

rePhrase™

The world's first automatic text leveler

A Venture Pitch to the Venture Analysts
of ETEC 522

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Introduction – The Problem

Before I began to think about educational ventures, I went about my life as a school teacher and educational technology masters student. The bulk of my current teaching time has me teaching English Language Arts, Social Studies, and technology to intermediate students. One of the most difficult and challenging things about my classes is the wide range of reading levels in one room or grade. In my current eighth-grade class, for example, my students have a range of reading abilities from about second or third grade to above eighth grade. About 20% of my students have special allowances made for them based on their literacy skills. One of my colleagues has a class where that percentage is closer to 90% - forcing them to teach several different things several different ways to their class – not a very efficient scenario. Many of my peers also have immigrant students, placed into a grade by age rather than by their level of functioning in English. Finding ways to reach all of our students (and appropriately challenge each one), especially in the content-based subjects, is quite difficult. Students have a very hard time working with information if they cannot even consume it or take it in.

This is what sparked the fire of rePhrase.

What is rePhrase? It is the world's first automatic text leveller and enabler of adaptive text. The idea itself is relatively simple. rePhrase will take text of a certain reading level and adapt it (without changing meaning as much as possible) to make it readable for almost any reader. Taking existing school texts and eliminating the need for many differentiated materials makes things easier on teachers, students, and school budgets.



How will it work?

rePhrase will be distributed to electronic devices by disk or download / app.

First, rePhrase determines the reading level of a body of electronic text that someone wants to read. Once that has been established, the reader will alter the difficulty with a sliding scale at the top of the interface. Once a new reading level has been chosen, the program will use the abilities of a thesaurus and grammar check to change the words of a text without changing its overall meaning or hurting its sentence flow. As students grow in ability, they can adapt or change the difficulty of the text to suit themselves. For special words that have no synonymous replacement, there will also be a dictionary feature that displays simple pop-up definitions over a selected trouble word.

What is the Market?

rePhrase was invented with students in upper elementary and above in mind, including higher education. After the initial idea was born, however, many other future / potential markets for it started to emerge as well - especially people learning English as an additional language or adult learners. Essentially, anyone who wishes to make what they read suit them better is a potential user of rePhrase – potentially billions of users.



Types of Offerings

rePhrase does not deliver content – it simply allows readers to more easily access pre-existing content. Therefore, it is more of a service type of offering – but a service that would be used repeatedly. Being that it runs with existing technology and does so somewhat in the background while someone is reading, this piece of software may also be thought of as a tool or piece of infrastructure.

rePhrase will launch with two purchase options: a single-user download which allows users to access its abilities on any device they own (computer, tablet, smartphone, etc.), as well as a discount-rate site license marketed to schools (K-12 will be the initial focus, but schools teaching English as an additional language, higher learning, etc. will be offered the same rate). Pricing has not yet been set.

To ensure that users are not one-purchase customers, rePhrase will be offered as a yearly license. Also, upgrades or updates may be purchased for a small fee to do a variety of things:

- Focused activities on word groups (verbs, adjectives, etc) – great for mobile devices
- Specialized language rephrasing – for example, the simplification of legal jargon
- Versions of rePhrase for other languages

Another potential offering that rePhrase is looking into is a social / global one. We are interested in becoming a social enterprise by helping people around the world access useful information that will better their personal literacy level and affect their life



(and the planet) in a positive way. We see this happening as a potential bundled app with a venture like that of UbiSlate which aims to put the Internet and tablets into the hands of everyone in the world (The Canadian Press, 2011).

Who is the Buyer?

It is projected that most of rePhrase's initial revenue will come from site licenses in K-12 schools, as well as schools (particularly foreign ones with more students) teaching English as an additional language. This means that most buyers will either be individual school administrators or a consultant of an entire school district (in the case of a multi-school purchase). Secondary revenue streams will come from disk/app sales to individuals at places of higher learning or the general public.

Global Target

rePhrase will be available online globally at launch, and will only be available in English at start-up. According to the cube analysis of ETEC 522, the five potential main targets for rePhrase will be, in this projected order: wired Anglophone countries, Asian countries with quality Internet, European countries with language skills, European countries requiring translation, and regions with poor quality Internet service.



Competition

At the moment, there is no direct program that is competition for rePhrase. It is a truly original venture; a new intellectual property. The programs which come closest are those that are basic text-to-speech aids (Kurzweil, ReadPlease, etc.), which allow readers to hear a text they are using, but are having it read to them at a reading level that is perhaps too far from their own. They do not adapt or alter the text to suit the reader.

Without rePhrase, students must be given alternate materials – books different (perhaps entirely) from their classmates. rePhrase is designed to work within existing classrooms, while allowing students to read higher-interest materials and have more independence as a reader.

Testing

Aside from looking at rePhrase through the last six sections (the cube analysis), I have applied two other tests to it to show its worth to potential investors. The first, from 2003, is the SECTIONS model from Bates and Poole.

- Students - rePhrase is appropriate for almost any students, as it allows them to use content at their own level. Being a technological tool, it is also appropriate for today's 21st-Century learners.
- Ease of use – the program will basically have two functions: a sliding difficulty scale and mouse-over word definitions



- Costs – although not finalized, the goal of rePhrase is to price it so that it will make its profits through mass sales / use rather than a premium price point.
- Teaching & Learning – rePhrase will allow teachers to better teach common content (or specialized content, too), and will allow students to function more independently in their own classroom. Also, since it uses technological devices, it aids the growth of 21st-Century skills and allows for a new approach to differentiated learning.
- Interactions – students will be able to interact with text at their own level – there are no other social / enhanced features like collaboration or embedded video
- Organizational issues – as long as someone can download an app, .exe file, or load a disk, they should have no problem using the program.
- Novel – this is a unique, new venture, still in its pre-launch stage
- Speed – a teacher or student could start using this as soon as they load the program.

The second assessment tool is that of De Coster and Butler (2005). In the table on the following page, I compiled their eight criteria, the suggested weighting for each, my scores, and the reasons for those scores.



Criteria	Weighting	Score	Reason
Technological / commercial risk	X 3	2	An idea only, but with principles established
Level of product innovation	X 2	10	Very innovative satisfies a well-known market need
How it satisfies a market sector	X 1	4	A potential, general market has been outlined – no client feedback yet
Timeliness	X 1	7	Definite growth in the area of the innovation which will support establishment of a new product
Longevity / repeat orders	X 0.5	10	A viable business may be built on a single product initially. Further added value or complementary items are clearly identifiable for future growth
Family of products	X 0.5	10	Similar products satisfying this market sector have been established for a period of years and will definitely be required for the foreseeable future. Once established the product may lead to repeat purchases
Entrepreneurial Background	X 1	5	Some evidence of successful innovation, but not necessarily a financial success. Applicant(s) provide some confidence that technical expertise exists
Protecting competitive advantage	X 1	3	Provisional patent only. Patent possible (unpublished)
Total score: 55 Scaled product score: 56 (weighted scores multiplied by one another and divided by 15,000) (a score of 50 or more in each area indicates a product strong enough to consider funding)			

Market Status

The need for this product exists in schools and homes, and the current app market in North America is experiencing a lot of growth (“Seeing the apps...”, 2011). For some foreign markets, availability in other languages would help to expand rePhrase’s market. Not just for learning English, but for improving literacy rates in other languages as well. That being said, the facts that roughly one billion people are learning English right now and that about 20% of the world speaks at least some basic English are very encouraging for a company that helps people to read.



There are some other favourable statistics that could play in rePhrase's favour as well. If current trends continue, more than 4.1 million students in the American K-12 market will be enrolled in cyber or virtual schooling by 2015. A conservative estimate says that, by 2015, over 4.5 million children will be schooled at home, and at least 75% of them will be online. This represents over 3.3 million individual users and potential license sales, separate from site / school licenses (Ambient, 2011).

Conclusions

As soon as the idea came into my head, I wanted this program for my own use. It would make my job easier, and I believe it would help students to grow in the areas of reading as well as background knowledge, which is also important. rePhrase can allow students to read and potentially understand texts that may normally be out of their reach. It is like their own personal Lev Vygotsky, pulling them up into their own zone of proximal reading development.

Bates and Poole's SECTIONS model looked favourably upon it, and the (more objective) De Coster and Butler analysis also gave a result of rePhrase being a worthwhile investment. Teachers, students, and people outside of any education system can all benefit from this program. Invest today and join the team before the project launches!



Self-Evaluation

As much as I think this program is an overall winner, it (or the pitch) definitely has some pros and cons (or potential challenges) to mull over:

- Pros
- original and innovative
 - simple design / task that the program executes
 - has a repeating revenue stream, as well as add-ons / new languages
 - not predicted to be very expensive to start up
 - easy to get to consumers, and very little cost for materials
 - potentially massive market
- Cons
- unsure if any company has an exclusive patent on things like grammar check, reading level assessment, synonym generators, or any other component that rePhrase would require
 - requires electronic devices, which may not exist in many of the areas where this program would be needed most
 - requires electronic texts, but could see it running on scanned / viewed / photographed text on a mobile device
 - it would reach the most people on cell phones, which would require a bit of a different program than a version for tablets / computers / laptops.
 - lacking more hard numbers / concrete evidence (which is hard to come up with for something when it's a new idea)



It has been something rather difficult to research because of its originality. My main worries / personal criticisms have been the chance that existing patents on parts of its functions / abilities may stymie the whole venture. More research is needed here. It is also just an idea at the moment, so it is nearly impossible to test or get feedback from. The only feedback I have received from a couple of people so far was to not post it online for everyone to see, lest someone snatch an idea – which is somewhat flattering. With a bit more research, polish, and focus, this excellent idea could have a pitch to match and really attract some investors.

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www.rephrase.ca (coming soon)