

Paraphrasing in Academic Writing of L2 Learners: Strategies, Challenges, and Pedagogical Implications

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ABSTRACT

Paraphrasing is a very important skill in academic writing. This study aims to explore the learners' paraphrasing strategies and the challenges they encounter in paraphrasing as novice writers in academic writing. The participants were 53 students who studied English academic writing. The students' paraphrasing source sentence task was collected and analysed, examining the strategies the students relied on. They also responded to a set of questionnaires enquiring about challenges they encountered when completing the paraphrasing task. The analysis of the students' paraphrasing task showed that vocabulary substitution together with the changing order of sentences was the most commonly used strategy while the strategy of vocabulary substitution together with changing word order and changing word class was the least practised by the students. The areas of challenge in their paraphrasing included the students' limited vocabulary knowledge, the inappropriate use of vocabulary in context, and inadequate understanding of the reading text. Pedagogical activities that can help improve the students' paraphrasing skill were presented in this study. The findings provide useful insights into teaching paraphrasing skills which can help the teachers of academic writing better train their students in paraphrasing.

Keywords: Paraphrasing in academic writing, novice writers, Thai learners of English

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is an important part of learning for students in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The important aim of the courses is to familiarise the students with the styles of academic writing. Among other academic writing skills, paraphrasing is one area that should be promoted for the students as paraphrasing can help them to refrain from directly copying from source texts without crediting the writer of the original text, or plagiarism behaviour (Pecorari, 2001).

In L2 academic writing, paraphrasing has received little attention. Often, it is considered a subsumed part of summary writing (Hyland, 2000). Martiarini (2018) reported that L2 paraphrasing is one of the problems that L2 students face in reading academic courses. There is a need to examine this area of academic writing to look closely at what the students encounter in their paraphrasing practice. The present research was carried out with the aim to explore what paraphrasing strategies were used by the students who were learning academic writing and the challenges they encountered in paraphrasing academic texts.

1.1 Research Objectives

The study examined how the L2 students performed in paraphrasing academic texts, offering a closer look at students' challenges in successful paraphrasing in academic writing. The findings from the present study can provide useful insights for teaching and learning paraphrasing of L2 students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The objectives of the present study were 1) to explore the paraphrasing strategies used by the learners, and 2) to examine the challenges they encountered in paraphrasing the academic texts. Related literature and research were reviewed and are included in this section.

2.1 Paraphrasing and L2 Academic Writing Students

Paraphrasing is part of the academic writing lessons. Campbell (1998) defines paraphrasing as the activity in that writers "use different phrasing and wording to express a particular passage that was originally written or spoken by someone else in order to blend the other's idea smoothly into one's own writing" (p. 86). Similarly, Uemlianin (2000) offers the other definition of paraphrasing as "the reproduction of the information content and structure of the source text" (p. 349). In paraphrasing, the writer rewrites individual sentences using some new words and grammatical structure.

Paraphrasing is a skill that involves both reading and writing (McGinley, 1992); the students need to comprehend the reading source as the first step toward successful paraphrasing. Yamada (2003) states that students are required to engage in the action of generating meaningful reconstruction of what they have understood from the reading. In her view, paraphrasing can be a good learning activity for the L2 learners to practice reading the original L2 texts and writing to express the message by relying on their own words and/or structure. Thus, paraphrasing is believed to improve both the reading and writing skills of L2 learners.

2.2 Paraphrasing Practices of L2 Students

The scholars have examined the paraphrasing of novice and expert L2 writers and found that their paraphrasing can vary in terms of how much work they put into their paraphrasing. Scholars viewed that their paraphrasing can be ranged from superficial paraphrasing and substantial paraphrasing, generally based on the extent to which the students use the words or grammatical structure in the original texts (Rogi, 1999; Oshima and Hogue, 1999; Yamada, 2003; Keck, 2006; Shi, 2012).

Rogi (1999) defines superficial paraphrasing as the one in which the writer makes minor modifications to the original/source text, relying on word substitutions, deletion of words, or rearranging of sentence structures, and their paraphrasing usually contains a long string from the source text. Additionally, Oshima and Hogue (1999) add that paraphrasing is categorised as an unacceptable paraphrase if the writer uses the same words and grammatical structures as the resource.

Yamada (2003) describes substantial or effective paraphrasing as the one that usually involves inferential thinking, in which the writers form a conclusion based on statements in the original text. The writers may borrow only the important words related to the topic and use other different wording and structure in constructing their paraphrased version.

Based on the same principle of the extent to which the writer uses words and structure in the original text, Keck (2006) classifies paraphrasing into four types: “near copy”, “minimal revision”, “moderate revision”, and “substantial revision”. She emphasises that the beginning academic writers, including L2 students, may rely more on the “near copy” strategy. She also argues that some students’ paraphrasing can be minimal in the beginning. However, it shows the attempts of the student to paraphrase the texts. Over time, it is assumed that they can develop their paraphrasing skill.

2.3 Related Research

In this session, the related studies were reviewed and relevant research findings were presented.

Liao & Tseng (2010) found that the participants both at postgraduates and undergraduates levels failed to produce an acceptable paraphrase. There were many reasons contributing to this finding, including less explicit learning of paraphrasing, lack of practice in paraphrasing, and the influence of citation which allows the possibility of not paraphrasing in their reports or papers. The study concluded that in order to help the students improve their paraphrasing, their English proficiency needs to develop, and their awareness of the importance of paraphrasing should be raised.

Jahić (2011) examined the incorporation of source texts in student essays. The results of the study showed a high rate of inappropriate textual borrowing practice in student texts. She suggested that longer hours of teaching paraphrasing explicitly by the teachers can help the students overcome the problem.

Mira and Fatimah’s (2020) study showed that just under half of students’ paraphrases in their study were categorised as minimal revision. Moreover, more than half of the students’ paraphrases were classified as somewhat inappropriate when their work did not correspond to the good standard of paraphrasing. The participants in their study also reported that students did not have a clear understanding of the concept of paraphrasing because most of their understanding of paraphrasing was not supported by a concrete example.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

53 undergraduate students who were studying English academic writing participated in this study. They appeared to be novices in academic writing because they were taking their first course of academic writing and had not written or published formal writing work.

3.2 Data Collection

The data were collected from two sources: students’ written work and the questionnaire after the students did paraphrasing exercises and received feedback. The students’ paraphrasing task was collected from a quiz in the academic writing class. Their paraphrased version of the original sentences was marked and analyzed for the strategies the students used. The students’ paraphrase was also used as a basis for the construction of the questionnaire items. One week after they completed the paraphrasing task, the students were given feedback on how well they did in paraphrasing. After that, they were asked to complete a short online questionnaire in their first language, reflecting on what difficulties they faced when paraphrased, how satisfied they were with their paraphrasing performance, and their self-study outside the classroom.

4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

4.1 Data Analysis

The interest of this research was in the paraphrasing strategies and challenges of L2 learners when they paraphrase academic texts. The students' paraphrasing was analysed, based on paraphrasing techniques that were adapted mainly from Keck (2006), Bailey (2015), and Sowton and Hewings (2013). The strategies were classified into 5 categories: 1) minimal (one) substitution, 2) multiple substitutions, 3) changing word order, 4) the combination of word substitution and changing word order, and 5) the combination of word substitution, changing word order and changing word class. The numbers of the students who were observed to use each of the strategic categories were tallied. The students' responses about the paraphrasing challenges in the questionnaire were collected, counted for the frequency and percentage, and presented in the following section.

4.2 Results

In this study, data were collected from two sources: the students' paraphrasing task and a set of questionnaires, aiming to explore two areas of students' paraphrasing practice: their paraphrasing strategies and the challenges they encountered when completing the paraphrasing task.

4.2.1 Paraphrasing Strategies

The students were asked to rephrase the original sentence of "Women are more likely than men to use politeness strategies in their speech" which was part of the research findings of Brown (1980). Their paraphrases were analysed to observe the strategies they used. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Paraphrasing strategies employed by the students

Strategy	No. of Students	Percentage	Example
Minimal substitution	7	13.21%	<i>... women are more <u>probable</u> than men to use politeness strategies in their speech.</i>
Multiple substitutions	13	24.53%	<i>...women are more <u>probable</u> than men to use <u>courtesy</u> strategies in their speech.</i>
Changing word order	9	16.98%	<i>... the politeness strategies in the speech were used <u>by women</u> <u>more</u> than men.</i>
Word substitution and changing word order	22	41.51%	<i>...women <u>have more mildness</u> in their speech <u>than men</u>.</i>
Word substitution, changing word order and changing word class	2	3.77%	<i>... women <u>tend to</u> use more <u>polite speaking skills</u> than men.</i>
Total	53	100	

The data in Table 1 shows that the strategy that 41.51% of the students relied on was the combination of word substitution together with changing word order when paraphrasing. They appeared to replace at least one word in the original text with another and, at the same time, they managed to change the order of word(s) in the sentences. The second most used strategy was multiple substitutions (24.55% of the students), in which the students replaced more than one

word in the sentences without changing the word order or grammatical structure of the original sentences. The strategy that was used the least by the students (3.77%) was the combination of word substitution, changing word order, and changing word class.

In general, academic writing students are encouraged to use multiple strategies to paraphrase successfully and avoid plagiarism. It was found that less than half of students (45.28%) used more than one strategy in paraphrasing the original sentences. However, more than half of the students (54.72 %) still relied on one paraphrasing strategy at a time.

4.2.2 Paraphrasing Challenges for L2 Students

There are two sources of data that inform about the students' challenges in paraphrasing academic texts: the questionnaire responses and the mistakes observed in the students' paraphrasing practice. The findings from both sources of data are presented in this section. The students' responses to the questionnaire are reported in Table 2 and the mistakes the students made in their paraphrasing task are also exemplified in the paragraphs that follow.

Table 2 Paraphrasing challenges encountered by the students

Paraphrasing challenges	No. of Students	Percentage
Limited knowledge of vocabulary	40	75.5%
Use of vocabulary in an inappropriate context	34	64.2%
Incorrect parts of speech	24	45.3%
Incorrect word order in sentences	26	49.1%
Changing the meaning of the original texts	24	45.3%
Inappropriate tenses	23	43.4%
Inadequate understanding of the original texts	30	56.60%

Table 2 shows the number and the percentage of students who reported facing certain challenges in paraphrasing task completion. There are three areas of challenges encountered by a number of students, including having limited knowledge of vocabulary (75.50%), use of vocabulary in an inappropriate context (64.20%), and inadequate understanding of the original texts (56.60%). Moreover, just under half of the students reported paraphrasing challenges in using incorrect word order in sentences (49.10%), using incorrect parts of speech (45.3%), changing the meaning of the original text (45.3%), and using inappropriate tenses in their paraphrases (43.4%). The students' performance in paraphrasing the original text "Women are more likely than men to use politeness strategies in their speech" (Brown, 1980) was analyzed, and the observations of the students' paraphrasing mistakes that appear to illustrate the challenges the students reported in the questionnaire are presented below.

- i. Incorrect parts of speech
 ...women tend to speak more gentle than men.
- ii. Changing meaning in the paraphrased version
 ...men are more likely to be tricked by women who use politeness in the speech.
- iii. Vocabulary in an inappropriate context
 ...men are lower than women to use politeness strategies in their speech.
- iv. Incorrect word order in sentences
 ...woman use soft skills in their speech more than men.

5. DISCUSSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTION

5.1 Discussion

The present study found that L2 students in academic writing appeared to rely on certain paraphrase strategies more than the others. They were found to use word substitution together with changing the order of words in the sentences and multiple substitutions for words in the sentences more often than the other strategies. It can be a good practice when the students have a chance to practice paraphrasing texts using various strategies at the same time or do more than just minimal changes in their paraphrasing practice. However, more than half of the students (54.74%) relied on a single strategy at a time, especially when only one or two words in the sentence were substituted by the others or when only the order of words in the sentences was changed and most of the words of the original text were kept. This practice is described by Howard as patch-writing in which the writer “copies from a source text and then deletes some words, altering grammatical structures, or plugging in one synonym for another (1999, p. 18). Keck, (2006) describes this act as “near copy” and this minimal change of the original texts in paraphrasing practice needs attention both from the teachers and the students themselves.

The student’s responses to the questionnaire showed that the important challenges in paraphrasing for them which were rated by a high percentage of the participants included 1) limited knowledge of vocabulary, 2) the use of vocabulary in an inappropriate context, and 3) inadequate understanding of the original texts. Moreover, a number of students reported they found paraphrasing challenging in other areas, including the use of incorrect word order in paraphrasing, the use of incorrect parts of speech, changing the meaning of the original texts after paraphrasing, and using inappropriate tenses. These reported challenges are important to pedagogical consideration in teaching paraphrasing in academic texts for L2 learners. Similar findings of challenges or difficulties in paraphrasing were found in previous studies (Sunjaya, 2021; Dung, 2010; Khairunnisa, Gatot, and Surmiyati, 2014). These reported challenges faced by the students can indicate the complex nature of paraphrasing for them as novice writers. In order to help the L2 students paraphrase successfully in academic writing, careful attention needs to be paid to these aspects of challenges, including the students’ proficiency, grammatical and vocabulary knowledge, and academic writing skills.

5.2 Pedagogical Implications

Pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings and suggestions for teaching paraphrasing academic texts are made to help L2 students learn to paraphrase and avoid slipping into plagiarism in academic writing. What the teachers can do to help their L2 students perform better paraphrasing in academic writing are as follows.

- i. Reading academic texts can be a necessary step toward successful paraphrasing in academic writing since reading can have a great positive impact on the students’ writing performance (Khoirunnisa & Safitri, 2018). Through reading academic texts, the students learn to handle the texts for adequate understanding and learn to see acceptable examples of academic vocabulary, sentence structure, and styles of writing of other experienced writers.
- ii. The students should be made aware that their paraphrases should contain substantial paraphrasing. Having one or two words of the original texts replaced is not sufficient for the good paraphrasing. It is also good to bring such issues into the class discussion or have the students express their opinions on the issue.
- iii. It is observed from the students’ paraphrases in this study that grammatical mistakes such as incorrect parts of speech, incorrect word order in sentences, and the use of vocabulary in an inappropriate context were part of the mistakes they made in paraphrasing. It might be useful to have them analyse the paraphrases of the others in the

class and identify ungrammatical or inappropriate parts of sentences in the others' paraphrases.

- iv. It is also of great importance to emphasise in class that the same meaning as in the original text must be kept in their paraphrased version.

5.3 Conclusion

This study explored the students' paraphrasing strategies and the challenges they faced in the sentence paraphrasing task. The students who participated in this study were novices in academic writing. The findings showed that strategies that the students frequently used were vocabulary substitution and changing the order of words in the original sentences. Generally, the students' paraphrases appear to be less than substantial revision. The teachers may need to help them in class to encourage them to do more than minimal revision when paraphrasing. They also responded in the questionnaire that they faced problems of limited academic vocabulary, inappropriate use of vocabulary in the context, and inadequate understanding of the original sentences. These problems may be lessened through reading academic texts extensively through which the students are exposed to and learn about academic writing style and vocabulary. It is recommended that the investigation of students' paraphrasing of longer texts will help better understand the students' paraphrasing.

5.4 Limitations and Future Direction

In order to examine the strategies, the students used in paraphrasing academic text in this study, the students were asked to paraphrase important findings of research in the related fields which were presented to them in one sentence since the participants in this study were novices in academic writing. These short original texts could be the main limitation of this study. Investigating the students' paraphrasing tasks of greater length, such as at paragraph level, could provide other interesting insights into teaching and learning paraphrasing academic texts for L2 students. Also, it is recommended for future research to explore the paraphrasing of L2 students when they perform paraphrasing together with other academic practices, such as writing a summary, since for the students to write successfully in academic writing they usually perform the two tasks of paraphrasing and summarising together in their writing.

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