Paraphrasing as a Strategy to Develop Reading Comprehension at The Tertiary Level of Education

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Abstract

The three aims of this study are to determine (1) the reading proficiency and the motivation level of a group of tertiary level learners, (2) how far paraphrasing as a strategy can help in developing the reading comprehension of the learners, and (3) whether this strategy also motivates the learners to read more. This study employed a quasi-experimental design. The research population comprised all 18 students in the third semester of the MA in ELT (English Language Teaching) programme of Gauhati University. The data were collected by using (1) two types of tests to measure abilities in literal and inferential comprehension, (2) paraphrasing as technique for reading and (3) questionnaires. The results showed that there was a greater engagement with the text and higher levels of motivation while using the paraphrasing strategy. However, more research needs to be carried out to obtain conclusive evidence that the reading comprehension of students can be developed substantially with the use of the paraphrasing strategy.

Keywords: *motivation, literal comprehension, inferential comprehension, paraphrasing strategy*.

INTRODUCTION

According to Smagorinsky(2001), written texts are usually the main source of knowledge and therefore the ability to comprehend what students read becomes more important as they progress through their academic life. Reading a text can be for various purposes: to understand the gist of what is written, to glean some specific information from the text, to understand the meaning of some unfamiliar word etc. As Smith(1985) has pointed out, we read textbooks and technical works for specific information and some other books for the overall idea or for reference. There are again other kinds of texts like dictionaries, directories, encyclopedias, timetables, bibliographies etc. which we read for various other purposes.

However, reading as a skill is neglected both by teachers and students. In Indian classrooms, teachers deliver lectures or explain the content of the paper word for word to the students. At the time of examinations, students memorize from readily available self help books from the market. Students develop the habit of 'rote memorization' in order to write examinations. Critical thinking skills are not employed by the students to read texts. They are unable to 'question' the text because they do not have the relevant questions to ask. As a result, they seldom work on developing their reading ability. According to Paris and Jacob (1984), the ability to critically think about the text, adopt effective reading strategies and also monitor their own reading is what distinguishes skilled readers from the unskilled ones.

Also, being able to read with proper comprehension makes students more independent. A student can be said to be an independent reader if they can read with a purpose, try to find answers to questions, analyse the text and are able to think critically. Therefore, practical comprehension strategies that can be used in the classroom are the need of the hour. According to Smith (1985), reading is an activity in which the reader needs to engage actively in a number of complex intellectual processes.

In India, the usual method of teaching is the teacher explaining the content word for word. There is no interaction or discussion on the content being taught. As such the students take down notes and rote memorize the ready- made notes that are available in the market to prepare for examinations. This arrangement is convenient for both the teacher and the student. The students become dependent on the teacher or the ready- made notes to pass the examinations. There is no effort made to read and understand the text.

For this study, the researcher worked with a group of student participants who were doing their M.A. in English Language and English Language Teaching (ELT) at Gauhati University, India. These students who come to study MA in ELT and who are considered proficient in the language are seen to be struggling with academic texts in English. They are seen to be reluctant to read the course books because they find them difficult.

The researcher teaches a content subject called *Testing and Evaluation* in the department of ELT. She uses the book, '*Testing for Language Teachers*' by Arthur Hughes as the textbook. The teaching method that is planned to teach them the course comprises of intensive reading followed by classroom discussions, presentations etc. The researcher would also sometimes give them sets of questions that are intended to assess the extent to which the students could follow the text. She realized that the students could find the answers to the questions that required them to decode the text. However, for the more analytical questions, they mostly failed to find the answers. So, the conclusion drawn was that the students could decode the text, but had difficulty in understanding and comprehending the text.

In order to confirm her hypothesis, the researcher carried out an experiment. The student participants were first given a set of questions that required them to decode the answers from the text. They could locate the answers from the text by just matching the words in the questions. Most of them were able to answer the questions. To a questionnaire that was provided to them following the test, they replied that they found the questions very easy to answer as they could locate the answers with the help of similar words in the questions.

The second set of questions was more analytical and required the participants to read the text more critically. In this test, most of them scored significantly less than in the first set of questions. The participants admitted that they found the second set of questions more difficult as the answers were not readily available in the text. This experiment proved that the participants found it difficult to comprehend the text. However, when asked about the reading strategies that an efficient reader employs, they listed the following reading strategies. Being able to summarize, paraphrase, evaluate, infer meanings, read between the lines, guess meaning of unfamiliar words from context, frame questions in their mind, note down important points, predict, scan and skim, locate key words, understand topic sentences, understand the overall idea without reading for the details and so on.

The exhaustive list above might indicate that the participants are quite proficient in reading. However, the awareness of these sub-skills of reading does not translate into

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actual reading proficiency. This awareness can be attributed to the fact that the participants are students of English language and English Language Teaching, and therefore they are taught about the different language skills and their underlying abilities. This point also reinforces the gap that exists between knowing about language use and actual language use.

This paper aims to determine whether paraphrasing as a strategy can make the learners comprehend the text better and whether it can also increase the motivation level of the learners to read more. The need for this paper can be understood in the Indian context of the teaching of the language skills at the primary, secondary and higher levels of education. In the teaching of language skills to students, teaching of reading is the most neglected. Decoding the text is taught at the primary level, but it is assumed mistakenly that a student who can decode a text successfully will also be able to comprehend the text in an adequate manner.

Studies on the use of reading strategies for comprehension are quite limited. There has been extensive research done on reading as a skill, but most of the extant work are on the foundational reading skills like vocabulary, fluency, decoding etc.(Boulineau et al, 2004). The importance given to foundational reading skill can be better understood in the light of the theory that successful decoding skills are essential for effective reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). It is assumed that successful comprehension of the text will follow from proficiency in decoding skills. However, it has been discovered that though this assumption holds true for majority of students, there are some problems related to comprehension that are not associated with decoding Williams, 2005). Research has proved that some students cannot comprehend the text even after successfully decoding it (Caccamise and Snyder, 2005; Duke, Pressley & Hilden, 2004; Underwood & Pearson, 2004).

In his book, *Reading*, Smith (1985) has commented that reading involves active involvement of the reader and is not a passive process. He reiterates again and again that the teaching of reading should be more about making the students aware of the processes of reading than about teaching them how to read. And this can only be done by making them practice reading. Suwanto (2014) found literature dealing with the use of paraphrasing strategy to be limited. However, *An Open Access International Journal* Vol.4 2014 proves that this strategy is an effective tool for better reading comprehension. Therefore, this study aims to (1) find out whether paraphrasing enable learners to read with more comprehension, (2) does the use of paraphrasing strategy motivate the learners to approach the text more actively, and (3) whether the intervention make the participants consider paraphrasing as a useful strategy that could be adopted to read different kinds of texts.

METHOD

The method that was adopted for this study was the quasi-experimental method. The teacher researcher took the group of 18 participants through the paraphrasing strategy using the book *Academic Writing* by Ann Hogue (Level 4). Before this, the students were given two types of test to determine their reading proficiency. One test assessed their literal understanding of the text whereas the second test determined their comprehension of the

same text.   Data for this study came from three sources: two types of reading comprehension tests, a questionnaire on their attitude towards reading as a skill, a questionnaire on their attitude towards paraphrasing as a reading strategy, the paraphrases that they wrote after undergoing the training on the use of the paraphrasing strategy

Participants

A cohort of 18 participants was taken. The participants were all postgraduate students in the department of English Language Teaching of Gauhati University. They were a mixed level group with no adequate training in reading and writing in English. In the Indian education system, students are taught basic decoding skills. However, higher level reading strategies like drawing the inferential meaning from the text, guessing meaning from the context etc. are not taught adequately. Interestingly, as mentioned previously, these students are aware of the different reading strategies, but when it comes to the actual implementation of those strategies they are seen to be lacking.

Setting

The study was conducted during the third semester of the M.A. in English Language and English Language Teaching (M.A. in EL and ELT) course in the department of English Language Teaching (ELT) of Gauhati University. There were 18 students attending the M.A. course. The teacher researcher carried out her research as part of her daily routine classes in which she makes students read the text and gives them activities to do that are based on what they have read.

How the research was carried out

As discussed in the introduction, the researcher first tried to identify the students who were weak in reading and those who could read with comprehension quite effectively. She gave a set of questions from a text that required students to just decode the answers from the text. Almost all the students could find the answers to most of the questions. The second set of questions required them to analyse and interpret the text. Most of the participants failed to answer 50 percent of the questions.
The scores are given below.

Code	Score in test 1 (out of 12)	Score in test 2 (out of 12)
S1	11	5
S2	10	5
S3	11	5
S4	12	8
S5	11	6
S6	11	5
S7	12	8
S8	10	6
S9	12	8

S10	12	8
S11	10	5
S12	12	8
S13	10	5
S14	10	5
S15	11	9
S16	10	5
S17	11	6
S18	12	7

Fig. 1: The scores obtained by the participants in Test 1 and Test 2

The students were also asked to rate the difficulty level of the text that they had to read in order to find the answers on a scale of 10.

Code	Difficulty level of text (on a scale of 10)
S1	8
S2	Not submitted
S3	Not submitted
S4	6
S5	7
S6	8
S7	5
S8	8
S9	5
S10	Not submitted
S11	8
S12	6
S13	7
S14	8
S15	6
S16	8
S17	7
S18	7

Fig. 2: The ratings given by the participants on the difficulty level of the reading text

On the basis of the combined scores in the two tests, the rating of difficulty level of text by the students and going by their views on their own, they were divided into two groups : the participants who scored less than 6 were put in the LS (Less Score) group and those who scored 6 or more than 6 were grouped in HS (Higher Score) group.

In addition to the above tests, questionnaires were provided to the students to find out about their attitude towards reading as a skill.

There were mixed responses regarding their attitude towards reading as a skill.

i.   80 percent of them think that they are average readers. Only one participant was confident that she was a proficient reader who could read any kind of text.

ii.   80 percent said that they found texts that had too many unfamiliar words and long and complicated sentences difficult to comprehend. A few mentioned that lack of interest and lack of patience made them bad readers.

iii.   Almost all of them said that a good reader should be able to read any kind of text critically and with comprehension.

iv.   80 percent of them like exercises that make them look for specific information, make notes while 10 percent like finding answers to questions, looking for the main idea and paraphrasing/ summarizing, while the last 10 percent like questions that require them to decode the text without thinking critically.

It was evident that most of the participants found questions that were inferential and questions that required them to think critically to be more difficult and did not enjoy doing them. This paper aims to determine whether the use of paraphrasing as a strategy can assist and motivate weak readers to read texts with adequate comprehension.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION
What Is The Paraphrasing Strategy?

A paraphrase is someone else's ideas rewritten in our own words. However, a paraphrase is not condensed and should be of the same length as the original text. The paraphraser's opinions about the topic, the content of the original text or the author's way of presenting it should not be reflected in the paraphrase. A paraphrase should not in any way copy the original text but should be the paraphraser's own writing. The only job of a paraphrase is to accurately and completely represent the relevant idea presented in the text you are paraphrasing.

The job of paraphrasing as a reading strategy is to indicate how well a reader has understood the text, including the complex points of information. It also facilitates the reader to establish connections between its main points and helps in ensuring that the reader has understood the text correctly.

For this study, the type of paraphrasing strategy that was taught was a step ahead of the RAP strategy. The RAP paraphrasing strategy (Schumaker, Denton and Deshler, 1984) is a three-step strategy: *R*ead a paragraph, *A*sk myself "What was the main idea and two details?" and *P*ut it into my own words. The RAP strategy is grounded in information processing theory using chunking and paraphrasing procedures to help improve memory of main ideas and details in text. The strategy requires students to break reading passages into smaller units or "chunks" (i.e., paragraphs) and remember information from these smaller units of text (Schumacher et al., 1984). Breaking material into smaller units can facilitate memory and recall (Swanson, 1996). Because the strategy requires students to paraphrase material they read in their own words, students are actively involved in reading rather than passively approaching text (Schumaker et al. 1984). Research shows that students who engage in strategies requiring a restatement of text or paraphrasing are more likely to recall text and understand main ideas (Best et al., 2005; Plake et al., 1981). However, for the purpose of this paper, a more detailed paraphrase strategy was taught to the students as the students were required to read the text in a little more detail than the

RAP strategy. Students were taught how to paraphrase using the *Academic Reading* by Ann Hogue. Steps that were taken to teach them 'how' to read with the help of the paraphrasing strategy are mentioned below.

Step One: The participants were made to do an activity from *Academic Writing* by Ann Hogue (Level 4) on paraphrasing. The different steps in paraphrasing are
- read the text several times.
- change the vocabulary and the order of words in each sentence of the paragraph. Reread the text to determine whether the overall meaning is intact.
- identify the main points, change the vocabulary and the sentence structure and paraphrase the text. In the process, they were:
  - reading repeatedly.
  - selecting the main points.
  - changing the vocabulary and the sentence structure.

Step Two: The previous step was followed by a different activity in which the participants had to read the text and complete some incomplete passages. This involved reading and writing.
However, it was noticed that some students had copied from the text directly. The researcher had to ask them to read, understand and then rewrite in their own words.

Step Three: After making them practise the paraphrasing strategy, the student participants were
asked to design incomplete paraphrases for their friends from any of the course materials and then exchange their paraphrases with them. This strategy, in addition to helping them read the passage for comprehension and also for information, reinforced the strategies they have been using but were not aware of. During the process they were engaged in reading, discussing, collaborating and also building their confidence in reading. This exercise made the students become more aware of the strategies used.
Students were also asked to design similar activities for their partners and then check if they had got them correct. This strategy helped them to read the passage for comprehension and also for information.
Lastly, the opinions of the participants were sought where they were asked if they would use the paraphrasing strategy in the future to read other texts.

Discussion
It was observed that the participants attempted to read the text in more detail and understand it in order to rewrite it in their own words when using the paraphrasing strategy.
1. Did it make the reading task easier? If yes, how?
   The students were asked to paraphrase the target text using the format provided to them. It was seen that though the paraphrases created by them had a number of problems in different areas like grammar, vocabulary etc. there was sufficient evidence that they had made an attempt to understand the content in more detail when they used the paraphrasing strategy. Their responses to the questionnaire show that the paraphrasing activity helped in motivating the students to read the text with

comprehension and in detail. Also, the students' approach to the text becomes more active.

2. Any problems that were seen?
The difference between the paraphrases of the LS group and the HS group of participants was evident. The paraphrases of the LS group were seen to be more similar to the original text, whereas a tendency to follow the steps taught in the paraphrasing class was observed in the HS group. The LS participants were also the less motivated ones and were seen to have not understood the rationale behind the paraphrasing exercise. They copied the answers from the original paraphrases provided by their friends. This also indicates lack of critical thinking.

3. Another very interesting finding was that both the LS and the HS groups shared with the researcher that they had very little interest in applying the paraphrasing strategy to read other kinds of texts in future. They found it helpful, but too time consuming.

CONCLUSION

Though it was found that the use of paraphrasing as a tool can make the students more involved in the reading process and also motivate them to read more, it cannot be conclusively claimed that the students would show similar motivation level to use the paraphrasing strategy when confronted with other academic texts without the interference of the teacher. The teacher with adequate instruction and competence should be able to motivate the students to engage with the reading material in the class, and may also give them some assignment to do at home. However, how far the student wishes to apply the strategy to deal with different academic texts is not clear from this study.

The paraphrase strategy needs careful planning as weaker students who struggled in answering inferential and critical questions found the strategy to be not very helpful, and they were seen to have copied the answers from the original text. As opposed to that, the more motivated students and capable readers enjoyed the activity and found it challenging and quite helpful in understanding the text. The acceptance of the paraphrasing strategy can also be attributed to the fact that students realised that they could use it to make their own notes from the textbooks instead of relying on ready- made notes, as the paraphrasing strategy is also a useful strategy in writing.

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