Paraphrasing: An Effective Comprehension Strategy

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Heather (all names are pseudonyms) looked away from the paragraph and said, “Well, he’s just getting ready to go out, but.... I don’t remember why; let me look back.” She skimmed the paragraph again, “Oh, yeah, he was going to go meet his friend, but his friend isn’t really there, so he’s not going to find him.”

Heather, a fifth-grade student in the West Chester University Reading Center, was practicing paraphrasing, a strategy that students can use to monitor and increase their comprehension. Heather, like many of the students with whom we work in the reading center, reads fluently with accuracy, appropriate rate, and good expression, but after she has read a passage, she has difficulty retelling what she has read and difficulty answering questions about it.

Although paraphrasing has been identified as a strategy that good readers use (Kletzien, 1991, 1992; Kletzien & Dreher, 2004; Meijer, Veenman, & van Hout-Wolters, 2006; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995), it has not received as much attention as many of the other comprehension strategies, such as visualization, using prior knowledge, or questioning. Yet research into teaching students to use paraphrasing either alone or in conjunction with other strategies (Gajria, Jitendra, Sood, & Sacks, 2007) has demonstrated its benefit. In several intervention studies, paraphrasing has been found to help special education students increase their comprehension (Bakken, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 1997; Ellis & Graves, 1990; Schumaker & Dreshler, 1992).

Paraphrasing, putting the content into one’s own words, is often considered the same as summarizing. Paraphrasing, however, is substantially different from and easier than summarizing. In summaries, readers are expected to reduce the length of a passage by approximately one-third through reducing lists into a general statement, selecting a topic sentence or constructing one if there isn’t one stated, deleting redundancy, and deleting unimportant information (Brown, Campione, & Day, 1981; Kintsch & van Dijk, 1978). Paraphrasing, on the other hand, does not require that a reader make the distinction between important and unimportant details, find (or create) a topic sentence, or delete redundancy. Summarizing, therefore, is more formal than paraphrasing and requires much more practice to be able to do it well. Students may be able to paraphrase long before they acquire the sophisticated ability to summarize. Indeed, paraphrasing may be seen as a precursor to learning to summarize.

Paraphrasing is different from retelling as well. In retelling, readers are invited to use the words of the author in explaining a passage. In fact, as we work with readers in the reading center, we are interested in whether they use the phrasing and wording of the original text in retelling. In paraphrasing, however, we encourage readers to use their own words and phrasing to “translate” the material to their own way of saying it. Readers may be able to retell without ever actually engaging the content of the passages; they must engage the content if they are paraphrasing.

Paraphrasing encourages the reader to make connections with prior knowledge to access what is already known about the topic and to use words that are part of the reader’s knowledge. It helps the reader establish retrieval cues that enable integration of what is previously known with what is being read, an important part of comprehension according to Kintsch (1998).

Instructional Sequence

Paraphrasing can be seen as part of the monitoring aspect of metacognition (Meijer et al., 2006). When students understand how and why this strategy works, it becomes part of their metacognitive repertoire and available for independent use. In teaching students to use paraphrasing to monitor comprehension, we
make certain that they understand the purpose of the strategy, as well as how to do it.

We follow the Roehler and Duffy (1984) model of strategy instruction; we begin with explanations and modeling of the strategy. As students become accustomed to using the strategy, we gradually provide less support; thus we scaffold their progress from novice to competent users of the strategy.

In the beginning, we explain that many good readers stop when they are reading, look away from the text, and put what they have just read into their own words. If they are unable to do that, they can look back and reread the text to help them. We explain that this is a good strategy to use to check to see if one has understood the passage. We point out that it is also a good strategy to help readers remember what they read.

We model paraphrasing by using think-alouds with texts that are on the student's instructional level. Because we want to be sure that students understand how the strategy works, we model numerous passages. We use both narrative and expository short passages, making certain that students know why we stop at the end of each paragraph to paraphrase.

During the modeling, we make sure to "not remember" some of the paragraph so that we can model rereading for parts that we either "did not understand" or "had forgotten." After three or four paragraphs each day, we invite students to participate in paraphrasing. We paraphrase some of the paragraph and ask students if there is anything else that was in the text. As students begin adding their own paraphrasing, we gradually reduce the number of ideas that we give. After two or three sessions, most of our reading center students take over the paraphrasing completely.

Heather

Heather, a fifth grader, was confident about her reading although her instructional level as determined with the Qualitative Reading Inventory-4 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2005) was third grade. Her oral reading was marked by good word recognition, an appropriate rate, and good expression through the fifth-level passage. When she was asked to retell passages, however, she remembered few of the ideas, and her retelling did not reflect the organization of the passage. She had difficulty answering questions about the passages, especially when they required inferences.

It seemed clear that Heather was not monitoring her comprehension; in fact, it seemed as if she didn't realize that comprehension was the object of reading. Her idea of "good" reading seemed to be oral presentation. When asked what good readers do, she responded that they "said all the words right."

We taught Heather to use paraphrasing to monitor her comprehension. She understood that if she couldn't paraphrase, she should go back to the text and reread to try to clear up her misunderstanding. After the first two weeks of working with the strategy, Heather read Thunder Cake by Patricia Polacco (1997). The text read,

“Hurry now, we haven’t got much time. We’ve got everything but the secret ingredient.”

“Three overripe tomatoes and some strawberries,” Grandma whispered as she squinted at the list.

I climbed up high on the trellis. The ground looked a long way down. I was scared.

“I’m here, child,” she said. Her voice was steady and soft. “You won’t fall.”

I reached three luscious tomatoes while she picked strawberries. (n.p.)

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Heather said, “Um, they needed the secret ingredient, and she had to go up something to get tomatoes and strawberries, but she was scared. Her grandma told her she wouldn’t let her fall, so she got the tomatoes, and the grandma got the strawberries. But I don’t understand what she was climbing on, and I don’t know why she was getting tomatoes...
for a cake." At this point, Heather reread the passage but said that she didn’t know the meaning of trellis. After prompting to think about what it might be based on the context, she decided it must be kind of like a fence because the little girl could climb on it. Even after rereading, she expressed confusion about how the tomatoes were going to be in a cake. This response was quite different from Heather’s earlier reading when she seemed unaware of whether or not she had understood. She had begun questioning words and ideas that she didn’t understand and seeking to figure them out.

Danny

Not all of our students catch on to paraphrasing as quickly as Heather. For example, Danny, a sixth grader, found it very difficult to put text into his own words. As we began working with Danny, we were convinced that he understood what he was reading because he was able to retell it so effectively. He had some trouble, however, responding to questions that did not use the exact terminology of the text. It seemed obvious to us that he had had a lot of practice with retelling in his reading instruction but that he had not had a lot of experience talking about texts or discussing questions.

Danny had some difficulty with word recognition and read very slowly. After completing passages, however, he was usually able to retell them in great detail, using the exact words and phrases from the text. It seemed that Danny needed to work on automaticity in word recognition to improve his fluency. His instructional level, as measured on the Qualitative Reading Inventory-4, was fourth grade.

Danny was very much interested in sports and wanted to read about football, choosing to read Emergency Quarterback by Rich Wallace (2005). At the beginning of our instruction, we focused on developing his fluency, believing that his comprehension was fairly strong and would improve with better automaticity in word recognition. As we talked about the book with him, however, we soon realized that he was not able to discuss the story. He could sometimes repeat sentences in response to direct questions, but he couldn’t talk about what was happening in the story nor was he able to make inferences about what he had read. This was not because of a lack of background knowledge because he played football himself and could define the terms used in the book (such as linebacker, handoff, blitz) with great enthusiasm. Danny seemed to believe that the point of reading was remembering the exact words, not understanding (or enjoying) the text. When asked what good readers do, Danny’s response was that they “remember what they read.”

It seemed that Danny was able to remember the actual text, but he didn’t integrate it with what he already knew. Kintsch (1998) would consider that Danny formed a textbase. “If readers form only a textbase, they can achieve only a superficial understanding of such texts, sufficient for reproductive recall and recognition, but not for reconstructive recall and inferences” (p. 199).

Our task was to help Danny connect with his prior knowledge and to use that prior knowledge in constructing meaning from what he was reading. He was taught how to use paraphrasing as a means to monitor his comprehension and to make the connections with his prior knowledge. When he first began adding his ideas to the ones that had been modeled, he used the exact phrasing of the text. For example, in the story it states,

He took a deep breath and called the first play, a simple handoff to Jared between the center and right guard—Sergio and Anthony.
Hoboken had its linebackers packed tight behind the line, ready to exert a lot of pressure. Coach had warned that they were tough to pass against, constantly blitzing. (p. 90)

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Danny attempted to paraphrase by saying, “He took a deep breath and called the first play, which was a handoff between the center and guard. Hoboken’s linebackers were packed tight behind the line because Coach had warned that they were tough to pass against because they were always blitzing.”

We explained to Danny, again, that paraphrasing was putting something in his own words—not just remembering the words of the text. This was difficult for Danny. As he said, “But they say it better than I do.” Still, translating the text’s language to his own was crucial for him to check his comprehension and connect with his own prior knowledge. If he was
unable to “translate” the book language to his own conversational language, it meant that he hadn’t really comprehended.

We continued to work with Danny, modeling for him how to put paragraphs and sentences in his own words. His paraphrase of a portion of the story near the end of the book shows how his paraphrasing had changed: “They scored and then they went for the two-point conversion and Jason bobbed it. But then he backed it up to the fifteen with all the defenders on him, and then he broke loose and ran across the field. But then Jason saw the Hoboken safety coming at him, and he saw Miguel open in the end zone, and just when he got hit, he threw a bobbly pass to Miguel, and Miguel caught it and they won.” Danny’s paraphrasing of the text was conversational; it reflected the text, but it did not use the exact wording and phrasing of the author.

At this point, Danny was able to talk about the story and to get excited about what was happening. He was also much better able to make inferences about the plot and the characters.

Brian

Brian, a seventh-grade budding scientist, provided a different challenge for us. Brian read accurately and fairly quickly through a sixth-grade level. His comprehension seemed relatively strong until he was faced with text that had complex concepts that were new to him. He was particularly interested in weather, especially violent weather such as tornadoes, hurricanes, thunderstorms, and blizzards. He wanted to understand the forces that caused these storms and chose to read Lightning by Stephen Kramer (1992), an informational book that explains the causes of thunderstorms and lightning.

Brian found the book somewhat frustrating because he read it with the same speed that he read narratives and other less complex informational books. Because the concepts were new to him and required shifting attention from the text to the illustrations, he needed to read more slowly. It seemed that to Brian slowing down and rereading was an admission that he was not a good reader; his concept of good reading was reading quickly, which was easy enough for him to do with less conceptually challenging material.

One exchange with his teacher illustrated his concerns about reading slowly, even after she had discussed the need for changing speed for more complex ideas:

Teacher: What do you think that’s saying?
Brian: That lightning is hot.
Teacher: So we’re back to that lightning channel again. I have to reread this.
Brian: It doesn’t make any sense to me sometimes.
Teacher: Sometimes when things don’t make sense to me, Brian, I have to read it twice.
Brian: And you’re a quick reader.
Teacher: But it doesn’t matter how quick you read, as long as you understand it.
Brian: Right.

As Brian and his teacher worked through the Lightning text, he was encouraged to put the information into his own words, to reread when necessary, and to integrate the illustrations. His understanding of the text and his ability to monitor his comprehension and reread improved dramatically during the three weeks he worked with Lightning. Toward the end of the three weeks, he paraphrased one portion: “Well, it’s telling you if you want to count how far lightning is you can always count when you see the lightning: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. And if it’s five seconds that counts as one mile away. And if you count to 20 seconds the lightning is four miles away because 4 times 5 equals 20. And if you count 10 seconds, it’s really close and you have to take cover. And if you see lightning far away, you probably won’t hear the thunder because it’s probably more than 15 miles away.”

Paraphrasing, and explaining that all texts aren’t meant to be read with the same speed, was a way to help Brian monitor his comprehension while helping him understand the importance of adjusting his speed.

Paraphrasing and Comprehension

Paraphrasing helps students monitor their understanding and encourages them to access what they already know about a topic. It makes it clear to them that understanding is the goal of reading. Each of the children described in this article each seemed to have a different idea of what “good” reading is.
Heather seemed to equate good reading with oral performance; Danny appeared to believe that good reading was recalling the exact words from the text; and Brian seemed to believe that good reading was reading quickly. Each of these children benefited from practice in paraphrasing, a strategy that puts the emphasis on comprehension.

With careful instruction and modeling, focusing on what the strategy is, how to do it, when it is useful, and why it is important, children can learn to monitor their comprehension and take steps to correct it if needed.

References


Literature Cited


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▶ I Used My Own Words!

**Paraphrasing Informational Texts**