

Effects of Culturally and Contextually Familiar Texts on Paraphrasing Skills of ESL Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of cultural and contextual settings of passages on ESL students' paraphrasing skills using a sample of forty-one students enrolled in a university diploma programme. The results showed that students paraphrase better with passages that contained main points that were easy to identify. The culture and context of the passages played an important, but secondary role of stimulating students' interest. It was also found that there were changes in students' perceptions of themselves as learners after they had learned the paraphrasing skills. They were more confident about using their paraphrasing skills especially with passages that contained subject matter that was easy to understand and interesting.

KEYWORDS: ESL, paraphrasing skills, student perceptions, cultural settings, contextual settings

Background

Previous studies showed that paraphrasing skills helped ESL students learn academic writing (Omar, 2003). In other studies there were indications that culture had an influence on writing and learning (Boondao, Hurst & Sheard, 2009). Studies conducted by Orellana and Reynolds (2008) and Lee and Choy (2010) showed that skills alone did not help students with paraphrasing. Other factors, including culture and context, influenced their abilities. Hence, the current study was conducted to investigate whether culturally familiar texts influenced students' paraphrasing skills.

Most bilingual students find translating from their first language to a second language challenging, especially when this language is the medium of instruction. This was highlighted by Orellana and Reynolds (2008) in their article on the influence of context on paraphrasing tasks of bilingual students. Another study by Lee and Choy's (2010) found that students were not helped by paraphrasing skills alone. Other factors that were cultural in nature also determined their ability to summarise a passage. Yu (2008) suggested that these cultural factors were language bound and found that students did better at summaries when they were allowed to paraphrase in Chinese, their first language, what they had read in English, which they learned as a foreign language. This suggested that students' skills could exceed what they expressed if they were not hindered by their command of the second or foreign language. The results from these studies were inconclusive; hence further research was necessary to determine if the cultural orientation of a passage also influenced a student's performance in a paraphrasing task.

Studies by Yu (2008) and Orellana and Reynolds (2008) also suggested that contextual settings of passages played a part in students' performances when paraphrasing. Students tended to perform better in their native language (Yu, 2008). However, the results from both studies indicated that students preferred to paraphrase in English because it was easier to directly copy the text even when it was not fully understood. It was also found that proper understanding of the text and the time allowed for the task were important prerequisites for paraphrasing (Yu, 2008).

Paraphrasing skills, therefore, were viewed as process driven rather than skills driven as these skills depended on a student's comprehension of the context of the passage (Johns, 1988). Hence, it was best for students to have prior experience with the context and content of the text. Passages that were culturally, nationally and ethnically bound to students help them derive more meaning. The strategies students used to process the paraphrasing task was also important as it influenced how successful they were when completing the task (Johns, 1988). Another difficulty with paraphrasing was that students were writing to an unknown, absent audience (Orellana and Reynolds, 2008) Hence, they were often oblivious to what this audience would like to know

and want included from the passage. The identification of this audience was often not emphasised by the teacher. Students would possibly benefit from being provided with such process enhancing information to help them paraphrase.

Westin (2006) found that readers could better comprehend passages that were culturally related to them. The same study also found that second language speakers had greater difficulty paraphrasing passages that contained contexts that were unfamiliar to them. Students who had to translate texts in order to understand them might gloss over meanings of words creating inaccuracies in their paraphrasing (Orellana and Reynolds, 2008). Therefore it would be difficult to paraphrase accurately while keeping the writing context, as well as content, accurate. Hare and Borchardt (1984) further noted that the paraphrasing of passages by less proficient readers were more piecemeal, sentence by sentence based, rather than based on the whole passage.

Most studies on paraphrasing focused on the use of strategies to enhance skills required to carry out the task. There was little emphasis on the type of learning that took place as a consequence of these skills (Johns, 1988; Scott, 1998). Anthony (1996) noted that students should be actively involved in their own learning and stressed the need for them to make learning meaningful to themselves rather than a passive acceptance of information or repetition of knowledge. Students actively involved in learning, required an emphasis of contextual learning where students constructed their own learning experiences. This form of learning could enhance students' paraphrasing skills as they would be able to apply these skills to different passages and situations.

Methods

The Present Study

This study was interested in determining the perceptions of students when carrying out paraphrasing tasks that were culturally and contextually oriented for them. Students' performances in their paraphrasing tasks were measured using selected passages. The perceptions of the students interpreted from interviews were used to determine how they used the paraphrasing skills and the influence of the passages on their ability to paraphrase. A search of the literature found a dearth of information on the influence of passages on students' paraphrasing skills with the exception of studies by Yu (2008) and Orellana and Reynolds (2008). Hence, in an attempt to enhance our understanding of such influences two research questions (RQ) were used to underpin this study:

RQ1. What were students' perceptions of the paraphrasing skills taught using passages that were culturally and contextually relevant?

RQ2. Were students' perceptions of the paraphrasing skills reflected in their performance in the paraphrasing tests?

Design and procedure

This study was carried out using the qualitative approach with a sample of forty-one students who were pursuing diploma programmes at a university in Malaysia. All of the students in the sample were adult learners, non-native speakers of English and had obtained a C in English for their SPM Examinations in the Malaysian equivalent of the GCE 'O' Levels. The informed consent of each student was obtained with an assurance of anonymity. These students were allowed to withdraw at any time from the study and were also told that any information provided by them would only be viewed by the researchers.

The intervention was for a ten week period during the first semester when the students were learning paraphrasing skills in their English course. The students were taught paraphrasing skills with relevant practise exercises during these ten weeks. Two tests were administered to the sample group: a teacher made pre- and post-test for paraphrasing which consisted of a selected passage to be paraphrased.

The pre-test was administered on the second week, while the post test was administered on the twelfth week of the fourteen-week semester. In the teacher made paraphrasing tests, two passages were chosen for students. The first passage was contextually familiar to the students, while the second passage was not. The two passages were selected to study the influence of familiar passages on students' abilities to paraphrase (Appendix A and Appendix B). The readability levels of the two passages were determined using the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Tests (Kincaid, Fishburne, Rogers, & Chissom, 1975).

In order to ensure that the passages chosen for the pre- and post-tests were appropriate, ten passages were initially selected. The passages were checked for readability levels using the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Tests, and read for content and context relevancy by the researchers. The passages were all 350 to 450 words long with readability levels of between Grade 8 to Grade 9. As the students were ESL learners, passages chosen were lower than university level English. These passages were read and re-read until two of them were finally chosen based on the subject matter of the passages. The two passages chosen had the same reading level at Grade 8.5 and were on hijacking in South Africa for the unfamiliar passage and the custom of handshaking for the familiar passage.

In addition to the tests, the students were interviewed as a group. They were asked questions about what they had learned as well as their impressions of

the paraphrasing tasks they had carried out during class. A list of the questions can be found on Appendix C. A total of two interview sessions were recorded and videotaped, one before teaching the paraphrasing skill and the other after. These sessions were then transcribed by the researchers for analysis. The students were encouraged to be vocal with their views during the sessions and were asked to indicate their responses with a show of hands which the interviewer recorded using an observation protocol (Creswell, 2013).

The results obtained led to the use of the interpretive approach. The interview data was analysed, and themes were allowed to emerge from it. The interpretation was based on the perspectives of the researchers and, as such, was value laden and biased. These salient points from the interview were then analysed and grouped under a common category (Radnor, 2002). An interpretive approach was used as the researchers were subjectively involved with the participants through their interactions with them. The goal here was to rely on the participants' views of paraphrasing which were formed during interaction with the researchers (Creswell, 2013). The researchers also addressed the process that the students went through to learn paraphrasing. The analyses were used to answer the research questions. The sample used was from a Malaysian population and cannot be generalised. The hope of the researchers was that the results obtained might be applicable to students of other nationalities in similar situations.

Results

RQ1. What were students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the paraphrasing skills taught using passages that were culturally and contextually relevant?

From the analysis of the interviews, several salient points were found. These points were grouped into the following categories and used to answer the research question. The quotes from the interviews were edited to aid the reader's understanding.

Culturally and contextually familiar passages were harder.

Fifty-eight per cent of the students perceived that paraphrasing the contextually familiar passages was more difficult. They found the task difficult because they did not know how to identify the important points to be included in their paraphrased passage. Although the handshake was familiar to these students, they found it difficult to pick out the main points in the passage. For instance, Student K commented:

'Handshake is something common for me. However, I am confused with which points to choose from the passage, although the passage is easy to understand.'

Student F noted the difficulty of the passage:

‘The handshake passage is more difficult for me as there are hidden points. I got the main points, but I could not formulate the answer. The language used in the passage is not the problem.’

Culturally and contextually unfamiliar passages were easier.

About fifty-eight per cent of the students perceived the contextually unfamiliar passage was easier because the main points in the passage were obvious and could be easily identified. The comments from students implied that an easier to understand passage in terms of the language might be more helpful for ESL students than the context of the passage. For instance, Student O commented:

‘The hijack passage is easier because I can find all the points, but the handshake passage is difficult as the main points were not clear.’

Student V commented:

‘The hijack passage is easier. I understand the passage better. I have never read about car hijack before, but I managed to get the necessary information.’

Sixteen per cent of the students from this group perceived that they could paraphrase better because they were interested in the subject matter. These students also mentioned they had some prior knowledge of the topic in the passage and found the passage easier to paraphrase and summarise. For instance, Student C commented:

‘The hijack text is easier than handshake. I read some hijacking articles and most of the cases were from foreign news. The meaning of the passage can be easily understood.’

Understanding requirements of the task improved confidence levels.

All the students mentioned that their ability to understand the requirements of the task and identify the main points affected their confidence levels. For instance, Student V commented:

‘The exercise where I had to summarise the advantages and disadvantages of watching television, is rather an easy task because the requirement is understood and the points were easily lifted from the passage. Thus, I was confident about doing it.’

Another Student H also commented:

‘I was more confident about carrying out the task after I was able to understand what was required; I was not as confident before I tried it.’

Students were unable to apply skills.

All of the students perceived that the skills taught were useful, but they were not able to fully apply them in their exercises and tests. Even after many practise exercises in paraphrasing, they continued to have difficulties understanding and applying the requirements of the task and extracting the main points from the passage. For instance Student K said:

‘The skills taught are useful, and I am more confident as a result, but I still have difficulties when I have to paraphrase. I could do the practise exercises and I did well in the exercises. They were easier than the passage because they were short sentences. Whereas the passage had so many sentences and I did not know which was important and which was not.’

Other students commented that the skills taught helped as long as the points in the passages were clear and could easily be lifted from the text. When the passages were difficult they found paraphrasing confusing. For example, Student M commented:

‘The skills taught are useful as long as the passage is easy to understand. The points must be easy to find. When the passages get difficult it is confusing to apply the skills. I do not know where to begin.’

Skills did not help.

About thirty per cent of the students perceived that the paraphrasing skills they learned did not help. They could not apply the techniques that were taught, and their poor command of English was an obstacle when paraphrasing. This was evidenced by Student T who commented:

‘Techniques were useful. But even when I used them to help me do the paraphrasing, I cannot find the main points. Sometimes examples are like the main points, and I include them as part of the answer. I cannot differentiate them well because I am poor in English.’

Other students were unsure if the techniques actually helped them carry out the paraphrasing task. For instance Student H said:

‘After learning the techniques, I did not apply them on the tests only on the exercises. I did not use the techniques as I was not taught them especially before the first test.’

Comprehension of passage was essential when applying paraphrasing skill.

There were two different passages given to students. About thirty per cent of the students found the hijack passage easier to understand while the rest of them found the handshake passage easier. The comments from students suggested that perceptions of paraphrasing tasks depended on whether students found the passage easy to understand and whether the main points were obvious in the passage. For instance, Student O said:

‘The hijack passage is easier because I could find the points, but the handshake passage was difficult. There were so many points and I could not differentiate the main points from the less important ones.’

Student S further commented:

‘The hijack passage was harder. I could not differentiate the main points and examples. The handshake passage was straight to the point. The context was more familiar to me.’

It was also found that paraphrasing skills were only useful if students could comprehend the passages to a certain level. This was evidenced in the comment made by Student C:

‘If I understand the whole passage then I would be able to write, and apply the techniques that I was taught. But if I could only understand the passage a little then I would just try to copy the main points and make a passage with the sentences I copy.’

Discussion: RQ1

The passage on the handshake, a gesture practised by most people, could be perceived as part of a world-wide culture and, therefore, familiar to the students. However, based on what students expressed during the interview, the contextually relevant passages were more difficult to paraphrase as the main points were obscured by the sub-points in the passage. Thus, the way the passage was written might be more important than its culture and context. This finding did not support research by Orellana and Reynolds (2008) and Yu (2008) as the ease of assessing the main points might be more important than the contextual setting of the passages for ESL students when they were paraphrasing. In the contextually familiar passage, the students had difficulty differentiating the main points from the secondary ones.

The findings also suggested that if students were able to extract the main points without difficulty they could paraphrase the passage. Students with some knowledge of the subject found the task easier to carry out. This supported research done by Johns (1988) and Westin (2006) who noted that prior knowledge of the context of the passage might help students to paraphrase a passage better. This prior knowledge acted as a bridge which helped them understand the passage. The ease of lifting the main points from a passage proved more important than the context of the passage for ESL students. The familiarity of the subject matter played a role in helping these students but seemed to be a secondary factor to the ease of identifying the main points from the passage.

Students felt that they were more confident about paraphrasing if they could understand the requirements of the task and if the main points of the passage were clear and direct. Hence, these tasks seemed dependent on the structure of

the passages rather than the cultural orientations. Students found it easier to focus on the requirements of the tasks rather than on the context and culture orientation of the passage. This supported findings by Lee and Choy (2010) and Westin (2006) that teaching paraphrasing skills alone did not help students acquire these skills. Students paraphrased better when they could identify the main points from the text. Also, interest in the subject matter helped students carry out paraphrasing tasks, but this was secondary.

It would seem that the exercises for learning paraphrasing skills were easier because they were mostly in short sentences or paragraphs giving a false impression that paraphrasing was easy. However, when applying these skills to the passages, most of them perceived the tasks were more difficult when they had to apply the skills they learned. It could be that these students needed to be introduced to paraphrasing short paragraphs then gradually progressed to whole passages. The process where the students started paraphrasing sentences and immediately progressed to full passages was daunting, especially for ESL learners. It seemed that confidence in carrying out this task could be built if students were given a transition period where paraphrasing tasks progressed from sentences to short paragraphs and finally to full passages. This further supported the findings by Lee and Choy (2010) that skills alone did not help students' paraphrasing abilities. Students also perceived they were more confident paraphrasing if they understood the requirements and could find the main points in the passage without difficulty. They seemed to focus on the requirements of the tasks rather than the context and culture of the passage.

Some of the students did not find the paraphrasing skills useful and were unable to apply them when paraphrasing passages. One of the problems constantly mentioned was that they did not have a good command of the English language which hindered their ability to carry out the task. This would support the findings of Orellana and Reynolds (2008) that students with a poor command of the language they were paraphrasing in would have more difficulty carrying out the task effectively.

The type of passage seemed to influence students' comprehension level. This was likely dependent on students' prior knowledge of the subject matter in the passage. The cultural influences did not seem to directly affect the student's ability to paraphrase the passage. Students who were able to comprehend the passage to a certain level were able to lift the main points. This seemed to agree with the findings of Hare and Borchardt (1984) and Westin (2006) that ESL students with less language proficiency tend to paraphrase a passage piecemeal and just extract information from the passage verbatim.

Paraphrasing skills were useful if students could apply them to passages they could adequately comprehend. As such, the contextual settings might not be as important as ensuring that students had the language ability to understand

the passage to be paraphrased. This finding seemed to support research by Johns (1988) that students' comprehension of a passage was important to help them effectively carry out a paraphrasing task. However, this did not support the findings by Orellana and Reynolds (2008) and Yu (2008) that the cultural settings of a passage played an important part in helping students paraphrase. Hence, the cultural setting of a passage was of secondary importance to students' comprehension of a passage when carrying out a paraphrasing task.

RQ2. Were students' perceptions of the paraphrasing skills reflected in their performance in the paraphrasing tests?

In an attempt to answer RQ 2, students' performances in the post and pre-tests were used in the analysis. Table 1 shows a summary of the scores obtained.

Table 1. Results of students' paraphrasing scores

Average Paraphrasing Score	Culturally Unfamiliar Passage (%)	Culturally Familiar Passage (%)
Pre-Test	50	55
Post-Test	60	60

Discussion: RQ2

The results of the paraphrasing test showed a bigger improvement in students' scores for the unfamiliar text than the familiar one. Students paraphrasing the unfamiliar passage had an average ten point increase in their post test scores from fifty points to sixty points. In comparison, students who paraphrased the familiar passage had an average five point increase in their post test scores from fifty points to sixty points. As the readability levels of both passages were the same at grade 8.5, it would imply that the cultural orientation of a passage might only play a secondary role as to how easy it was for students to identify the main points in the passage.

The students were able to paraphrase the unfamiliar passage better because it was easier to identify the main points when compared to the familiar one. This finding did not support research by Orellana and Reynolds (2008) that familiar texts help students perform their paraphrasing tasks better. It rather suggested that another factor influencing students' abilities to paraphrase was their abilities to comprehend the passages. Students were able to understand the unfamiliar passage better than the one that was familiar to them.

Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that using familiar texts did not directly help students improve their paraphrasing skills. However, ensuring that the students understand the requirements of the tasks and using passages that are interesting to students with easy to identify main points as a start will help build confidence. The culture and context of the passage play a secondary role. Also, students' perceptions of their own paraphrasing skills do not seem to accurately reflect their actual skills when paraphrasing. Further research on how teaching strategies can be tailored to suit the needs of ESL learners can be carried out. Another suggestion will be scaffolding the learning of paraphrasing skills by having students paraphrase sentences and then short paragraphs and eventually longer passages. Since the selection of passages for paraphrasing tasks seem to influence the performance of ESL learners, further studies are needed as well. A passage needs to have content and context that are easy for students to understand until they become more proficient with the language.

The strategies that have been used to teach paraphrasing skills to students in the past also need re-examination. Teachers seem to be teaching the strategies without realising that their students are having difficulty applying them. The selection of passages for paraphrasing, usually done by the teacher, could result in students finding the passages uninteresting, especially if they have had no prior knowledge of the topic. Further studies need to be carried out to determine if passages of interest can influence students' performances when paraphrasing, as there are indicators in this study that this could have a greater influence than its cultural orientation.

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APPENDIX A

The Custom of Handshaking

A handshake is a short ritual in which two people grasp each other's right or left hand often accompanied by a brief up and down movement of the grasped hands. Research shows that handshaking was practised as far back as the 2nd century BC. It is believed that it originated during the Roman Empire, when people would grasp each other at the elbow rather than the hand as a gesture of trust, showing that they are not carrying any weapons beneath their sleeves.

The handshake is commonly done upon meeting, greeting, parting, offering congratulations, expressing gratitude or completing an agreement. In sports or other competitive activities, it is also done as a sign of good sportsmanship. Its purpose is to demonstrate goodwill, trust and equality. Men are more likely to shake hands than women. However, in business situations, it is considered the standard greeting for both sexes.

In some cultures, people shake both hands but in most cultures people shake the right hand. In Islam, shaking hands, along with the greeting *Assalamualaikum* (peace be upon you), is a regular greeting. Boy Scouts specifically use a left handshake. Since the right hand is more commonly dominant, the left hand would typically be used in holding a shield; by shaking with the left hand, one is defenceless while trusting the other person who may still be holding a weapon in the right hand.

In the olden days, it was always the most important person, or the strongest in the group, who had to extend the hand. That has changed. Today, anybody at any place and at any time has the right to offer you his hand.

It is believed that when you extend your hand, there are three ways of doing it, palm down, palm vertical and palm up. The palm down way forces the other person to offer palm up, and he can feel in an 'underdog' position. Doing it palm vertical is a generous way to offer a handshake. It sends the signal of cooperation, 'I want to work with you'. Salespeople often offer a handshake palm up. This is a subtle way of indicating the at-your-service aspect of doing business. It says that the other person is in charge.

Your summary must:

- Be in continuous writing (not in note form)
- Not be longer than 80 words, including the 10 words given below

Begin your summary as follows:

A handshake is a short ritual in which two people

APPENDIX B

Hijacking in South Africa

The article describes the way car owners in South Africa have adapted their lifestyles to meet the threat of hijacks. Write an account of what they do to prevent hijacks.

People who live in and around Johannesburg are used to stories of cars being hijacked and it is difficult to find a family that has not been affected by a hijack. Johannesburg is in the Gauteng district and last year in this district alone, 8979 hijackings were reported to the police. That is about 24 a day. Most did not result in death but in more than 80 per cent of cases, hijackers were armed with guns and there was a threat of death.

People drive defensively in Johannesburg. They keep their windows up, their doors locked and skip red lights because any car waiting at an intersection is vulnerable. They are vigilant and careful, and if a suspicious-looking car or character is outside their house, they drive on. If their cars are bumped by other cars on highway, they also drive on because stopping to investigate is too dangerous.

While some hijackings are smooth, quick and polite, some are exceptionally violent and involve hostages and murder. Cars have been taken with babies and children still strapped in the back seat. Because of this, many mothers no longer strap their children into cars. They think it is too risky. If they are at the supermarket, they always pack the groceries into the car before they let the children to get in. They are permanently on their guard.

Many parents prepare their children for such situations as if they were practising fire drill. They tell them, for example, that if hijack takes place, they are to listen to their parents and not the hijackers.

Hijacking is so much a part of daily life that a book was recently published on what to do in the case of a hijack. One radio station even runs a hijack-watch line that describes cars that have been taken and asks motorists to look out for them.

Your summary must:

- Be in continuous writing (not in note form)
- Not be longer than 80 words, including the 10 words given below

Begin your summary as follows:

Car owners in South Africa are so frightened of hijack...

APPENDIX C

Interview questions:

1. What were your experiences when you were attempting to write the paraphrasing tests?
2. What did you have to do to complete the summary writing test?
3. What were your experiences using the paraphrasing skills that you learned? Were these skills something new or something familiar to you?
4. How well did you think you applied the summary writing techniques taught to you in class?
5. What were some of the difficulties you encountered while producing a summary?
6. Which of the two passages did you prefer? Why?
7. What do you see were your strengths and weaknesses when you attempted to complete the task?
8. What were your feelings about the first test when you attempted it? What about the second test?