, who needs more practise with using the correct words in English, let alone using synonyms.

I found that encouraging the students to use their meaning making motor also helped them to think of the word in context and aided them in coming up with synonyms and as follows, enhanced their comprehension. Following the discussion that was then generated, some students even said, "So that's what that means!"

Some students, when it came to paraphrasing a paragraph, embellished quite a lot. They would add information that they knew, or thought they knew, to paraphrase and not just use the information in the text. Reminding them at the beginning of each session that they were not allowed to change the meaning, became even more important than it had been earlier.

As a teacher who takes groups of students at different age levels, I will teach this strategy to each of those levels of students. The results have shown that it is effective for young students, who have reading difficulties, which expands on the contention that good readers use paraphrasing and synonyms (Harmon, 1999). If this strategy can help these students to comprehend better, then the ramifications for year levels throughout the school are promising. I will also teach the sessions to the control group, to give them the benefit of the use of this strategy.

As with all learning, it is important to use a new skill often, so as it becomes second nature, so to speak. For this reason, I have encouraged the students to use paraphrasing with their reading at home, which some students have told me they have done. The texts we used at school were factual, but the books they read at home were narratives. The students had no problems in using the strategy with a different type of text. We have continued to use the strategy as a reading activity with a variety of

genres, with success. We revisit the prompts for the strategy every now and again to ensure the students remember what to do and why we do it.

For future research, it would be beneficial to see if teaching the strategy to a middle years level at the beginning of a year would enhance their reading comprehension. As was suggested earlier, in the junior years the focus is more on decoding. If a grade three level could be introduced to the paraphrasing strategy, it may serve them well as they proceed into the higher grade levels.

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Appendix 1

These sessions are designed to improve the use of synonyms to improve word level understanding and the use of paraphrasing strategies while reading to enhance sentence level comprehension. The sessions were taught to a group of seven year 2 students, as a teaching group within their own classroom.

Session 1

Teacher dialogue is shown in italics.

Display photo and sentence, "A sleepy lion is napping on a fallen log".

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. This is what you do. After you have read each sentence, you say it in your own words.*

We will begin doing this a word at a time and then with sentences and finally with paragraphs.

*The first sentence we will read is about a lion.
Let us read the first sentence aloud. I will read it aloud first and then I will ask someone else to take a turn at reading it.*

After the sentence has been read twice, cover the word napping and ask the children for other words for it.

What word could we use that means the same and makes sense in the sentence?

Write these on a card and put them on the sentence to show the children that the sentence meaning has not changed. If the children say words that do not make sense, add these as well and ask the children if this makes sense. Does the sentence still have the same meaning?

Cover the word log. Repeat above procedure.

Teacher reviews the action: *Let us look at what we have done. We read the sentence and then said some words in other ways. See how it helped you understand the sentence?*

Do you have any questions?

Cover the word sleepy and ask the children to come up with some words in pairs that would fit.

With the person beside you, try to think of as many words as you can that mean the same as sleepy.

Make a list of these words together as a group. Say these words in the sentence to make sure they make sense.

Now that we have had a go at changing some of the words in the sentence, who would like to have a go at saying the sentence using some of the different words we have come up with?

Write a paraphrase of the sentence.

Tell me what you know about paraphrasing and what steps you should follow.

Write up on a display card:-

1. Read a sentence
2. Change as many words as you can, but keep the same meaning.
3. Say the sentence again in your own words.

Ongoing booklet: We will make a "Another word for.." booklet which we will add to each session. Each page will have a list of words that are synonyms. These words will be the ones we have discussed during the session.

Session 2

During this session, the students again apply the paraphrasing strategy, concentrating on a word at a time. Supplying synonyms for specific words. The students review the steps involved and the teacher gives additional practice interactively and then in pairs. The teacher actively monitors the students' work, giving appropriate feedback both individually and through group discussion.

Teacher reviews what students remember about paraphrasing from Session 1.

*What do you do when you paraphrase a sentence?
How does paraphrasing help you?*

Have the students paraphrase the sentence from session 1, with no prompts.

Introduce a new sentence, The big brown bear opened his mouth wide and growled.

Repeat the set of teaching procedures used for Session 1. Regularly remind students of the nature of the task and have them review the action. Add words to booklet.

Session 3

On the last two sessions we were practicing paraphrasing a word at a time. Now we are going to read one sentence and paraphrase it.

Let's look at what actions we do when we paraphrase. Students say what they do.

Introduce them to the sentence, This tiny bird is taking a piggyback ride on the zebra. The teacher reads the sentence. A child reads the 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. I will write down what I say and what you say.

Read sentence and paraphrase, *A minute budgie is getting a fun lift on an African animal.*

Ask the children for other ways of saying the same thing. Record these responses. Write synonyms in our booklet.

Let us look at what we did here. We read a sentence and then said it in other ways. See how it helped you to understand the sentence.

Do you have any questions?

In pairs, the children write a joint paraphrase of the sentence.

Discuss how paraphrasing helps them to comprehend what they read.

Session 4

Teacher reviews what students remember about paraphrasing.
What do you do when you paraphrase one sentence at a time?
How does paraphrasing help you?

Introduce the sentence, This baby calf is peeking out from under its mother.

In pairs the children paraphrase this sentence.
Repeat the set of teaching procedures used for session 3. Regularly remind the students of the nature of the task and have them review the action.

Session 5

Display sentences, Mother grizzly bear led her cubs across the log and through the forest. And, The lioness carries her baby to her cave.

Remind students of the strategy: *You have been learning to do something that will help you to remember what you read. We call it paraphrasing. What you do is this. After you have read a sentence or a group of sentences, you say it in your own words.*

So far we have been doing it with one sentence. Now we are going to do it with two sentences.

These sentences are about animal mothers. I will read them out aloud first and then I will ask a child to take a turn.

Have students take turns to read aloud twice. Then in pairs, have students read each sentence, paraphrase it and write their paraphrase. Then ask the pairs to read out their paraphrases of each sentence.

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 sentences said.*

Do you have any questions?
Correct students' responses.

Fill synonyms into the booklet

Session 6

Use sentences, The honeybee reaches deep down into the daisy to get the sweet nectar. The spider can spin a web to catch its lunch.

List key words and suggest synonyms for these, or matching meaningful phrases. Students say the links between each pair. Add synonyms to booklet.

During this session, the students read aloud two sentences, paraphrase sentence by sentence in the group activity and then each student individually writes a paraphrase of one sentence.

Teacher reviews what students remember about paraphrasing:

- * *What do you do when you paraphrase a sentence?*
 - *How does paraphrasing help you?*

Session 7

Use paragraph, Snails have a soft body and carry a hard shell. They do not have any legs. Some snails live in water but in this book we will be looking at snails that live in gardens and woods.

Write each of the key words down and ask students to suggest synonyms or matching meaningful phrases. Have students say again the links between each pair. Add words to the booklet.

During this session, the students read silently each sentence. Once they have done this at least once, students in the group activity paraphrase the sentences. In pairs write a paraphrase of each sentence.

Teacher reviews what the students remember about paraphrasing:

- *What do you do when you paraphrase a sentence?*
- *How does paraphrasing help you?*

Session 8

Use paragraph, Snails come in different sizes and have shells of different colours. Some snails are very small. Some are very big. This is a Giant African land snail. It can grow to be longer than your foot!

List key words and ask students to suggest synonyms or matching meaningful phrases. Have students say the links between each pair.

What do you do to paraphrase a sentence?

When you paraphrase a paragraph, you can combine sentences to paraphrase, but still keep all the same meaning.

Read silently each sentence. Paraphrase sentence by sentence in a group activity and each student writes a paraphrase of each sentence.

Teacher reviews what students remember about paraphrasing:

- *What do you do when you paraphrase sentences?*
- *How does paraphrasing sentences help you?*

Session 9

Use paragraph, Snails have a thick, soft foot that they can pull into their hard shell. Each ring on the shell is called a whorl. The soft foot usually feels damp and slimy.

Review the key words and synonyms listed in previous sessions. Have students say again the links between each pair.

Ask students: *What do you do to paraphrase sentences?*

During this session, the students read silently each sentence. Once they have done this at least once, students individually write a paraphrase of each sentence. Then each student shares this with the group.

After reading these list key words from the sentences and teach synonyms for these. Add these to the booklet.

Teacher reviews what students remember about paraphrasing:

- *What do you do when you paraphrase sentences?*
- *How does paraphrasing sentences help you?*

Session 10

Use paragraph, Snails have a mouth under their head and a breathing hole under their shell. The short feelers are for touch and smell. The long ones have two tiny eyes at the end.

Review the key words and synonyms listed in previous sessions. Have students say again the links between each pair.

Ask students: *What do you do to paraphrase sentences?*

During this session, the students read silently each sentence. Once they have done this at least once, students individually write a paraphrase of each sentence. Then each student shares this with the group.

After reading these, list key words from the sentences and teach synonyms for these. Add these to the booklet.

Teacher reviews what students remember about paraphrasing:

- *What do you do when you paraphrase sentences?*
- *How does paraphrasing sentences help you?*

Appendix 2

The following are the texts used during the sessions.

Session 1

"A sleepy lion is napping on a fallen log".

Session 2

The big brown bear opened his mouth wide and growled.

Session 3

This tiny bird is taking a piggyback ride on the zebra.

Session 4

This baby calf is peeking out from under its mother.

Session 5

Mother grizzly bear led her cubs across the log and through the forest.
The lioness carries her baby to her cave.

Session 6

The honeybee reaches deep down into the daisy to get the sweet nectar.
The spider can spin a web to catch its lunch.

Session 7

Snails have a soft body and carry a hard shell. They do not have any legs.
Some snails live in water but in this book we will be looking at snails that live in gardens and woods.

Session 8

Snails come in different sizes and have shells of different colours. Some snails are very small. Some are very big. This is a Giant African land snail. It can grow to be longer than your foot!

Session 9

Snails have a thick, soft foot that they can pull into their hard shell.
Each ring on the shell is called a whorl. The soft foot usually feels damp and slimy.

Session 10

Snails have a mouth under their head and a breathing hole under their shell. The short feelers are for touch and smell. The long ones have two tiny eyes at the end.

Appendix 3

Is in the form of an attachment, as it didn't fit on the page as is. It is a chart of the students' information, whether they are ESL or have had intervention previously. It also records all their scores for the pre and post tests, along with the average and standard deviation for each pre and post test.