

ABSTRACT

The hypothesis to be investigated is: The Teaching of paraphrasing, with a focus on synonyms, will improve comprehension at the sentence level in non fiction texts.

The objective of this research project was to investigate whether the explicit teaching of paraphrasing to the Year 5/6 class would improve their understanding at the sentence level of non fiction texts.

This class was chosen because there were some concerns as to the comprehension capabilities of some students and also to ascertain whether concentrated teaching sessions would make a difference. The concern with regard to this class stemmed from the previous national literacy results and the present reading and writing assessments that had been conducted. While moderating the work from this class, it became evident that some students were under achieving in both literacy and numeracy. Investigating the NAPLAN booklets, it became very obvious that even teachers had difficulty with some of the texts. If teachers had this problem, what effect are these tests having on students?

Checking with the class teacher, it was established that paraphrasing had not been explicitly addressed but that other comprehension strategies such as visualising and questioning as well as re-reading had been taught.

It was also noted that these students had little experiential knowledge to support the comprehension of text.

In choosing the texts for the 10 sessions, an important fact was, that each text was accompanied by a drawing, which would assist the students in their understanding as well as employing the paraphrasing strategy.

After the 10 sessions, it was established that most students had improved in their comprehension of text with the assistance of the taught strategies. Their sentence construction had also improved beyond recognition and they were using a variety of vocabulary previously not used. This was attributed to the fact that the use of synonyms was encouraged and students were now applying these strategies automatically.

INTRODUCTION

The Broad Topic Targetted

Students in Year P/1/2 generally have a 2 hour literacy block which is divided into writing and reading. Students who exhibit difficulties at the Year 1 level also have access to Reading Recovery. What happens after that?

Over recent years, it has become evident in results of LAP, AIM and now NAPLAN testing, that many students were exhibiting difficulties in the reading comprehension part of the testing, as well as in some of the directions given in the numeracy sections of the test. This could have been because students do not have the opportunity to speak, read or discuss in English in the home situation or simply that students do not read other than at school. The other element could be that teachers are not teaching the strategies needed to assist students to confidently approach the reading of non fiction texts and understand as they read. Could it be that we are not teaching vocabulary and that it is our fault that students are not reaching the benchmarks? These and many other questions need to be addressed as we aim to educate our students for life.

Related Research

With our students, many of whom come from an ESL background, comprehension was a major stumbling block. Students were mostly confident in decoding words but were less proficient in the higher order cognitive processes. This has been acknowledged by Westwood 2001 and also by Parker, Hasbrouck and Denton who identified students who did not understand main ideas or key words in sentences. Katims and Harris 1997, have also declared that the teaching of learning strategies assist students of all abilities to improve their comprehension of text.

There is a distinct need in middle years teaching, to include the explicit teaching of strategies that will enable these students to comprehend non fiction texts. It is with this in mind that the strategy of paraphrasing has been chosen for this particular exercise. According to Fisk and Hurst(2003),” one of the reasons that paraphrasing for comprehension works so well is because it integrates all modes of communication – reading, writing, listening and speaking – which leads to a deeper understanding of the text.”They also indicate that there are four simple steps used in the paraphrasing for comprehension strategy:

- ❖ Initial reading of text followed by discussion
- ❖ Second reading followed by note taking
- ❖ Written paraphrasing
- ❖ Sharing of the paraphrasing

As Woolacott 2002,says:”Given the emphasis on the application of reading skills for learning in the secondary school, and the lack of instruction in reading in that context, it is particularly important to understand the demands on reading instruction in the upper primary school and how these demands may be met.”

This project will aim to teach a paraphrasing strategy to a Year 5/6 class in an inner suburban school and place an emphasis on using synonyms as substitutes for a number of words in the text as an aid to comprehension. As Fisk and Hurst (2003) indicate, the paraphrasing strategy is meant to be a genuine retelling of the text in the student’s own words ensuring that the main ideas and tone of the text are held intact.

In applying this strategy, there will be opportunities for discussion of vocabulary, suitable synonyms and general sentence construction.

The hypothesis to be investigated is: Teaching of paraphrasing, with a focus on synonyms, will improve comprehension at the sentence level in non fiction texts.

METHOD

Design

The OXO design was used in this study. The Year 5/6 students were explicitly taught synonyms and how to use them in a paraphrasing activity. The aim of this instruction was to improve the level of comprehension for the whole class. In my position as a non teaching principal in a small school, I decided, in consultation with the Year 5/6 teacher, to use the whole class in this study.

Participants

The chosen students are in a composite Year 5/6 class of 16 students in a multi cultural inner suburban school with a high incidence of ESL and EMA as indicated in following table. (Table 1)

Teaching/Control Group	Age in YEARS	Age in MONTHS	ESL ?	Earlier Intevention?	EMA
Teaching A	10	1		Y	Y
Teaching B	10	7	Y		Y
Teaching C	10	8		Speech Path.	
Teaching D	11	7		Speech Path.	
Teaching E	11	1	Y		Y
Teaching F	11	2	Y	Intellectual Disability.	Y
Teaching G	10	5			
Teaching H	11	3			Y
Teaching I	11	1			
Teaching J	11	2	Y		
Teaching K	11	6	Y		
Teaching L	11	3	Y		Y
Teaching M	11	7	Y		
Teaching N	11	11		Speech Path.	
Teaching O	11	8			Y
Teaching P	11	3	Y		Y

It was noted, after the Year 5 AIM testing the previous year, that several students displayed difficulty when completing the comprehension tasks, which is the reason why this research is being undertaken. There is a wide range of reading ages within the group and the majority of students display a reasonable level of literal understanding of a text but have difficulty when asked to infer what a text could be saying.

Within this class there appeared to be a wide variance of abilities, ranging from a student (F) with an IQ of 69 to another student (M) who, in the AIM testing the previous year, indicated that in both literacy and numeracy, he was ranging between Year 7 & 8.

Student (F) had been assessed with an intellectual disability from Prep to Year 5 but when reviewed last year was deemed to have improved and thus removed from the integration program. This student has great difficulty following directions, keeping on task and retaining knowledge and is a great challenge in class.

Student (M) has a strong competitive streak and a thirst for learning, but still brings with him elements from his ESL background that cause some difficulty in comprehending text. This student, however, has shown great progress in the use of synonyms as a result of this project.

Student (C) enrolled from another school early this year, presented with major expressive language difficulties, and low ranging receptive language. We have placed him on an individual learning plan but he needs one on one instruction in many instances. This student also has 20 minutes each day with our Reading Recovery teacher to assist him.

Students (A, D & N) have had speech pathology throughout their primary years but are well on the path to improvement.

Student (B) has been in the country for less than 2 years, can decode well but has difficulty comprehending text because of her limited knowledge of vocabulary. She has had individual coaching from our Reading Recovery teacher.

Student (L) has been in Australia for 3 years and is competent orally but needs to be skilled in comprehension strategies. He is always willing to participate in class discussions and have a go.

Student (G) has travelled the world since birth, lived in several countries, is of ESL background, has been with us for 2 years and seems to have good control over her literacy skills. Unlike many others in the class this student has professional parents and appears to be very resilient.

Students (K, O & P) all have ESL backgrounds and seem to be performing to the best of their ability.

Students (E & J) are achieving at the higher level of the class.

Students (H & I) are average students who always strive to do their best but are sometimes reticent to participate fully.

Materials:

For pre and post testing:

- ❖ TORCH
- ❖ Synonyms Task ©2005, John Munro.
- ❖ Comprehension – Paraphrasing Test © 2005, John Munro.

For 10 lessons:

Non-Fiction Texts which were chosen to complement the unit of work being undertaken in the class at that time.

- ❖ First Buildings
- ❖ Brewer’s simple cottage design
- ❖ Better buildings

Synonyms – 20 puzzles. Designed in NZ. By Smart Kids.

Basic Skills Puzzles – Synonyms. Didax Educational Resources.

Sentence Strips.

Highlighters

Exercise books to record all work.

PROCEDURE:

The class was tested with the synonym and paraphrasing tests of John Munro and the TORCH test using the text “Feeding Puff” from Gerald Durrell’s book, “The New Noah”.

Ten lessons were planned for the month of April. They were scheduled to be given in the second hour of the literacy block to the Year 5/6 students. Lessons were supposed to last for between 30 and 45 minutes but the reality was that most lessons went for nearly an hour. In collaboration with the class teacher, the chosen texts were concerned with the buildings erected when the convicts were first brought to Australia. These texts were selected to complement the inquiry unit being studied at the time in this particular classroom. Each student was given an exercise book in which all texts used were pasted in and all written work recorded.

The first two sessions would concentrate on synonyms and as an introduction, I read the text titled: “I Read It, But I Don’t Get It”..... This text was taken from an article by Strickland, Ganske and Monroe, 2002 and illustrated perfectly how synonyms can be used to help comprehension of a text.

Synonym games were introduced and the class divided into 2 groups for this activity.

Sessions 3-10 followed a pattern of looking at sentences in a text, changing as many words as possible for synonyms, then constructing their own sentence individually.

The next step was to work in table groups and construct a single text to be written on sentence strips and placed on a pin board. Groups shared their texts with each other.

More detailed information is in Appendix 1. so that these lessons can be replicated.

RESULTS

The first test that was applied to the class was TORCH. With a wide reading age in the class, I chose “Feeding Puff” as the text for the pre test and “The Cats” as the post test. In retrospect, I am wondering whether I should have kept to the same text and would that have changed the results? Overall, 43.75% improved their pre test score and one student was absent. (Table 2)

The most amazing result was that of student (C) who moved from TORCH score of 7 to 42. At the beginning of this project I had hoped to make a difference to this student but I think the difference has been achieved through a variety of factors. As well as being given individual assistance in class, this student was also coming in to school early and having a 20 minute reading session with another teacher four days per week. Within my ten sessions in the classroom, student (C) had also offered his opinion when general questions were asked and was also participating more in class discussions. Personally, I was thrilled with this result and his reaction in class, remembering that this student had come from another school with both receptive and expressive language difficulties.

Other students, whose scores improved pre to post, moved less radically between 2 and 11 points. Student (H) was the next highest mover going from 62 to 73, which indicates to me that she was applying the skills learnt in the 10 sessions. This student is a very conscientious child and takes her school work very seriously, thinking carefully about each question and taking the time to make an informed decision.

Of the 50% of the class who scored less in the post testing, student (D), who scored 20 less, had been absent for several sessions and had thus missed out on valuable learning time. Student (N) scored 18 less on the post test and is known for not listening to instructions, being easily distracted and presenting unfinished and/or careless work. He is capable of producing better work but we are certainly finding him a challenge in more ways than one.

Student (K) made his mistakes in the last 8 answers of the text which clearly indicates a lack of understanding. It seems that this student did not re-read for understanding or apply the skills and strategies learnt in the 10 sessions to assist him in this instance.

The other students in this category were between 1 and 7 points down from their pre test score, which is also disappointing from a teaching perspective.

I still maintain that the choice of text may have lent some relevance to these results.

Table 2.

Name	Teaching/Control Group	Age in YEARS	Age in MONTHS	ESL ?	Earlier Intervention?	EMA	TORCH raw PRE	TORCH raw POST	TORCH Score PRE	TORCH score POST
A	Teaching	10	1		Y	Y	14	abs	43	abs
B	Teaching	10	7	Y		Y	14	12	43	46
C	Teaching	10	8		Speech Path.		0	10	7	42
D	Teaching	11	7		Speech Path.		21	10	62	42
E	Teaching	11	1	Y		Y	21	18	62	61
F	Teaching	11	2	Y	Intellectual Disability.	Y	0	0	7	13
G	Teaching	10	5				21	16	62	55
H	Teaching	11	3			Y	21	20	62	73
I	Teaching	11	1				19	14	53	50
J	Teaching	11	2	Y			22	20	69	73
K	Teaching	11	6	Y			21	13	62	48
L	Teaching	11	3	Y		Y	14	9	43	41
M	Teaching	11	7	Y			20	12	57	46
N	Teaching	11	11		Speech Path.		21	11	62	44
O	Teaching	11	8			Y	19	16	53	55
P	Teaching	11	3	Y		Y	16	13	46	48

Comprehension: Pre and Post Paraphrasing Tests – John Munro© 2005

Trends for the group as a whole indicated that most students have improved with the skill of paraphrasing, changing a greater number of words/phrases into synonyms as well as keeping to the original meaning of the text. A very welcome 87.5% of students improved their results from Pre to Post testing. Table 3

The results from the Pre and Post Paraphrasing indicate that explicit teaching of synonyms in the strategy of paraphrasing have a direct and positive effect on the comprehension of non-fiction texts.

In the early sessions we spent a considerable amount of time using synonyms and playing synonym games, so that it would become automatic for most students to substitute marked words. The lesson plans in Appendix A will elaborate on this.

The most impressive improvement was with student (M) who increased his pre test score of 15 to 30. This student has really applied himself to the theory of changing as many words as possible in order to retell a given sentence in his own words. Throughout the 10 sessions, he was one of the most enthusiastic participants, always ready to offer suggestions and has thoroughly deserved these results.

Student (I) also had remarkably improved results moving from a score of 15 to 27. This was an unexpected result from this student but has been strengthened by her results in her NAPLAN Language Conventions Test which we gave to this class recently

Table 3.

Name	Teaching/Control Group	Age in YEARS	Age in MONTHS	ESL ?	Earlier Intervention?	EMA	Para PRE	Para POST	Naplan Reading 2008	Lang. Conventions.2008
A	Teaching	10	1		Y	Y	24	24	19.5/36	25/48
B	Teaching	10	7	Y		Y	18	20	23.5/36	32/48
C	Teaching	10	8		Speech Path.		2	8	Exempt	10/39
D	Teaching	11	7		Speech Path.		27	30	25.5/36	32/50
E	Teaching	11	1	Y		Y	25	31	30/36	48/50
F	Teaching	11	2	Y	Intellectual Disability.	Y	2	0	0/36	10/50
G	Teaching	10	5				26	32	30/36	41/50
H	Teaching	11	3			Y	23	abs	28/36	39/50
I	Teaching	11	1				15	27	22.5/36	49/50
J	Teaching	11	2	Y			28	32	28/36	45/50
K	Teaching	11	6	Y			24	32	27/36	39/50
L	Teaching	11	3	Y		Y	21	25	27/36	31/50
M	Teaching	11	7	Y			15	30	31/36	50/50
N	Teaching	11	11		Speech Path.		27	27	29/36	37/50
O	Teaching	11	8			Y	27	30	27/36	43/50
P	Teaching	11	3	Y		Y	20	16	23.5/36	36/50

Midway through the ten sessions I gave the students the Synonyms Task to see how they would react to the words in this test.

Four of the students (25%) performed very well scoring 30 or more for the synonym task whilst 11 students (68.75%) scored above 20 which was also quite acceptable. One student (6.25%) scored less than 10. These results seem to indicate that the explicit teaching of the strategy of paraphrasing with the use of synonyms has improved the comprehension of the students concerned.

I was again impressed with student (C) who was within the middle group of achievement.

I did not post test with this task.

At the end of the ten sessions, I gave the students the text “Grasshoppers” from TORCH. This text was chosen because it was unknown to the students and it was a relatively uncomplicated and not too long. It was also very different from the texts that we had been working with. The object of this exercise was to see how many words the students could change without any guidance from a teacher and also to clarify whether the students could maintain the general idea of the text and keep the main ideas intact. Most students managed to change between 13 and 36 words but also discovered that it was a challenging task.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this project was to teach students the Year 5/6 students the strategy of paraphrasing a non fiction text with the use of synonyms, so that they could increase their comprehension of the passage. The first two sessions concentrated very much on the use of synonyms and playing synonym games to imbed the idea into the students' mode of operation. This was greeted enthusiastically and all but one were successful in their application of the use of synonyms.

Student F was the student who did not respond positively to these first two sessions, even though she was able to correctly identify matches in the exercises. In the paraphrasing sessions, she could not apply herself to the task and do what was asked and most times would write the text as it was. This situation will be followed up by the class teacher although many previous attempts to assist this student have not been very successful.

Some students commented that they were now using more complicated words as a result of the strategy being taught and it was observed that students were writing more complex sentences, using a variety of conjunctions and improving their sentence construction. This was a benefit that was not considered when the project started, but one that was greatly pleasing to myself and the class teacher. This was an unexpected outcome as the current research into paraphrasing as a strategy, has not suggested that this would be a possibility.

Possible reasons for this could be that the strategy was modelled orally by the teacher before the students were asked to paraphrase a sentence in their books. It could also be that a considerable amount of time was devoted to listing synonyms on the whiteboard during each session.

Students reflected after six sessions and were all very positive in their comments. Most agreed that the sessions had helped their understanding of the texts and that they were feeling more confident with the paraphrasing strategy. They also responded well in each session and looked forward to the next one, which was an encouraging sign that they were learning something new and were able to apply what was being learnt.

It became obvious as the sessions progressed that it was becoming automatic for students to look for words to change into synonyms so that they could paraphrase. This was a pleasing outcome for the project as the students had earlier recorded the process that they were to follow.

- ❖ Read the sentence
- ❖ Decide what words should be changed
- ❖ Change as many words as possible
- ❖ Write the new sentence.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING PRACTICE.

- ❖ Ensure that explicit teaching of strategies for comprehension is in place at each level of schooling so that students can benefit at an early age.
- ❖ Assess at regular intervals.
- ❖ Be predisposed to inquire into teaching practice and student learning.
- ❖ Engage in collaborative reflection and evaluation

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Appendix 1

Lesson 1

Introduce students to their books prepared for the ensuing 10 lessons and ask them to turn to the first page.

“I read it, but I don’t get it.....”

A female of the Homo Sapiens species was the possessor of a small, immature ruminant of the genus Ovis, the outermost covering of which reflected all wavelengths of visible light with a luminosity equal to that of a mass of naturally occurring, microscopically crystalline water. Regardless of the translational pathway chosen by the Homo Sapiens female, there was 100% probability that the aforementioned ruminant would select the same pathway.

Strickland, Ganske, Monroe,2002.

The above passage is a text, that when deciphered, becomes:

“Mary had a little lamb.”

This text is used to show students that without background knowledge and knowing the meanings of many words in the text, being able to comprehend this passage would be nigh on impossible.

Brainstorming activity – What problems do they find when reading.

Teacher to list reasons on the whiteboard.

Explain to students that in the next 2 lessons they will be working on a relevant text to their inquiry unit. In this text we will try and use synonyms for as many words as possible.

Games with synonym cards.

Students will be directed to the text:

“First Buildings”

Looking at the first sentence:

“The tents and improvised shelters put up during the first days ashore were adequate in fine weather.”

9 words have been highlighted in this sentence and students are asked to suggest synonyms/words with a similar meaning, for the 9 words. This is done as a group activity. Children write the words in their book and write the synonyms next to each word.

Once all words have appropriate synonyms next to them, children will be asked to try and re-create the given sentence, maintaining the meaning. Children will share their sentence with the class and will write in on a sentence strip to be displayed.

Re-cap on the lesson – making sure that children know what a synonym is.

Re-read the sentence from the text and ask for someone to re-tell the sentence in their own words, orally, using some of the synonyms discussed during the 1st session.

The next 2 sentences can be approached in a similar manner and completed for homework if time runs out.

Lesson 2

Start with a game of synonyms.

Recall previous lesson. Have children verbalize what they did with the text.

Check on the 2 sentences that children were asked to work on.

Write down synonyms next to words in a book.

Make sure that the meaning has not been changed.

Move onto next sentence employing same process as before. This time let children decide what words can be changed.

Encourage children to work in pairs to find suitable synonyms. Make sure that children are paired appropriately i.e. that they can work well together but one is not to dominate.

Have children reconstruct the passage by assembling the sentence strips in correct order.

Lesson 3

Revise the process

- Read the sentence
- Decide what words we can change – use synonyms
- Change as many words as we can
- Write the sentence making sure it keeps it's meaning

Children to write the process in their books.

Now we are going to read a paragraph that has 6 sentences in it.

We will look at the first 3 sentences to see if we understand them. Then we will choose the words that we need to change and list them in our books.

Now, find synonyms for the chosen words.

Try and combine the first 3 sentences into 1 new sentence.

“The builders had trouble from the start because, although the area had plenty of trees, the wood was so hard that their implements kept breaking and finally they had to use explosives to get the trees out of the earth to make way for housing.”

“A sailor named Henry Brewer, who had previously worked in designing buildings, came up with a simple design for a single space for living which became prevalent in the early years of life in Australia.”

Lesson 4

Revise the paraphrasing from previous lesson.

Children to work on next 3 sentences and repeat the process from previous lesson.

Lesson 5

Synonyms – worksheet

Revise paraphrasing from previous lesson

Put on sentence strips and display in room.

Lesson 6

Last paragraph in text.

Teacher reads, student reads, student marks words that need to be changed.

Children work individually on paraphrasing.

Each table is to come up with 1 sentence.

Lesson 7

Text: “Brewer’s Simple Cottage Design”

Teacher reads text and children highlight words they do not understand the meaning of.

List to be compiled on the whiteboard.

Discussion of words on list - referring to drawing besides the text.

Children to write in meaning of list words in their own words.

Lesson 8

Review previous text – as above.

Children to work independently and choosing synonyms for chosen words, paraphrase the text.

Children to check that they have all key words covered and main ideas included.

Lesson 9

Revise last paraphrasing activity.

Introduce new text – “Better Buildings”

Working individually, children try to distinguish the difference between:

“Better Buildings” and “Brewer’s Simple Cottage Design”

The use of T charts are encouraged.

Children are to share their findings.

Lesson 10

Read a completely different text to children and set them a task of underlining words that they think they can change. Going sentence by sentence have children paraphrase the passage in their own words and hand up for assessment.