

The Influence of Teaching Strategies on Students' Paraphrasing Strategies: A Case Study

Daljeet Singh Sedhu

Mun Yee Choy

S. Chee Choy

Tunku Abdul Rehman University College

Perak Branch Campus, Malaysia

Email: daljeetsingh@acd.tarc.edu.my

Abstract

This paper examines the influence of teaching strategies on the paraphrasing skills of English-as-second-language learners. Data for this study was obtained from the teacher using reflective journals that were kept for the duration of the course. Studies have shown that keeping reflective journals helps teachers construct meaningful and effective teaching strategies. In this study the teacher's observations of his students' performances and comments about summary writing were recorded in weekly journals and then analysed. The results showed that the use of content-driven teaching strategies affected students' acquisition of the paraphrasing skills taught. Students were found to perform better on the summary writing tests when teachers used content-driven teaching strategies. They also did better with a contextually unfamiliar passage than a passage with a familiar context if the main points were more direct and accessible. This further implies that apart from teaching strategies, the nature of a passage could influence students' performances in summary writing. Further investigation is needed on the influence of the types of passages on students' performance when paraphrasing.

Keywords: Paraphrasing skills; summary writing; reflective journals.

1. Introduction

Studies have shown that paraphrasing skills are important in helping English-as-second language (ESL) students foster their reading and writing skills. Numerous studies have indicated that the strategies used by the teacher to help students acquire such skills play an important part in their ability to paraphrase well (Lee & Choy, 2011; Orellana & Reynolds, 2008; Johns, 1988). Further to this, McCarthy et al (2009) noted that students are frustrated by teachers who do not strategise well and are slow on providing feedback on their progress. Scott (1998) also noted that the meanings of things that shape individual lives are only meaningful by virtue of the cultural systems of interpretation; something that many teachers do not take into consideration when they teach. This is in line with the Vygotskian (1978) perspective that each individual must be 'scaffolded' to assist their learning.

1.1 Problem statement

Many students who enrol in institutions of higher learning enter without prior familiarity in paraphrase writing, regardless of whether they are native or non-native speakers of English (Macbeth, 2006). Studies have found that the teachers themselves were often unable to define to students what is actually needed when writing a paper but could only recognise content that was inappropriate when it was read. This was

especially true when the terms used to ask students to carry out a writing task were ill-defined and students had to guess at their meaning (Macbeth, 2006). Teachers who could not effectively communicate to their students the tasks to be carried out added to the problem.

1.2 Research objectives

This study, in part, will explore the influence of strategies reported by the teachers as used to help students learn paraphrasing skills. Another part of the study will explore how the teachers communicated these strategies to students.

1.3 Research questions

In order to have more focus for the study, two research questions (RQ) were used to underpin this study:

RQ1. What was the paraphrasing strategies used by the teacher?

RQ2. What was the teacher's perceptions of the students' reactions to the strategies?

2. Literature review

2.1 Teaching paraphrasing skills

Paraphrasing is the rephrasing of sentences while essentially keeping their meaning the same as they were originally (McCarthy et al, 2009). This is important for individuals pursuing academic studies as it can facilitate comprehension and conceptualisation of text passages. However, there are inherent problems with teachers having to evaluate their students' paraphrasing skills. While paraphrasing skills are considered to be a learning strategy to improve learning and reading, they have traditionally been intended to measure writing skills (Yu, 2008). Added to this it has also been found that summarisation may require certain writing skills that are more complex than reading skills. Other studies have also found that summary writing tasks are influenced by students' language proficiency levels and the availability of reference tools to aid students in the task (Yu, 2008).

Johns and Mayes, (1990) found that students who were poorly prepared in the language used for carrying out paraphrasing tasks tended to include statistically significant fewer main idea units than those more adept in the language. Therefore, ESL students would be disadvantaged when carrying out such tasks in English and, therefore, would be expected to not perform as well as native speakers. In the same study, John and Mayes (1990) had ESL students from the remedial and advanced non-native speakers groups carry out a paraphrasing task. It was found that the remedial students with low proficiency in English were more apt to copy sentences directly from the text, although both groups were just as likely to distort the ideas presented in the passage. Corbeil (2000) found that the use of problem solving strategies was closely linked to the literate expertise students developed in the language they used to paraphrase. The use of these strategies was not related to their proficiency in the language, although there was a relation to the quality of the summaries they produced. The students' previous writing expertise also determined to a considerable extent how they approached the summarisation task. This study is also interested in determining how the manner in which a teacher introduces summary writing strategies influence students' approach to producing such work. Therefore, a reflective journal will be used to document the implementation of such strategies.

2.2 Journals as a tool to aid development of teaching strategies

An effective way of getting access to the strategies used by teachers in their classrooms is through reflective journaling. This is a form of in-depth journaling that encompasses emotions as well as the thoughts of the author. According to Piburn and Middleton (1998), reflective journaling is an indicator of the expertise of a teacher and engaging in it will aid the process of knowledge construction. Hubbs and Brand (2010) noted that journals are seen as a form of active learning for teachers as they reflect on what they do in the classroom. It can be viewed as a path or technique for self-awareness as it allows teachers to assess, test and challenge their perceptions of the world. The process will enable the internal making of meaning, resulting in the insights of the teachers being overtly expressed. These journals can also serve to maintain lines of communication between the teacher and students and allow the progress of students to be evaluated. Added to this, the teacher is also able to keep a record of what goes on in the classroom during each lesson which will be helpful for future lesson planning.

Every journal entry will differ in depth and may not necessarily be reflective (Hubbs & Brand, 2010). Some statements may disclose thoughts and emotions, while others may just be giving information. Journals require the teacher to shift from just giving information to introspection and to judge when to give information and when to engage in reflection. Therefore, a journal must allow for both information and introspection. In this study the journal will be used as the main source of data to obtain insights into the strategies used by the teacher during his paraphrasing classes. It is acknowledged that the interpretation of the writings in the journals is subjective; however, journaling is used by many teachers as a means of gathering data and evaluating learning outcomes.

3. Method

This study was carried out in order to determine the teacher's perspective of teaching of paraphrasing strategies to ESL students. The thoughts of the teacher were written down in a journal, the contents of which were subjective and opinionated; hence, the interpretive approach was used to analyse the data. This approach allowed the data to be interpreted holistically by taking into consideration the multiple socially constructed realities (Radnor, 2002). It also allowed the researchers to actively construct meaning to the data as an observer to the phenomena. The purpose was to understand reality as different people see it and to demonstrate how their views shaped their actions. Ultimately the role of the research team was to render the data intelligible and to focus on the social construction of reality (Radnor, 2002) from different perspectives. The teacher, who was also a part of the research team, wrote in the journal for the duration of the semester. In the results section, the teacher will be referred to as Mr. D

The study was for fourteen weeks of a semester, and the teacher was to write in the journal his thoughts and feelings about the paraphrasing classes he taught. His writings were based on his observations of students' reactions to his lessons and his own reflections on the strategies used in class. The researchers took the view that teachers are learners and the process of reflection would eventually enhance his teaching strategies (Hubbs & Brand, 2010). The teacher was asked to be as detailed as possible in his narration of the lessons and reactions of the students. Two groups of students enrolled in diploma courses at a Malaysian institution of higher learning were invited to participate in this study. In order to maintain anonymity, no student names were mentioned in the journals. The data was allowed to emerge (Radnor, 2002) as the researchers analysed and reanalysed the writings.

In order to give the study more structure, the researchers decided to select and categorise the passages used for paraphrasing with the two classes into contextually and culturally familiar passages and unfamiliar passages. This is so that the reactions of students to the different passages could be observed by the teacher as he introduced the different strategies to paraphrase them. It was anticipated that this would generate rich data for the journal. The selection of the passages was done based on the researchers' perceptions and past teaching experience. It must be noted that selection was based on the researchers' impressions of the passages.

In all, four passages were selected as exercises for students to apply the paraphrasing strategies. Two of the passages were used for the pre-tests and post-tests while the other two were used as practise exercises in class. The length of each passage was between 250 to 300 words. The four passages will be referred to as Passage A, Passage B, Passage C, and Passage D in the discussion section.

The first passage was about the practice of handshaking among Malaysians and the ways of extending handshakes in different cultures and contexts. This was something familiar to students. This passage was called Passage A. It was used for both the pre-test and post-test for one of the classes. The second passage also used for both pre and post-tests in the other class was about the precautions taken by parents in South Africa against car hijacking. Hence, the context of Passage B was regarded as unfamiliar to students, as car hijacking was not a common phenomenon in the country where the study took place.

Passage C was also contextually and culturally unfamiliar for students because the first part of this passage elaborated on the origins of Valentine's Day. It was assumed that students might not know much about the history of this much celebrated day around the world. The passage then proceeded to elaborate on the ways of celebrating Valentine's Day in modern times. The last Passage D was about the advantages and disadvantages of watching television, a common issue discussed by society at large, and the context was familiar to students. These two passages were used as practice exercises during class.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1 RQ1 what was the paraphrasing strategies used by the teacher?

In an attempt to answer RQ1, the journal was analysed and reanalysed and the following themes emerged:

4.1.1 Textbook used extensively

Mr. D used a main textbook as reference for his classes. The textbook was a standard guide, and the syllabus for the course was written based on it. The textbook contained a guide on strategies for summary writing and included many exercises. Mr. D seemed to rely on the textbook to help him be more confident when teaching the course. This is to be expected as Mr. D had only taught this course once before. In his journal Mr. D wrote:

“I felt confident using the textbook which is Practical English for Tertiary Students 2 because it has a chapter on summary writing, in chapter 4.”

Mr. D further explained that he felt the textbook was useful because it contained examples he could use with his students and it was suitable for their level of English proficiency.

“Therefore, I decided to give emphasis using the distinguishing example technique. When it comes to identifying the main ideas, a few passages with many examples were used from the textbook. I found that the textbook is really helpful for me because it matched my students' level of English language proficiency. This makes it easier to teach them. Anyway, I need to complete the syllabus on time.”

4.1.2 Discussion

From the reflections in his journal, Mr. D was not comfortable teaching without the textbook as a guide. He used the exercises in the textbooks as he felt they were appropriate for his students. He was more intent on completing the syllabus rather than helping students learn and internalise the necessary paraphrasing strategies. It was not mentioned in his journal if Mr. D had asked his students how they felt about the strategies he was teaching them. This seems to contradict what was found by [Lee & Choy \(2011\)](#) and [Orenella & Reynolds \(2008\)](#) that students perceived it was more important for teachers to help them internalise the necessary strategies for paraphrasing.

4.1.3 Strategies were not effectively taught

The four strategies recommended in the textbook for paraphrasing were: using synonyms; substituting phrases with single words; distinguishing examples; and leaving out irrelevant details. However, there was no evidence from Mr. D's journal entries that he effectively taught all the strategies. It must be noted, however, that he did introduce and emphasise the strategy: *use of synonyms*, with the aid of flash cards:

“During my first lesson, I taught my students how to use a synonym to replace a word. This is to help me determine students' vocabulary skills. I decided to use the flash card method. I chose a few active vocabularies such as beautiful, which can be replaced with nice, pretty, handsome, charming and inactive vocabularies such as lethargic, which means tired, exhausted and drained, randomly from the text book and dictionary. I then asked them to give another synonym that can replace the word.”

Mr. D also taught the strategies without bridging them contextually to students' prior knowledge. Instead, they were taught how to apply the strategies using exercises in the textbook which had questions that were not contextually related to any passages that had been previously attempted by them. Mr. D did try to teach substituting phrases with single words to a certain extent. However, the efficacy of this technique is questionable because it was done using isolated textbook exercises that were not contextually bound. Mr. D wrote the following in his journal:

“As the lesson was about to end, I told them to complete exercise 2 on page 94 from the textbook which required students to replace the phrase in italics with a single word as homework and I also told them that I will discuss the answers with them in the next lesson.”

In another part of Mr. D's journal, the following excerpt gives further evidence that he was not interested in helping his students bridge what they were learning contextually with their prior knowledge. He seemed more intent on having his student learn the strategy through repetition using relevant exercises:

“I went through with them some of the questions in exercise 3 on page 95 from the textbook which required the students to rewrite sentences in the questions by leaving out examples and repeated or irrelevant points in order to make them more concise in writing summary.”

4.1.4 Discussion

Mr. D taught the strategies using exercises from the textbook as reinforcement. However, these exercises did not help students bridge their prior knowledge of the strategies with what they were currently learning. Apparently Mr. D was not aware that the way he approached the strategies might not be effective in meeting the needs of his students. There was also no evidence of any analysis being carried out to understand the problems faced by students prior to teaching the strategies. This would seem to support the finding by [Macbeth \(2006\)](#) that teachers themselves may be unable to effectively use recommended techniques to meet the needs of students when carrying out a writing task.

4.2 RQ2 *what was the teacher's perception of the students' reactions to the strategies?*

In an attempt to answer RQ2, the following themes were found:

4.2.1 Students' comprehension of the strategies

Mr. D did not seem able to accurately rate his students on how well they had mastered the strategies. He was also unsure whether his students were having more problems finding the main points from a passage or distinguishing important examples. Although he finally decided that his students were facing more problems with distinguishing examples. This is shown in the following excerpt:

“After discussing the answers (finding main points from the passage page 1 in the textbook) given by my students on the white board I think they have managed to understand the techniques well. However, I felt that the problem faced by many students is more with distinguishing examples than the main points. They were not able to distinguish between examples to be included as their main points and they were not sure which word can be replaced with important examples.”

Learning to distinguish examples in passages was relatively new to students but Mr. D was not aware of this and only identified the problem after assigning exercises which the students could not do well. Mr. D did not anticipate this, and he only noticed it after the students had difficulties with the exercises he assigned. The following excerpt illustrates this:

“Many of them say that during their secondary school they were taught that examples should not be included in summary writing as a main point. They say learning this technique is something new for them in tertiary level, and they had difficulty with the exercises. I did not know this when I was teaching them in class.”

4.2.2 Discussion

Mr. D was intent on having his students learn the four paraphrasing strategies based on what he wrote in his journal. However, he was not aware that it was important to help students learn by bridging the strategies with their prior knowledge. His students commented that they had been taught a different way. It would have been more effective if Mr. D had used this prior learning as a bridge for his students to learn the new strategies. The difficulties experienced by his students were only discovered after they were unable to do the exercises assigned as Mr. D did not assess the situation earlier. This seems to support [McCarthy et al \(2009\)](#) who noted that if the teacher delays assessment it could subsequently affect students' comprehension of the subject matter.

4.2.3 Application of strategies by students

According to Mr. D, the students seemed to be able to apply to a certain extent the paraphrasing strategies they had learned. A majority of them were only able to produce below average work as they were not familiar with the context of the passage (Passage C) as noted in the following excerpt:

“With regards to Passage C, a majority of the students were only able to produce below average work based on the techniques taught. However, rephrasing examples was quite difficult for them. They were not familiar with the context of passage C as they had no prior knowledge about the topic, which was surprising. This could be because the concept of Valentine's Day discussed in the passage was different from the students' concepts of the holiday.”

In the other exercise passage (Passage D) where students were familiar with the context, students did not have problems extracting the main ideas and rephrasing the sentences. They were also able to apply synonyms to words in the passage. It would seem that passages with a familiar context were easier for students to paraphrase. The following excerpt highlights this:

“With regards to Passage D, my students were able to identify the main ideas easily and rephrase them using the techniques taught. I also saw that they managed to rephrase examples into single words, which was a difficult task for them previously. They told me that television is something they knew about, therefore, they found it quite easy to complete the task.”

4.2.4 Discussion

Students seemed better able to apply the paraphrasing strategies to passages with contexts that were familiar to them than to ones that were not familiar. It seems that a student's interest is vital when it comes to the application of techniques. This would imply that the selection of passages for ESL students is important in helping them be successful with paraphrasing. This finding seems to support [Scott \(1998\)](#) who found that in order for students to experience success, teachers must scaffold student by providing them with the appropriate tools and contexts to learn. As such, teachers would need to know what really interests their students and use this knowledge as a platform for helping them to learn paraphrasing.

4.2.5 Effectiveness of the strategies

Based on the results of the post-test compared with the pre-test, Mr. D concluded that the strategies had improved the overall performance of his students. This is highlighted in the following excerpt:

“As I was marking my students' post-test, I found that they have improved compared to the pre-test which I conducted four weeks ago. They were able to produce a properly organised writing by applying the techniques I taught them.”

Although there is an improvement in the students' post-test scores, it is questionable whether it is entirely due to the effectiveness of teaching paraphrasing techniques. The students were still facing problems distinguishing examples in the passages. This also led them to make further mistakes, especially in passages with unfamiliar contexts. Besides that, it must be noted that students performed poorly when paraphrasing Passage A which had an unfamiliar context compared to Passage B as suggested in the following excerpt:

“With regard to Passage A, many of them still have problems with this technique (distinguishing examples) because they are not well versed with the topic. The main points that they used in their paraphrase are mainly based on examples given in the passage. Most of them included irrelevant points in their summary. They performed better with Passage B.”

The teachers' reflection on Passage B showed that students were able to perform better. Although the passage was not familiar to students, they found it easier to perform the task. This is because the passage was more direct and the main points could be easily identified.

Mr. D noted that students found it easier to paraphrase Passage B because the points in the passage were more direct and the main point could be easily identified. The following excerpt highlights this:

“With regard to Passage B, many of them did well because the passage contained a lot of direct points which can be identified. I guess the topic really gained my students' interest as it may be easier for them because there were fewer embedded main points in the passage.”

4.2.6 Discussion

The analysis of the comments from the journal seems to suggest that the type of passage chosen for each paraphrasing task may be more important for ESL students than teaching them paraphrasing strategies. It may also be more important than the context of the passage. The ease with which students were able to identify the main points in passages would determine how well they perform when paraphrasing. Added to this, ESL students would be hindered by their limited command of English. As noted by [Johns and Mayes \(1990\)](#), students with limited command of English include fewer main ideas in their work than those more adept in English. Hence, students tend to do better in passages where the main ideas are easily assessable than in passage where ideas are more embedded. [Yu \(2008\)](#) further noted that summarisation skills are not

easily mastered as it may require writing skills that are more complex than reading skills. Therefore, since these ESL students may already have poor reading skills as well as poor writing skills, this combination could have resulted in the poor overall performance in their paraphrasing tasks. Added to this, paraphrasing strategies may not help these students until they have greater literacy levels in the language they use to paraphrase as found in a study by [Corbeil \(2000\)](#).

Conclusion

From the reflective journal, it would seem that many of the strategies were taught as content material rather than contextually. That is the teacher did not try to use students' prior knowledge to act as a bridge to help them learn the strategies he was trying to introduce. The teacher, perhaps because of his inexperience, did not seem to be alert to the problems students were having when learning the strategies. The reflective journal helped the teacher to identify his problems when teaching the strategies and the anxieties felt by students while delivering summary writing lessons. Nevertheless, unless a teacher can follow through with appropriate actions and corrections, any journal entries recording the strengths and flaws of teaching and learning will be futile. It must be noted that teaching paraphrasing strategies to ESL students is challenging because of their limited command of English. The strategies taught to them may not help as ESL students are not as literate in English, a criterion for paraphrasing passages. The writing expertise of these students may also be questionable as this has been found to determine how they would approach paraphrasing tasks. Hence, helping these students improve their paraphrasing skills may require an improvement in their English literacy levels rather than the teaching of strategies. Nonetheless, these strategies should not be undermined as long as teachers consistently guide ESL students with appropriate examples to help them apply the skills they learn. These skills are regarded as essential in order to avoid plagiarism in students' projects and essay papers which must be written as original pieces of work.

The results of this study also suggest that teaching paraphrasing strategies to students may not help them in actual writing tasks. ESL students may receive greater benefit from the appropriate choice of passages used than in strategies. Appropriate passages include ones that are easy to comprehend, have obvious main points, have appropriate language level and have topics interesting to students. Students were able to paraphrase passages where the main points were easy to extract and the topic in the passage was of interest to the students. The cultural and contextual relevance of the passages to students were not as important. Students performed better on passages that were not culturally or contextually familiar to them but were easy to read and comprehend. It must also be noted that when a passage required them to infer the main points, students could not perform as well as those where the main points were obvious. This again could be associated with their low English competency that has hindered them from writing reasonably good summaries even when they had been taught the strategies.

Further studies need to be carried out on the criterion for the appropriate passages to be used with ESL students that would most enhance their paraphrasing skills. It would also be interesting to determine if teaching ESL students one strategy at a time in different courses rather than all of the strategies together in the same course would be more effective. In addition, students would have more time to increase their literacy in English which might result in a more definite overall improvement in their skill as a result. Meanwhile, more opportunities for paraphrasing passages could be used to support students' application of the strategies they had learned. Furthermore, the teacher could use the reflective journal as a tool to reflect on follow up strategies as a scaffold to help students with increasingly difficult passages that students can choose on their own and paraphrase at their own pace. This allows teachers to facilitate students regardless of their levels of language competency. Teachers, for example, could also provide a check list to help students facilitate their own learning, allowing them to evaluate or review their own summary work. This could allow more room for discussion between teachers and students in which students are given an avenue to be aware of their progress and areas of improvement.

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