

# **How Do I Teach My Students to Paraphrase Academic Content in Order to Improve Their Reading Comprehension?**

**Michelle Ahn  
J.E.B. Stuart High School  
Fairfax County (VA) Public Schools  
Submitted June 1999**

## **Introduction**

I am currently in my first year of teaching World History and Geography I at J.E.B. Stuart High School in Fairfax County. In the beginning of the school year, my classes studied a unit on geography and the students could easily follow the lessons on maps, longitude, and latitude. However, as the school year progressed and the classes moved to the study of the Paleolithic and Neolithic times, I noticed that the students, particularly the foreign-born students, needed more of my assistance in understanding the material in their textbooks. Because one of my primary goals as an educator is to foster "real learning," I decided to focus on this problem for my research project.

## **Reading Scores**

In the middle of the year, I received my students' reading scores for my ninth grade World History and Geography I classes. The average vocabulary level for my students was at the sixth grade level, while the average reading comprehension level was at the seventh grade level.

In light of the students' low reading scores, I considered different teaching techniques which I could employ in my lesson plans in order to help my students to read. To this end, I decided that teaching my students how to paraphrase their reading material was the best means by which to accomplish the goal of improving students' reading.

## **Students' Background**

A large number of my students came from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Two important factors seemed to be influencing their academic progress: language/cultural differences and weaknesses in reading comprehension.

Language and cultural differences between students' homes and the school were one factor that influenced students' performances in the classroom. For example, in one of my World History and Geography I classes, 14 of my 24 students spoke two different languages in their homes. These students were originally from countries such as the Philippines, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, El Salvador, Bolivia, Pakistan, Somalia, and Ghana. The English which these students did speak in their respective homes was very limited because many of their parents are first generation immigrants who do not speak much English.

As a second generation Korean-American myself, I recognized from my own past experience that, many times, my students' exposure to the English language consisted of television or radio. As noted by reading advocate Stephen Krashen, excessive television watching has a clearly negative impact on school performance<sup>1</sup>. Krashen further noted that "people acquiring a second language have the best chance for success through reading."<sup>2</sup> Yet it has become increasingly clear that, all too often, students do not spend enough time reading.

When I asked the students in my fifth period class what topics they enjoyed reading about, some of the responses were as follows:

"Nothing."

"Mysteries."

"Nothing, I hate reading!"

"History of Asia."

"Nothing, I don't like to read at all."

"Something out of the ordinary."

"Autobiographies."

In fact, approximately half of my students expressed a dislike for reading.

As I spent more time with my students that year, I had the opportunity to view their work habits. In the classroom, I found myself constantly helping my students transfer the information into easier phrases which they could more readily comprehend.

Particularly troubling to me was the fact that students were struggling to explain "in their own words" their answers to reading assignments. In many cases, the students would copy answers to their homework assignments word for word from their textbook, Prentice Hall's *World History: Connections to Today*, without seeming to comprehend the answers which they were providing. It occurred to me that the primary reason the students were unable to understand and interpret the text was because they were not engaging in active reading. For example, the majority of students were not underlining or marking important ideas as they read. They did not skim the material first in order to get a general idea of the particular passage.

Consequently, I soon realized that my teaching goal was two-fold: 1) teaching my students world history concepts in a manner in which they can understand and, 2) teaching my students how to read independently.

## What the Students Had to Say

Before actually teaching my students how to paraphrase their reading material, I asked each of them to complete a survey which I hoped would help me better to understand how they approached reading. Some of the questions included in the survey were:

- 1) When the teacher asks you to find the answers to questions from your readings, do you write down sentences word for word from the textbook?
  - a) If yes, why do you think you copy answers to questions directly from the textbook?

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Krashen, The Power of Reading (Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, Inc. 1993), 83.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 84.

- b) If no, do you use your own words? How?
- 2) What is the best way to learn in a history class?
- 3) What is your definition of “paraphrasing?”
- 4) Do you know how to paraphrase?

My students’ responses to question # 3, “what is paraphrasing?” did not surprise me. Generally, the students replied that they did not know the definition of the term. Some of my students’ responses were as follows: “I don’t know.” “Dunno.” “No idea what you’re talking about.” and “I’m not sure.” This led me to the conclusion that implementing paraphrasing as a learning tool should start with the basics.

### Paraphrasing: One Answer to the Problem

Our school reading specialist defined paraphrasing as a “rewording of part or all of a text, stating its meaning in another way.” Its purpose is to help the student understand the original text more fully. Paraphrasing is an important strategy which students can use in order to ensure that they have properly understood the material which has been studied.

I began by teaching students a six-step approach to paraphrasing which was provided to me by the school reading specialist.

- Step 1- Read the passage to be paraphrased twice.
- Step 2- Circle any words or phrases you do not understand.
- Step 3- Use the dictionary or glossary for the definition of the word or phrase.
- Step 4- Read the passage again placing your definition of the unfamiliar words in the phrase.
- Step 5- Read through the passage. Translate the phrases into your own words.
- Step 6- Review your paraphrase, looking for errors and completeness.

### Paraphrasing in Action

I used several different techniques to incorporate paraphrasing into my lesson plans. The different techniques I used were graphic organizers, strip stories, and a modified form of the Cornell note-taking method.

Graphic organizers are charts such as cause and effect charts, T-charts, Venn diagrams, and hierarchical organizers, which help students to organize information from their reading material. For example, I employed T-charts in order to help students better organize and understand their readings. I would ask students to read a particular section of the text. After they read the section, I would give them the main idea of the passage and ask them to find a certain number of facts which supported the main idea. However, in providing supporting facts the students were not permitted to copy straight from the text, but had to provide supporting facts in their own words. Initially, my students did not enjoy this learning exercise, but as they acclimated themselves to the

exercise, they found that the T-charts served as an invaluable tool in organizing their reading and helped them to better prepare for their tests and quizzes.

A second technique I used was “strip stories.” A strip story is a learning activity whereby students read a section of the text and then they are given a list of important terms which they must use in recounting what they have just read. While covering “Empires of India and China,” I had my students use “strip stories” in order to help them learn about the emperors who united China. I gave the students key terms such as “Shi Huangdi,” “Legalist,” “Feudal states,” “Inspectors,” “Xianyang,” “Unity,” “Cart axles,” “Transportation,” “Confucian Scholars,” and “the Great Wall.” The students then used these terms to paraphrase the section they had just read.

A third technique I used was a modified form of the Cornell note-taking method. In class my students read several primary and secondary source assignments. The reading handouts contained text on the left-hand side of the page, while the right-hand side of the page was blank. After reading the text, the students were asked to circle all of the vocabulary terms which they did not understand and underline the main ideas in each paragraph using a highlighter. Then the students were asked to paraphrase each paragraph using the six-step approach to the paraphrasing technique outlined previously.

For example, while studying the chapter on “The Rise of Europe,” the students were asked to paraphrase a section on the medieval church. Within this section, the words the students did not understand included: “secular,” “interdict,” “to shun,” “vast,” “heir,” “excommunicate,” and “sacraments.” Despite their difficulty with certain terms within this section, using the six-step approach to paraphrasing helped them to more readily pick out those concepts which they did and did not understand and write them in their notes.

## Outlook for the Future

As I look back, I am proud of my students. They continually persevered through challenges in their reading and not only passed history class, but passed with an *understanding* of what happened in Egypt, Sumer, India, China, Greece and Rome. In the beginning of the year, the students knew the correct literal responses to questions, but they had difficulty in understanding their own answers. By the end of this project, when it came time for evaluation, they were able to demonstrate what they had learned through essays and short answer questions.

Overall, my students displayed improved cognitive ability at comprehending history by expressing their knowledge through writing, rather than just mere memorization. I believe that learning how to paraphrase greatly served students in their other classes. For example, by learning how to paraphrase aspects of the medieval church, students were then able to use paraphrasing in English class when they studied *Romeo and Juliet*.

After several months, the use of paraphrasing did seem to improve most of my students’ ability to comprehend conceptual information. However, while most students were comfortable with paraphrasing academic content, they still had difficulties with vocabulary. This opens the instructional door for other

reflection. If I could restart my school year, I would teach students how to paraphrase much earlier as well as place a greater emphasis on note taking, outlining actual substantive material, and learning vocabulary.

By learning paraphrasing techniques, my students became better equipped to handle difficult reading assignments and, in the process, were more successful at learning the substance of what they were reading.