

A Paraphrasing Game for Intermediate EFL Learners

by AIDA KOÇI McLEOD

How can a teacher get students to show true comprehension of a written text, rather than answer questions with mere repetition of words from the original? This is a difficulty for the teacher because many English as a foreign language (EFL) learners have little or no anglophone cultural background. They need three prerequisites in order to achieve and demonstrate real comprehension:

- sufficient vocabulary
- general world-context knowledge
- mental agility

It's possible that none of these have been acquired—especially by younger learners. How can learners be taught all three in a time-efficient way? English-language courses can vary in length and intensiveness, but no course can give EFL learners the years of immersion in anglophone language and cultural context that they have missed.

One way to tackle the challenge is to focus systematically on paraphrasing itself, as a skill to be learned and practiced.

PARAPHRASING

Paraphrasing is a productive exercise for students at the intermediate level because it develops capability in both directions: the cognitive capability to comprehend and the linguistic capability to express ideas autonomously—that is, without needing to copy from the original or from a model. Along the way, students acquire knowledge of new lexical items, intensively, in a meaningful context.

However, for students at this level, paraphrasing is a difficult and high-level skill.

How can we get them to acquire and practice using it?

There is no short path to the goal of building up the necessary cultural background knowledge and world-context perspective that nonnative-speaker learners lack. One effective method is to use quality resources carefully chosen to be relatable for the age group, in a cycle of patient and regular exposure (typically presentation by the teacher), discussion, and explanation.

To implement this idea, I developed an interactive paraphrasing game that I use for a portion of every lesson, usually as a warm-up activity. The game has three levels: single words, then single sentences, and finally paragraphs. It can be played orally or with written responses. The content focus and the difficulty level can be controlled by the teacher, according to the students' level of English and their moment on the timeline of their learning.

The game is adaptable, extensible, and scalable either up or down. It requires the teacher to prepare a model answer paraphrase for each item of target text, and this takes some time and effort. However, the game can be kept fairly short, around five to ten minutes for a single student's turn plus feedback at Level One, depending on how many items are used. This means the preparation should not prove too onerous—about 30 minutes of preparation time per game should be sufficient.

The items of target text can be reused with future classes, and eventually built up into a sizeable item-bank, which saves time. When the game is scaled up to fill a whole lesson, as

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I have sometimes done, the preparation time will increase proportionally. However, with most learners it is probably not a good idea to play the game for 45 minutes or a whole hour, because it demands a lot of concentration, and they will become too tired to perform well by the end. Short, sharp stimulating bursts are the best.

The regular use of the game format provides an opportunity to model and practice comprehension, to build content-area knowledge, and to develop higher-level vocabulary and thinking skills.

Here is the game setup, in a nutshell. The text items that you use in the game can be taken from your course’s content area, from the set text for your class at the time, from contemporary news stories, or from out-of-copyright children’s literature. A useful source is the website of the Full Text Archive (www.fulltextarchive.com/), which has a large library of downloadable children’s classics in PDF or e-book format. It is from there that I took the text of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, which I used for some of the examples in the tables below.

THE “WORD RITE” PARAPHRASING GAME

A note on the game name: it’s an anagram of “Reword it,” itself a paraphrase of the

instruction “Paraphrase it.” More-advanced students will appreciate the pun on *rite* (meaning a type of ritual) and *rite* as the colloquial misspelling of *right*.

Instructions for students

The game has three levels, of increasing difficulty. It starts with single words (Level One), progresses to single sentences (Level Two), and finally moves to short texts, but not longer than a paragraph (Level Three).

In groups of three, players identify themselves as Player A, Player B, and Player T (Timekeeper and Evaluator).

- Player A will read or speak a short text.
- Player B has to paraphrase Player A’s prompt within a specified time. For Level One, the time limit is 30 seconds; for Level Two, it is one minute; and for Level Three, it is three minutes. In Level Three, Player B is allowed to make notes.
- Player T has the task, apart from calling “Halt” when time is up, of deciding how close Player B’s paraphrase came to the meaning of the original and how much of it was *not* copied or repeated, but properly paraphrased. Player T awards full or partial points for Player B’s performance.

Prompt from Player A	Valid response from Player B
disappear	vanish
ocean	a sea, only bigger
crooked	not straight
mountain	a high place in the landscape, higher than a hill

Table 1. Sample prompts and possible valid responses for Level One (words)

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- The teacher can keep score, or with larger classes, the students in each group keep track of their scores.
- Rotate the roles and repeat until all three players have played all three parts.

With some groups, especially with younger or less advanced learners, it is advisable for the teacher to play the part of the Timekeeper and Evaluator (Player T), which is a demanding task. I have found, however, that in many cases, students love taking a turn at being Player T; it shifts the centre of gravity away from the teacher as dominant authority and towards the student team as an autonomous collective entity. In any case, you need to have a prepared set of model answers ready, against which to measure the relative accuracy and completeness of Player B's paraphrases. Player T will be given a copy of the model answers to refer to. Of course, there may be other ways of paraphrasing that are also acceptable; as students become familiar with the game, they can become better at judging Player B's responses. This is where the game can develop mental agility, mentioned earlier in the article.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 show sample prompts and possible valid responses for Levels One, Two, and Three, respectively.

OUTCOMES

This is a fun game, and it is challenging, too, which is never a bad thing. Your students will enjoy playing the paraphrasing game, and you can expect them to plunge into it with enthusiasm. The individual performances

may vary in fluency and accuracy, but with an overall rising trend in successful paraphrasing over time.

Achieving vocabulary expansion and improvement of world-context knowledge is a slow and necessarily incremental process. However, I have seen evidence from students' responses that they notched up a couple of increments with each round of the paraphrasing game. To consolidate the learning, I asked students to take notes on new lexical items after each round. A useful follow-up activity is to give them a quiz on the new vocabulary. Where necessary, you can interpolate mini-explanations of cultural-context and world-knowledge references.

This intensive and regular work on the complex skill of paraphrasing helped me enormously in my dual aim of (a) getting to know the specific gaps in my students' knowledge of English words, phrases, and usage and (b) helping them to go beyond mimetism and thus achieve greater relative autonomy as language users.

WORD RITE AS AN ONLINE ACTIVITY

For teachers who are working remotely, the Word Rite game works well as an online activity. As long as you and your students have computers and Internet access, you can establish a split-screen video conference, using just about any of the popular free conferencing apps, and play the game online. Moreover, if your school has a learning management system, you can put your teams of three players in separate virtual rooms

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Prompt from Player A	Valid response from Player B
Their house was small, for the lumber to build it had to be carried by wagon many miles.	Because the wood to build their house needed to be brought on a cart from a long distance away, the house was not large.
It was very dark, and the wind howled horribly around her, but Dorothy found she was riding quite easily.	Despite the pitch blackness and the terrible roaring of the wind, Dorothy felt comfortable as she flew along.
Dorothy wept bitterly at the passing of her hope to get home to Kansas again.	When she realized she had no hope of returning to Kansas, Dorothy was cruelly disappointed and burst into tears.

Table 2. Sample prompts and possible valid responses for Level Two (sentences)

Prompt from Player A	Valid response from Player B
Uncle Henry never laughed. He worked hard from morning till night and did not know what joy was. He was gray also, from his long beard to his rough boots, and he looked stern and solemn, and rarely spoke.	There was no pleasure or fun in life for Uncle Henry, an old gray man with a gray beard and clumsy gray boots who spent the whole day just working. He kept silent almost all the time and always looked serious.
When Aunt Em came there to live she was a young, pretty wife. The sun and wind had changed her, too. They had taken the sparkle from her eyes and left them a sober gray; they had taken the red from her cheeks and lips, and they were gray also. She was thin and gaunt, and never smiled now.	Aunt Em had been greatly changed by the harsh weather since arriving there as a new bride with bright eyes, rosy cheeks, and red lips. She had lost all her youthful beauty and aged into a skinny, gray, unsmiling figure.
I do not know where Kansas is, for I have never heard that country mentioned before. But tell me, is it a civilized country?	I've never heard of Kansas, so I have no idea where it is, but I'd like to know whether the people there are cultured and polite.

Table 3. Sample prompts and possible valid responses for Level Three (paragraphs)

(breakout rooms) so that any number of subgroups can play the game simultaneously. This is a great way to keep the whole class active, rather than having just three students playing at a time. Additionally, as students become more advanced, they can choose texts on their own; in fact, choosing items for their classmates to paraphrase can be

a productive out-of-class assignment in preparation for the game.

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