

Paraphrasing through Poetry

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The secret to successful paraphrasing lies in how it is taught and the material used to help make the learning experience a positive and productive one. Poetry offers promise.

Retelling a story your grandmother told you decades ago seems relatively effortless because of its emotional content. Restating an intriguing anecdote a colleague told in a recent meeting adds spice to your life probably for the same reason. And yet, paraphrasing ideas in a linguistics journal for a paper you are working on may offer a few challenges. If paraphrasing written material is not an easy task in our first language, then just imagine how hard it is for our English language learners.

What does it really mean to paraphrase?

There is the whole conundrum of actually defining the skill of paraphrasing. Our dictionaries are not much help. Let's take a look at three often used online dictionaries and their entries for paraphrasing:

Oxford dictionary

[paraphrase](#)

1. express the meaning of (the writer or speaker of something written or spoken) using different words, especially to achieve greater clarity

Merriam-Webster dictionary

[paraphrase](#)

1. a restatement of a text, passage, or work giving the meaning in another form
2. to say (something that someone else has said or written) using different words

Dictionary.com

[paraphrase](#)

1. a restatement of a text or passage giving the meaning in another form, as for clearness; rewording

The essential problem with these definitions is that they seem to focus on words like "restatement," "using different words," and "another form." The idea of making the text *one's own* or *digesting it* without changing the essence of the original is omitted. This complicates matters for both learners and teachers. These definitions cause students to fixate on "word change" and not on "understanding" the text in question.

In addition to the above, we often ask our students to paraphrase concepts, social realities, or ideologies with which they have had very little, if any, contact. So now, not only are we asking them to participate in a rather complex and daunting skill, but we are asking them to perform it with topics of minimal background knowledge.

We also need to take into account that some ELLs have never even been introduced to paraphrasing. I frequently give questionnaires to my students to fill out in the first week of the term. One of the questions is “How much paraphrasing have you done before?” If the students have been through the levels of my current program, they answer with having had sufficient practice. However, the new students coming directly to the program from their countries often answer as having no or very minimal exposure to paraphrasing.

Multiple steps in effective paraphrasing

How, then, can we address the above issues? First off, I find it best to discuss the whole procedure of paraphrasing with the students early on in the term. We examine the steps of reading the material and understanding it. To successfully understand the reading, we address the importance of thinking and talking about the material (Jensen, 2008; Medina, 2009; Willis, 2006). Thinking and talking about what one reads has three benefits:

- a. developing a sense of control over the material,
- b. assisting students to remember the information longer, and
- c. claiming a sense of ownership of the reading.

Next, we discuss the importance of “making the reading one’s own” by paraphrasing the content. Here, the ideas of personal interpretation are also addressed. That is, in paraphrasing, there is always a personal element from the reader that goes into the paraphrased piece. For example, a quantum physicist will have a slightly different paraphrase of a stanza in a Keats’ poem than a creative writing major. Likewise, a creative writing major will have her own interpretation of a passage from Anita Goel’s work in nanobiophysics compared to a student of nanotechnology or biomedicine.

After adopting the material and digesting it as thoroughly as possible, we move on to the notion of maintaining the essence of the original idea. This step is the most difficult for the students because they need to “own” the material in order to keep the core meaning of the idea or ideas intact.

Lastly, we go over the need to cite the passage in question. I usually use the APA style in class, but I explain to the students that depending on their field of concentration, they will need to learn the specific form of citation for their respective department.

The Paraphrasing Poetry Project

Very first steps

Before introducing the students to paraphrasing poetry, I spend a week on paraphrasing famous one-sentence quotes on a selected topic (e.g. success, failure, happiness, etc.)

and then move on to longer passages of two to three sentences. To immediately require your students to paraphrase full paragraphs is asking a great deal. I have found that following the Finnish education philosophy of “less is more” to be extremely effective in developing my students’ paraphrasing skills (Sahlberg, 2011).

Begin at the beginning: Talk about it

The first step of the Paraphrasing Poetry Project starts with a discussion of poetry: what it is, the different genres, the various perspectives poets take in writing poetry, the messages the poems offer the reader, and the whole idea of feeling the words, phrases, and stanzas of poetry.

Next, I have the students read a short poem in class and go over the following on their own:

- (1) What is the main idea of the poem?
- (2) What does each stanza address?
- (3) What is the setting? What does it represent?
- (4) Who are the characters? What do they represent?
- (5) What is the tone?
- (6) What is the theme?

After the students have thought these questions over, they turn to their neighbor and discuss each one. Lastly, we discuss these as a class. This gives us the opportunity to share ideas, think about various interpretations, and hone the art of critical thinking. The language benefits include listening and speaking practice on a controlled or focused topic and acquiring new vocabulary. But most important, this class discussion gives each student the opportunity to “make the poem come alive” by talking about it. Moreover, the process of reading, thinking, reflecting, and talking about a subject helps greatly in clarifying many of the ideas for the students.

Deepening understanding through multisensory questions

Next, we follow the same “self-partner-group” process in addressing the following multisensory questions:

- (1) If you could associate or assign a color to this poem what would it be and why?
- (2) What color is each stanza and why?
- (3) What tastes, smells, sounds, or tactile feelings do you associate with the poem?
- (4) How does each stanza make you feel? What emotions come to mind?
- (5) Who does the poem remind you of and why? (Randolph, 2014)

After discussing this last set of multisensory questions as a class, I have the students pair up and verbally paraphrase each stanza of the poem. This gives them the chance to discuss the details and exchange their ideas, insights, and feelings. Once they have verbally paraphrased the poem, I have them write down their “paraphrased version” of the poem.

Reviewing paraphrased poems

Next, the students write their partner-produced paraphrased poems on the board. This gives us the unique opportunity to read, review, critique, and analyze each one individually, emphasizing the ideas of “constructive” criticism, “energetic” support, and “compassionate” honesty as we review the students’ work.

In our review process, we address the following:

- (1) Have the paraphrased poems maintained the essential ideas of the original?
- (2) Are the poems a “unique variation” of the original?
- (3) What new words, phrases, or ideas do the new poems include? Do they change or maintain the meaning of the original?

Below are two recent examples of paraphrased poems from an advanced writing class.

Figure 1. Paraphrased Poem. This highlights the original poem and the paraphrased versions by two students.

Original poem (Randolph, 2011, p. 80)	Paraphrased poem (Byeongdeok Jeong)	Paraphrased Poem (Jiabao Wen)
<p>Heaven</p> <p>Lucky humans experience Heaven before Earth;</p> <p>It’s Mother’s miracle Womb before Birth!</p>	<p>Paradise</p> <p>Usually, A nice and amiable person lives in paradise Before they come to the world;</p> <p>It’s the amazing Mother’s belly Before The first cry!</p>	<p>Paradise</p> <p>A fortunate person Lives in paradise Before touching the sunshine.</p> <p>It’s that amazing Harbor of refuge Before The first cry!</p>

The students, Byeongdeok Jeong and Jiabao Wen, worked on the initial paraphrase together in class, as is apparent from the similarity in the last two lines in the second

stanza. It is obvious, however, that the two continued to revise their paraphrased poems individually as can be seen by the distinctions in the beginning stanzas.

During the class critique, this paraphrased poem generated positive responses; the students felt both Byeongdeok and Jiabao had done a nice job paraphrasing the poem in that they kept the original idea while simultaneously creating their own versions. The students liked the variation of the last line from “Birth!” to “The first cry!” They also liked Jiabao’s phrases of “Before touching the sunshine” and “Harbor of refuge.” The class pointed out, though, that while Byeongdeok kept the idea of “Mother” in his version, Jiabao left it out and would need to revise that for her final draft.

No one caught the use of the singular subjects in the students’ first stanzas (“A nice and amiable person” and “A fortunate person”) as opposed to the plural in the original. But those would be additional comments made on the students’ papers.

In general, I think we can see how effective this is in terms of reading, understanding, thinking about the topic, and making the material one’s own while maintaining the essential idea of the poem.

What do students think about paraphrasing practice with poetry?

To gauge the student reactions to this project, I asked my advanced writing class (n=14) to rate the following two statements: (1) I believe that paraphrasing poetry is helping me to understand the skills of paraphrasing and (2) I think other instructors should use this method. The students were asked to answer with (a) strongly agree, (b) agree, (c) disagree, or (d) strongly disagree. The results were inspiring. With respect to the first statement, six “strongly agreed,” eight “agreed,” and no one “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.” Statement two yielded similar results: Five “strongly agreed,” seven “agreed,” and no one “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed.”

The final segment of the survey included a written statement from the students, detailing their perceived benefits of paraphrasing poetry. The students were told to be honest and open. If they felt that they were not necessarily benefiting from this method, they should express as much. However, there were no such comments. All the students from the advanced writing class felt that they were indeed improving in a number of areas by using the paraphrasing poetry method. Table 1 outlines student survey responses.

Table 1. Student Reported Benefits of Paraphrasing Poetry. N=14

Reported benefits of paraphrasing poetry	Number of students
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me write clearer	3
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me acquire new vocabulary	12

Paraphrasing Poetry helps me write my own poems	6
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me become creative	6
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me understand the readings more	4
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me develop an interest in English	1
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me understand grammar better	3
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me improve my “feeling” for writing	3
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me acquire more synonyms	1
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me improve my paraphrasing skills	2
Paraphrasing Poetry helps me exercise my brain	2
Paraphrasing Poetry challenges me to think deeper	3

What does the research say about paraphrasing practice with poetry?

In the introduction, I claimed that one significant problem that is often perpetuated by English language teachers is the common practice of giving students topics to paraphrase of which they have very little background knowledge or interest. If the topics are abstract or unrelated to their current condition, the whole idea of paraphrasing may become even more arduous. Furthermore, we must always keep in mind that we are still at the stage in many of our classes whereby we are simply helping to develop these skills in our learners’ psyches. We are giving them maps and tools to work with, and if these maps and tools are cumbersome and unappealing, then the whole experience will be deemed unhelpful and pointless.

Poetry is often viewed as difficult and abstract, but we know that there are many poems out there that are personal, concrete, and easily speak to the reader. So, it is up to the instructor to use poems that are, on the one hand, challenging, but, on the other, personal and endearing.

Recent research in neuroscience (Damasio, 1994; Davidson & Begley, 2013; Jensen, 2008; LeDoux, 1996; Medina, 2009) supports the use of poetry in paraphrasing. I make this claim based on three significant factors that relate to learning: emotions, senses and personal involvement or ownership.

Although emotions are often excluded in the learning environment, the neuroscience community urges us to incorporate them in every lesson and in every activity. An example of this is Richard J. Davidson of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. After decades of research at the Waisman Center, he argues that “emotions... are central to the functions of the brain and to the life of the mind” (Davidson & Begley, 2013, p. xi). Long time brain-based learning advocate, Eric Jensen, finds emotions to be a crucial element in education. “Emotions are a critical source of information for learning, and they ought to be used to inform us rather than considered something to subdue and ignore” (2008, p. 90).

The senses are also a potent tool for learning. According to John Medina, a developmental molecular biologist at the University of Washington, “Our senses evolved to work together—vision influencing hearing, for example—which means that we learn best if we stimulate several senses at once” (2009, p. 219).

Any time we become personally involved in learning and take ownership in the process, we are usually much more engaged, and, at the same time, successful. Judy Willis, M.D., is a neurologist and educator. In her studies, she has found that one of the best ways to get students to connect with both the learning process and the material is to get the students to “personalize” it (2006).

Incorporating emotion, interest and the senses in paraphrasing

As we have seen above, the paraphrasing of poetry includes all three of these factors. The poems themselves elicit emotional appeal and interest, and the use of the senses is pivotal in the pre-analysis of paraphrasing. And the fact that the students are essentially creating their “own” poems drives home the whole idea of ownership and uniquely personalizing the material. I cannot claim that paraphrasing poetry is the perfect panacea for our classrooms. I can claim, however, that it is effective, helpful, and that it engages the students at a refreshing level of interest and enthusiasm. Moreover, this method exemplifies the true process of taking a written collection of ideas, turning it around and making it one’s own while staying true to the essential meaning of the original.

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