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STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN PARAPHRASING ACADEMIC TEXT

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Abstract: Paraphrasing is an essential skill in academic writing that requires students to restate source ideas accurately while maintaining their original meaning. However, many students encounter difficulties that affect their writing quality and confidence. This study aims to identify the challenges students face in paraphrasing and examine their impact on academic writing performance. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through observation, documentation and semi-structured interviews with five undergraduate students of the English Education Study Program, at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis involving systematic coding and categorization to identify recurring patterns. The findings indicated some primary challenges: limited vocabulary, fear of distorting the original meaning, grammatical and syntactic difficulties, and time constraints. Students also reported low confidence and uncertainty regarding the academic acceptability of their paraphrases, which led some to rely on translation tools or AI applications. Therefore, explicit instruction in paraphrasing strategies, vocabulary development, structured practice, and formative feedback are necessary to enhance students' competence and confidence in paraphrasing academic text.

Keywords: students' difficulties, paraphrasing, academic texts, academic writing

INTRODUCTION

Paraphrasing has an essential role in academic writing because it allows students to demonstrate comprehension of reading materials while avoiding plagiarism. In higher education, students are required to integrate ideas from multiple sources into their own arguments in a critical and responsible manner. Through paraphrasing, students show their ability to interpret and reconstruct knowledge rather than merely reproduce it. Academic writing, therefore, demands not only language accuracy but also the ability to transform information appropriately. As argued by Hyland (2016), academic literacy involves understanding how knowledge is constructed and re-presented within disciplinary communities.

Effective paraphrasing requires a deep understanding of the source text and the ability to restate ideas using different vocabulary and syntactic structures. Students must first comprehend the meaning of the original text before reformulating it in their own words. This process involves complex cognitive operations such as interpreting, summarizing, reorganizing, and expressing ideas clearly. Pecorari (2018) emphasizes that successful paraphrasing depends on both textual comprehension and the writer's linguistic resources, highlighting that it is not a mechanical substitution of words but a meaning-based transformation.

Despite its importance, paraphrasing remains a challenging skill for many EFL learners. Studies have shown that limited vocabulary knowledge and insufficient grammatical competence often hinder students' ability to reformulate ideas effectively (Chien, 2017; Nguyen, 2018). As a result, students frequently rely on superficial word substitution strategies rather than restructuring sentences meaningfully. This practice can lead to texts that closely resemble the original source, increasing the risk of unintentional plagiarism. Shi (2004) notes that patch writing, or minimal modification of source texts, is common among second language writers who struggle with linguistic limitations.

In addition to linguistic challenges, psychological factors also influence students' paraphrasing performance. Many second language writers experience anxiety and uncertainty when attempting to balance originality with accuracy. Li and Casanave (2017) explain that students often fear distorting the original meaning, which makes them hesitant to modify

sentence structures significantly. Vocabulary mastery has also been identified as a key predictor of paraphrasing quality, as students with broader lexical knowledge are better able to express ideas flexibly (Hartini & Adini, 2024). These findings suggest that paraphrasing involves not only language skills but also confidence and strategic awareness.

From a broader academic perspective, paraphrasing is closely related to students' understanding of disciplinary conventions and rhetorical structures. Academic writing requires awareness of citation practices, authorial voice, and genre expectations. Zhang and Hyland (2021) argue that students must learn how to position themselves appropriately within academic discourse while incorporating external sources. Without adequate guidance in these conventions, students may struggle to produce paraphrases that meet academic standards. This highlights the importance of explicit instruction and modeling in writing classrooms.

Although numerous studies have examined paraphrasing in different contexts, limited research has explored students' lived experiences in classroom settings, particularly within Indonesian EFL environments. Most prior research focuses on product-based analysis rather than examining how students perceive their own difficulties during the learning process. Understanding students' perspectives can provide valuable insight into the interaction between linguistic competence, cognitive processes, and emotional factors in paraphrasing tasks (Nguyen, 2018). Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: What difficulties do students face when paraphrasing texts in the classroom?

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the challenges experienced by students in paraphrasing activities within the classroom. A qualitative approach was selected because it allows the researcher to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, and personal difficulties in depth through direct interaction. Instead of focusing on numerical scores, this study emphasized students' lived experiences and interpretations of paraphrasing tasks in academic writing contexts. Qualitative research is widely recommended in

educational studies to investigate learners' perspectives and classroom realities in natural settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Paraphrasing is a complex academic skill that requires comprehension, vocabulary control, syntactic restructuring, and awareness of academic integrity. These processes involve cognitive and linguistic challenges that are better explored through qualitative inquiry. Recent studies indicate that EFL students often struggle with paraphrasing due to limited vocabulary and structural knowledge (Hu & Sun, 2017). Therefore, a qualitative design was considered appropriate to capture the depth and complexity of students' paraphrasing difficulties in authentic classroom contexts.

Participants

The participants of this study were five (5) students from Class 2024B of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Katolik Indonesia Santu Paulus Ruteng. Purposive sampling was used to select students who had direct experience completing paraphrasing assignments in their academic writing course. This sampling strategy is appropriate in qualitative research because it allows the selection of participants who can provide rich and relevant information related to the research focus (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016).

All participants were actively involved in classroom writing activities and had completed several tasks requiring paraphrasing skills. Prior to participation, students were informed about the purpose of the study and agreed voluntarily to take part.

Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a semi-structured interview guide. The interview questions were designed to investigate students' difficulties in paraphrasing, including challenges in understanding source texts, selecting appropriate synonyms, restructuring sentences, maintaining original meaning, and avoiding plagiarism. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in language education research because they provide flexibility while allowing the researcher to explore specific themes in depth (Mackey & Gass, 2016).

Paraphrasing difficulties among EFL learners are often associated with vocabulary limitations, grammatical challenges, and insufficient

knowledge of academic writing conventions (Mansourizadeh & Ahmad, 2018). Therefore, the interview questions were carefully constructed to address both linguistic and psychological aspects of paraphrasing tasks.

The interview was guided by the following five key questions addressed to the five students: (1) Do you find paraphrasing difficult in academic writing? Why or why not? (2) What difficulties do you usually face when paraphrasing academic texts? (3) Do you have enough vocabulary to paraphrase sentences using your own words? Explain your answer. (4) How confident do you feel when submitting paraphrasing assignments? (5) Do you use translation tools or AI applications when paraphrasing? How do they help or challenge you?

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected through observation, documentation and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet classroom on campus to ensure a comfortable and distraction-free environment. Each interview lasted approximately 30–40 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian to allow participants to express their experiences and opinions more clearly and confidently.

All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness of the data. The recordings were transcribed verbatim shortly after each session to preserve the authenticity of students' responses. The transcripts were then carefully reviewed and compared with the audio files to ensure accuracy before proceeding to data analysis. Accurate transcription enhances the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative findings (Nowell et al., 2017). This systematic procedure ensured that the analysis was grounded in participants' original statements.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The researcher first read the transcripts repeatedly to become familiar with the data and identify meaningful statements related to paraphrasing difficulties. Thematic analysis is widely recognized as a flexible and systematic method for identifying patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This stage helped the researcher gain a

deeper understanding of recurring issues mentioned by participants.

RESULTS

The results of this study reveal several difficulties experienced by students when paraphrasing academic texts. Based on the analysis of students' paraphrasing tasks and interview responses, the findings are categorized into two main areas: vocabulary limitations and Confidence in Submitting Paraphrasing Assignments. The presentation of study results are started with displaying students' perceptions of paraphrasing difficulties.

Students' Perceptions of Paraphrasing Difficulty

Most students considered paraphrasing academic writing to be a difficult task because it required understanding the original meaning while changing the language structure. Students felt that maintaining accuracy while using different wording was challenging and often confusing. One participant (TK) expressed this difficulty by stating, *"I am afraid that I don't have enough words to paraphrase properly, so I often stick too closely to the original because I worry the meaning will change."* This response shows that students experienced pressure when attempting to restate academic ideas.

Similar feelings were shared by other participants who associated paraphrasing with fear of making mistakes. Students often doubted whether their paraphrased sentences were acceptable in academic writing. Other participant (PP) stated, *"I am afraid that my paraphrasing is still considered plagiarism."* This statement indicates that students perceived paraphrasing not only as a linguistic task but also as a source of academic anxiety.

Common Difficulties Faced in Paraphrasing Academic Texts

Students reported difficulties in changing sentence structures, especially when dealing with long academic sentences. Many participants admitted that they tended to modify only several words instead of reorganizing the whole sentence. A participant (AD)

explained, *"I usually just change some words, but the sentence pattern is still the same."* This response suggests that students lacked strategies for restructuring sentences effectively.

In addition, complex sentence organization created confusion for students during the paraphrasing process. Participants found it difficult to rearrange clauses while maintaining clarity and meaning. Other participant (US) stated, *"It is difficult for me to rearrange long sentences."* This statement highlights that structural complexity became a significant obstacle in paraphrasing academic texts.

1. Vocabulary Sufficiency in Paraphrasing

Limited vocabulary knowledge was identified as a major challenge when students attempted to paraphrase using their own words. Participants admitted that even when they understood the content, they struggled to find alternative expressions, as stated in the interview *"Sometimes I understand the sentence, but I don't know how to change the words"* (US). This response indicates that vocabulary limitations restricted students' ability to restate ideas effectively.

Similarly, students often repeated original words because they lacked lexical variation. *"I often repeat the same words because I don't know other vocabulary"* (AD). This finding shows that insufficient vocabulary forced students to rely heavily on the original text, resulting in less effective paraphrasing.

2. Students' Confidence in Submitting Paraphrasing Assignments

Students generally reported low confidence when submitting paraphrasing assignments, particularly due to concerns about grammar accuracy. Many participants felt insecure about whether their sentences were grammatically correct. *"I feel insecure because I am not confident with my grammar"* (AD). This response demonstrates how grammatical uncertainty affected students' confidence levels.

Fear of plagiarism also influenced students' confidence in their work. Participants worried that their paraphrases might still resemble the original text too closely. *"I am afraid that my paraphrasing is still considered plagiarism"* (PP). This concern shows

that students' lack of confidence limited their willingness to modify sentences more creatively.

3. Use of Translation Tools and AI Applications in Paraphrasing

All participants acknowledged using translation tools or AI applications to assist their paraphrasing process. Students used these tools mainly to understand difficult vocabulary and check sentence accuracy. One participant (AD) explained, *"I usually translate the sentence first, then change it again. Sometimes I use AI tools to check if my paraphrasing is correct."* This statement shows that technology played a supportive role in completing paraphrasing tasks.

However, students' responses also indicated reliance on digital tools during writing activities. Technology helped them feel more confident, but sometimes reduced independent effort in constructing sentences. *"I use translation tools because they help me understand the sentence faster before I try to rewrite it"* (TK). This response suggests that digital assistance became an essential part of students' paraphrasing practices.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that paraphrasing is not a mechanical activity of replacing words but a cognitively demanding academic practice that requires comprehension, transformation, and reconstruction of meaning. Students' accounts reveal that many approach paraphrasing at a surface level, focusing primarily on lexical substitution. This tendency suggests a gap between students' operational strategies and the disciplinary expectations of academic writing. Rather than transforming knowledge within academic conventions, as conceptualized by Hyland (2019), students appear to prioritize visible textual alteration over deeper semantic restructuring. This mismatch highlights the need to re-conceptualize paraphrasing instruction as a meaning-making process rather than a synonym-searching exercise.

Vocabulary limitation emerged not merely as a linguistic deficiency but as a constraint shaping students' strategic choices. When lexical resources are limited, students tend to retain key terms

from the original text, resulting in minimal reformulation. This pattern reflects what Chung & Wan (2025) describes as the central role of vocabulary breadth and depth in academic writing quality. However, the issue extends beyond vocabulary size; it also involves lexical flexibility and contextual awareness. Students' repetition of core terminology indicates difficulty in navigating semantic nuance, which in turn restricts their ability to reframe ideas in academically acceptable ways (Li & Casanave, 2012).

Grammatical insecurity further compounds this challenge. Participants' hesitation to restructure sentences reveals how limited syntactic control narrows their paraphrasing options. Instead of reorganizing clauses or altering sentence patterns, students often maintain the original structure to avoid grammatical errors. This behavior suggests that grammatical competence is closely intertwined with writer confidence. As Morali & Boran (2021) argue, writing anxiety can suppress experimentation with language forms. In this study, grammatical uncertainty appears to function not only as a technical barrier but also as a psychological constraint that discourages syntactic innovation.

The fear of unintentional plagiarism introduces another layer of complexity. Students' reluctance to significantly modify source texts reflects uncertainty about academic integrity standards. Rather than empowering students to transform ideas confidently, plagiarism awareness sometimes generates excessive caution. This tension resonates with Bretag's (2016) discussion of how unclear understandings of plagiarism policies can produce anxiety. Moreover, the tendency toward patch-writing observed in participants' responses aligns with Shi (2004) view that second language writers may rely on close textual borrowing when linguistic resources are insufficient. In this sense, patch-writing may be interpreted not simply as misconduct but as a developmental strategy shaped by linguistic and institutional pressures.

The difficulty in restructuring long and complex sentences underscores the cognitive demands of source-based writing. Paraphrasing extended clauses requires simultaneous processing of

meaning, grammar, and organization. Students' preference for changing isolated words rather than reorganizing syntactic units indicates limited syntactic awareness (Oñate, et al., 2025). Park (2022) emphasizes that genuine paraphrasing involves structural transformation, yet this study suggests that such transformation requires instructional scaffolding. Without guided practice, students may lack the procedural knowledge needed to manipulate complex sentence patterns effectively.

Technology use adds a contemporary dimension to paraphrasing practices. Digital tools, including translation and AI-based applications, serve as compensatory mechanisms for vocabulary gaps and grammatical uncertainty. While Alharbi (2023) highlights the potential of technology-mediated writing support, the present findings suggest a double-edged effect. Strategic use of tools can enhance accuracy and confidence; however, overreliance may reduce cognitive engagement in meaning reconstruction. When technology becomes a shortcut rather than a scaffold, it may limit the development of independent paraphrasing competence.

CONCLUSION

The study concluded that paraphrasing is a multidimensional academic skill that extends beyond lexical substitution. Students' challenges were closely connected to limited vocabulary resources, insufficient syntactic flexibility, grammatical insecurity, and anxiety about unintentional plagiarism. These factors interacted cognitively and emotionally, influencing how students approached source-based writing tasks. The analysis highlights that paraphrasing competence involves not only linguistic knowledge but also strategic awareness and confidence in manipulating academic discourse.

However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved only five participants from a single class in one university, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The qualitative design also focused on perceptions rather than measuring actual paraphrasing performance. Future research may expand the scope by involving larger and more diverse participant groups across

institutions. Studies employing mixed-method designs could combine qualitative insights with quantitative assessments of paraphrasing performance.

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