



The effects of paraphrasing on EFL Students' academic writing

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Abstract

Studies have shown that academic writing plays its significant role in enhancing students' writing when learning English as a foreign language. In particular, paraphrasing as a writing strategy of putting ideas generated in a particular passage in different ways without changing the meaning of the original source, has been addressed as a crucial tool in academia at tertiary education through which individual students integrate source texts into their own writing. In order to succeed in academic writing in English, students are encouraged to understand how to generate or restate the main points from a particular text passage while preserving the essential meanings of the source. However, the question how paraphrasing influences students' academic writing at a university in the Mekong Delta remains unanswered. This paper therefore reports the effects of paraphrasing on English as a foreign language (EFL) students' academic writing performance. Using a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design, pretests and posttests were conducted with one hundred and forty-three students majoring in English at a Vietnamese university. The findings indicate that paraphrasing had positive effects on students' academic writing performance. Pedagogical implications for teachers and students are provided.

Keywords: academic writing; citation; source text; paraphrasing; plagiarism

1. Introduction

There is increased attention to the role of paraphrasing as part of academic writing for students in tertiary education to communicate ideas to intended audiences or peers (H. B. Nguyen, Ho, & Nguyen, 2019). Therefore, in order to succeed in academic writing in their learning process, students need to know how to integrate source texts into their own writings or evaluate the original texts. Paraphrasing is known as a strategy of presenting ideas given in a specific text passage in another way without changing the meaning of the original source texts. If this is not appropriately interpreted, the paraphrased statement is likely considered plagiarism, copying the others' writings without acknowledging their credits. Paraphrasing is also seen as a way to measure students' understanding to conceptualize while grasping, engaging, and restating the ideas generated in the text (Keck, 2014; Wagner & Sanford, 2010). Another view of paraphrasing is that it is not merely substitute of words by using synonyms; rather, source texts should be written in a different structure, as noted in the

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literature. By doing so, this learning strategy allows students to understand the reading texts easier, thereby developing their academic writing through their own styles while retaining the meanings of the source texts. Several studies therefore have raised concerns about what and how of paraphrasing used to ensure good paraphrases are obtained to prevent plagiarism when documenting or citing the source (e.g., Blanpain, 2006). It is therefore important for students to understand the nature of paraphrasing and plagiarism and know how to avoid this type of ‘academic crime’ (Bailer, 2015). However, in Vietnam, little research has examined the effects of paraphrasing on student learning of academic writing in English as a foreign language. This paper therefore seeks the answer to the question: “What are the effects of paraphrasing on EFL students’ academic writing?”

2. Literature Review

2.1. Academic writing

There is a growing interest in how academic writing influences student learning outcomes in their English language learning (Morley-Warner, 2010). There are several views of academic writing in the literature. Academic writing refers to a type of writing used in tertiary writing courses as this entails a sophisticated blend of generating and selecting ideas to produce a given text (Bailer, 2015). Another view is that academic writing is related to producing and thinking how to communicate knowledge of a particular subject or discipline through a set of rules or features to intended audience (Fulwiler, 2002; H. B. Nguyen et al., 2019; Oshima & Hogue, 2007). These conceptualizations suggest that academic writing serves as a guide that contributes to students’ academic success or writing competencies in their learning process at college or university. In the light of 21st-century demands, academic writing is an essential part of tertiary contexts and becomes a potentially critical tool for the growth of the intellect of individuals and society (Bruning & Horn, 2000; Johannessen, 2001).

Academic writing is known as producing a given text by a sophisticated blend of generating and selecting ideas (Bailer, 2015). Thus, academic writing can be viewed as a process of thinking or reasoning presented in a logical order or proper argument (Khazaaal, 2019). Academic writing thus involves outlining, summarizing, and paraphrasing a piece of writing assignment with a particular regard to style and correctness (Khazaaal, 2019).

Based on these conceptualizations, for the purposes of this study, academic writing is defined as *a type of college writing generated by students to communicate ideas to others in an effective and meaningful way.*

As academic writing plays an essential role in students’ writing process, paraphrasing, as noted below, is one of the most effective ways to help them succeed in academic writing.

2.2. Paraphrasing

There are several definitions of paraphrasing in the literature. Paraphrasing is defined as a strategy of transferring ideas given in a specific text passage in a different way while preserving the same meaning as in the original (Blanpain, 2006). This implies that its meanings are equivalent, but their words and syntax are different. Paraphrasing can be interpreted as the task of presenting the meaning of the text in a different form by rewriting, restating, rewording, or even rephrasing sentences to convey the meaning as synonymous with the original ideas (Keck, 2006). Nguyen and his colleagues (2019) point out that paraphrasing means rather rewriting the source texts in a different structure than replacing words with synonyms. Paraphrasing does not merely substitute words by using synonyms; rather, it is characterized by the use of different sentence structures (Blanpain, 2006). This requires

students to generate new sentences in their own words while retaining the major ideas of the original source (Morley-Warner, 2010; H. B. Nguyen et al., 2019).

More importantly, students may develop a better understanding of the proper use of source information with acknowledgment of the author's work to avoid plagiarism by comparing their paraphrased text with the source one (H. B. Nguyen et al., 2019).

For the purposes of this study, paraphrasing is defined as *a process of restating statements in a different way without changing the meaning of the original source text*. By doing so, students will develop their new understanding of appropriate use of the source text to acknowledge of the credit of the writer in order to avoid plagiarism while documenting the source.

2.3. Plagiarism

Plagiarism in higher education has received worldwide attention; thus, various conceptualizations of plagiarism are examined in the literature. Plagiarism is seen as “a failure to document...verbatim material, paraphrased material... and ideas specific to an author.” (Russikoff, Fucaloro, & Salkauskiene, 2003, p. 130). Another view is that plagiarism refers to “literary theft, stealing the words or ideas of someone else and passing them off as one’s own without crediting the source” (C. Park, 2003, p. 472). As the number of plagiarized cases has risen in academia, paraphrasing has been concerned as an effective pedagogical method to avoid plagiarism (Hyland, 2005; Keck, 2014). By paraphrasing the source text adequately and appropriately, students are likely to increase their opportunities to create their own words by source-based information but still keep the source meaning (Wagner & Sanford, 2010). However, an inadequate paraphrase is likely seen as plagiarism. Therefore, changing only few words in the original statement is not sufficient and such simple rearrangement (using synonyms) is unlikely to reflect understanding of the information given in the original text itself (Smalley, Ruetten, & Kozyrev, 2012). Instruction of appropriate paraphrasing partially reduces the number of copying source text directly. Similarly, Park and Lee (2010) argue that paraphrasing is a plagiarism-prevention practice toward Korean university students in writing essay tests. Likewise, the positivity of paraphrasing is related to declining plagiarism (Roig, 2001). In Roig’s research into plagiarism identification and paraphrasing criteria of college and university professors, three studies were conducted. In Study 1, six rewritten versions of a paragraph taken from a journal article were instances of plagiarism. In Study 2, another sample of professors was asked to paraphrase the same paragraph, it was found that 30% appropriated some text from the original. In Study 3, 26% of the psychologists appropriated text from the original version. Taken all together, the findings from these studies indicate the existence of wide differences in paraphrasing practices of college professors. Another research reported the decrease in direct copying from the source texts after instruction on plagiarism for L2 university students (Moon, 2002). In Barry's (2006) study, students first were introduced conceptualizations of plagiarism, then a six-week practice of paraphrasing and citing original sources was conducted. In the paraphrasing posttest, their scores were significantly increased. The students engraved two more specific plagiarism elements (‘taking someone else's ideas’ and ‘not giving credit’) into their previous definitions. Barry (2006) further contends that students' practice of paraphrasing should be focused instead of providing to them raw definitions of plagiarism.

The above-mentioned studies have acknowledged appropriate paraphrasing as a valuable tool for helping students prevent from plagiarism or academic crime. However, little research has been conducted to examine the effects of paraphrasing on students’ academic writing, particularly within the teaching and learning context in Vietnam. This current study therefore fills the gap in this area.

3. Methodology

A quasi-experimental study using quantitative and qualitative methods was designed to examine the effects of paraphrasing on EFL students' academic writing. This type of design is the best-used type of research to build up cause-and-effect relationships that can clarify connections between two variables, and utilizing a quasi-experiment minimizes threats to internal validity (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012). 143 English-majored students at a Vietnamese university participated in both pretest and posttest in this study. Participants were assigned into control and experimental groups. All of the students in the experimental group were studying *Advanced Writing II* course using the textbook *Advanced Writing Skill II* (second version) by Nguyen and his colleagues (2019). Paraphrasing exercises are part of this textbook. Students are asked to restate or paraphrase the following extracts in their own words:

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| Original statements | 1. There is a need for more classroom-based empirical investigation that specifically focuses on the actual impact of educational drama on classroom interaction and students' foreign language development (Belliveau & Kim, 2013). |
| | 2. Teacher change is seen as an indispensable part of teachers' professional lives (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). |

The students' generated answers below reveal the difference between acceptable and unacceptable paraphrases.

Unacceptable paraphrase	It is necessary for more classroom-based empirical investigation that mainly concentrate on the actual effects of drama on classroom interaction and students' foreign language improvements (Belliveau & Kim, 2013).
Acceptable paraphrase	It is necessary for more research into the effects of drama on students' interaction and their foreign language growth (Belliveau & Kim, 2013).
Unacceptable paraphrase	Teacher change is viewed as an important part of teachers' professional lives (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).
Acceptable paraphrase	Changes in instructional practices play an important part in teachers' lives (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

The participants in the treatment group practiced paraphrasing exercises, whereas those in the control group attended the writing course in class via other writing materials.

Pretest and posttest were administered to measure the effects of paraphrasing on students' academic writing. Since test-piloted step could benefit to save time in the data collecting process (Mackey & Gass, 2005), 15 students were randomly selected to participate in piloting the test. The Cronbach's alpha for the piloted was 0.718, indicating the high reliability of the test for data collection. The paraphrasing test was designed into two parts, including participants' demographic data and paraphrasing exercise. The second part consists of two levels of paraphrasing exercises: the sentence level (four sentences) and paragraph level (one paragraph). On the sentence level, students were asked to restate the sentence using their own words. An example is,

The United States leads the world in its belief in romantic love-86 percent of American college students say they would not marry without love (Levine, Robert, 'Is love a luxury, 1993).

Similarly, an example for the paragraph level is

The findings from the research indicate that storytelling has a positive impact on high school students' oral performance. Many aspects of students' speaking were improved such as fluency, lexical resources, and interactive communication. Such impact is in line with the findings of several studies in the literature (L. T. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019).

The paraphrasing-sentence exercises were taken from the textbook 'Advanced Writing Skill II' (H. B. Nguyen et al., 2019, p. 27), and the book named 'Sourcework: Academic writing from sources' (Dollahite & Haun, 2011, p. 11). The paraphrasing-paragraph exercise was taken from the article 'The impact of storytelling on high school students' oral performance' (L. T. Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019).

The study was conducted in a fifteen-week-semester period in which the experiment lasted ten weeks. Four criteria of VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency) were used as scoring rubric to evaluate students' academic writing pretests and posttests. For the purposes of this study, six criteria, based on Nguyen and Nguyen (2019) as indicated in the study of source-based academic writing, include (1) task fulfillment, (2) sentence structure, (3) citation, (4) spelling, (5) punctuation and capitalization, and (6) vocabulary. A five-point Likert scale was used to weight each criterion (1= poor; 2=average; 3= fair, 4=good, 5=excellent). The scoring rubric of paraphrasing is detailed (Appendix 1). The participants' responses of both the pretest and post-test were first statistically analyzed by using the scoring rubric of paraphrasing and then evaluated by two independent teachers.

The quantitative data gathered from the pre- and posttests were statistically analyzed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. Descriptive Statistics, Independent and Paired Samples t-Test were used to measure students' academic writing through the use of the paraphrasing strategy. the Cronbach's alpha was computed for the coefficient reliability of the test. In particular, the Cronbach's alpha for pretest and posttest was 0.727 and 0.768, respectively, indicating the reliability of the tests for collecting data for the main study.

4. Findings

The *Descriptive Statistics* for tests were used to evaluate EFL students' academic writing of the control and experimental groups before and after the intervention. The results illustrate that the mean score of the students' academic writing in paraphrasing pretest in the experimental group ($M_{pre}=2.225$, $SD=0.843$) is higher than that in the control group ($M_{pre}=2.15$, $SD=0.856$). Also, the mean score of the students' academic writing in paraphrasing posttest in the experimental group ($M_{post}=3.105$, $SD=.097$) is higher than that in the control group ($M_{post}=2.018$, $SD=0.929$). Hence, these results indicate that academic writing performance differed after the study, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of students' academic performance

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Pretest (con)	67	1	5	2.15	0.856
Posttest	67	1	5	2.018	0.929
Pretest (exp)	76	1	5	2.225	0.843
Posttest	76	1	5	3.105	0.97

Valid N 143
(listwise)

An *Independent Sample t-Test* was used to check the difference in EFL students' academic writing performance between the two groups before and after the intervention. The results of the paraphrasing pre-tests collected by each individual in the control group were compared to those in the experimental group. Table 2 shows that the mean difference ($MD=-.43539$) is not statistically significant ($t=-.766$, $df= 141$, $p=.445$). This result indicates that the initial levels of students' academic writing performance in the two groups were similar.

Table 1. Independent-Samples t-Test on pretest

F	t	df	Sig (2 tailed)	MD	SD	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
.194	-.766	141	.445	-.43539	.56864	-1.55955	.68877
	-.768	140.336	.443	-.43539	.56655	-1.55546	.68468

An *Independent Sample t-Test* was used to check whether there was a difference between the mean scores of students' academic writing posttests in both groups after using paraphrasing. Table 3 indicates a statistically significant difference in students' academic writing performance in the posttest ($t=-9.92$, $df= 141$, $p=.000$). As a result, students' academic writing performance between the two groups changed after the intervention of paraphrasing.

Table 2. Independent-Samples t-Test on posttest

F	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	MD	SD	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
						Lower	Upper
.311	-9.992	141	.000	-6.57423	.65795	-7.87495	-5.27352
	-9.983	138.212	.000	-6.57423	.65857	-7.87642	-5.27205

A *Paired-Samples t-Test* was run to evaluate the mean scores of academic writing by each aspect in the control and experimental group after the paraphrasing intervention. Academic writing consists of six aspects, namely *task fulfillment* (TF), *structure* (ST), *vocabulary* (Vocab), *spelling* (SP), *punctuation and capitalization* (PC), and *citation* (C). Table 4 shows the effects of paraphrasing on students' academic writing success of six aspects in the control group. The overall view shows that there is no statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest in all six aspects, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Paired Samples t- Test in the control group

Paired differences	Mean	SD	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig (2- tailed)
			Lower	Upper			
			TF	.213			

ST	-.173	1.005	-.405	.058	-1.494	74	.140
Vocab	.147	.881	-.056	.349	1.442	74	.153
SP	.453	1.398	.132	.775	2.809	74	.006
PC	.160	1.139	-.102	.422	1.216	74	.228
C	.080	.487	-.032	.192	1.424	74	.159

Table 4 shows that the test value of *task fulfillment* ($t=1.840$, $df=74$, $p=.070$) (TF), *structures* ($t=-1.494$, $df=74$, $p=.14$) (ST), *vocabulary* ($t=1.442$, $df=74$, $p=.153$) (Vocab), *punctuation and capitalization* ($t=1.216$, $df=74$, $p=.228$) (PC) and *citation* ($t=1.424$, $df=74$, $p=.159$) (C) illustrates the low mean difference (about 0.1-0.2) and high value of statistical significance ($p>.005$). Thus, there is no significant difference in students' *task fulfillment*, *structure*, *vocabulary*, *punctuation and capitalization*, and *citation*. Although the different mean value of spelling ($M=.453$) (PC) is more significant than the others, the statistical significance (2-tailed) of spelling is not significant ($p=.006$). Similar to the others, this test shows no change in students' spelling after the intervention. It can be inferred that after the study, students in the control group did not improve their academic writing performance in all six aspects.

To determine the mean scores of six aspects in the experimental group after the study, a *Paired-Samples t-Test* was administered. Table 5 illustrates how paraphrasing impacts students' academic writing output in the experimental group. Generally, with value $p=.000$ in all of six aspects, a significant difference was observed, as shown in Table 5.

Table 3. Paired Samples *t-Test* in the experimental group

	Paired differences		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig (2- tailed)
	Mean	SD	Lower	Upper			
TF	-.910	1.083	-1.175	-.646	-6.879	66	.000
ST	-.940	1.242	-1.243	-.637	-6.198	66	.000
Vocab	-.731	1.162	-1.015	-.448	-5.150	66	.000
SP	-.791	1.601	-1.181	-.401	-4.045	66	.000
PC	-1.119	1.332	-1.444	-.795	-6.880	66	.000
C	-.672	1.106	-.941	-.402	-4.969	66	.000

Table 5 shows that the test value of *task fulfillment* (TF), *structure* (ST), and *punctuation and capitalization* (PC) was observed ($t=-6.880$, $df=66$, $p=.000$), ($t=-6.198$, $df=66$, $p=.000$) and ($t=-6.506$, $df=66$, $p=.000$), respectively. Moreover, the different mean of all three aspects was considerable (around -1). These findings reveal a significant change in students' task fulfillment, structure, and punctuation and capitalization between before and after the intervention. Likewise, the test values of *vocabulary* ($t=-5.150$, $df=66$, $p=.000$) (Vocab), *spelling* ($t=-4.045$, $df=66$, $p=.000$) (SP) and *citation*

($t=-4.969$, $df=66$, $p=.000$) (C) demonstrate a significant difference of students in these aspects. At the end of the study, students made changes in all six academic writing elements.

Paired Samples-t-Test then was computed to give a detailed view for changes by aspect of elements in the experimental group. Table 6 depicts the mean value of both pretest and posttest by each aspect of academic writing in the experimental group. Generally, the mean scores in the pretest were in the low-score frame of language proficiency ($M<2.5$), whereas the mean scores in the posttest were about the average ($M= 2.5-3.4$) and high ($M>3.4$) level of language proficiency. The mean score is classified according to the categorization of the level of language proficiency by Oxford (1990).

Table 4. *Paired Samples t-Test* in the experimental group

	n		M	SD
TF	67	Pretest	2.36	.829
	67	Posttest	3.27	.770
ST	67	Pretest	1.90	.761
	67	Posttest	2.84	.931
Vocab	67	Pretest	2.27	.709
	67	Posttest	3.00	.835
SP	67	Pretest	2.91	1.083
	67	Posttest	3.70	1.231
PC	67	Pretest	2.39	1.014
	67	Posttest	3.51	1.035
C	67	Pretest	1.52	.660
	67	Posttest	2.19	.973

Table 6 shows that the mean scores of *task fulfillment* ($M_{pre}=2.36$), *structure* ($M_{pre}=1.90$), *vocabulary* ($M_{pre}=2.27$), *punctuation and capitalization* ($M_{pre}=2.39$), and *citation* ($M_{pre}=1.52$) were at a low level ($M_{pre}<2.5$). Only spelling was initially at the medium level ($M_{pre}=2.91$). However, in the posttest mean value, students' academic writing performance was at the medium level in *task fulfillment* ($M_{post}=3.27$) and *structure* ($M_{post}=2.84$) and from medium to high in *spelling* ($M_{post}=3.7$). Even in *punctuation and capitalization* ($M_{post}=3.51$), students' language skillfulness was upgraded dramatically. Only *citation* ($M_{post}= 2.19$) remained the low level of the score; however, the latter mean score is more than the former.

After the treatment, the difference in students' level of academic writing performance between the two groups was observed. While students' level of academic writing in the experimental group increased, students' level of academic writing in the control group (without intervening paraphrasing) remained the same.

5. Discussion

The findings from this study reveal that paraphrasing had positive effects on students' academic writing. Before the study, the initial level of academic writing performance in both groups was similar. After the study, that level of students between the two groups had a significant difference. In particular, the experimental group showed improvements in paraphrasing in all of six aspects of

academic writing (task fulfillment, structure, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and capitalization, and citation).

The findings from this study are in line with those in the previous studies (Hans, 2017; Keck, 2014). These authors found out that paraphrasing could improve learners' writing and their foreign language proficiencies as well. More specifically, in terms of vocabulary, this finding is in line with that of a study by Choy and Lee (2012) who indicated that paraphrasing was beneficial to learners as this strategy could lead them to extending their existing vocabularies. More importantly, citation of the sources was acted as a tool for students to credit the work of the authors and to avoid plagiarism, as noted in the literature (Keck, 2006, 2014; Tra, 2010). As such, paraphrasing could be seen an essential tool for improving students' academic writing success.

6. Conclusions

This research sheds light on the effects of paraphrasing on EFL students' academic writing performance. After the study, students with paraphrasing intervention had positive changes in their academic writing. Such effects of students' academic writing included enhancing task fulfillment, structure, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and capitalization, and citation. Therefore, paraphrasing can be included in academic writing courses.

Some pedagogical implications for students, teachers, and school administrators are provided. For students, it is necessary to get them involved in practicing paraphrasing in their writing classes as this learning strategy can help students improve their academic writing and feel more confident in their learning process. There is a need for teachers to raise their awareness of the importance of paraphrasing and integrate this potential strategy in academic writing courses. It is recommended that school administrators should consider ways to support teachers in applying paraphrasing as a potential method to boost students' academic writing.

Further research with an experimental design within a longer period of time is needed to provide insightful views into other uses of paraphrasing in relation to English skills such as speaking, listening and reading.

Appendix

THE SCORING RUBRIC FOR PARAPHRASING (Adapted from Nguyen and Nguyen, 2019)

	1 (Lowest)	2	3	4	5 (Highest)
Task fulfillment	No main idea included Completely new ideas added	Some main ideas included Many new ideas added	Some main ideas included Some new ideas added	Several main ideas included No new ideas added	All main ideas included. Message of the original totally presented No new ideas added
Structure	1. Sentence structure remains unchanged or incorrect. 2. Text fragments	1. Few parts of sentence structure changed. 2. Only simple sentences used 3. Incorrect	1. Some parts of sentence structure changed. 2. Correct simple and compound sentences but	1. Some parts of sentence structures mostly changed. 2. Clear meaning 3. Only a few	1. Completely new sentence structure 2. Clear meaning 3.No grammatical

	3. Incorrect grammar	grammar	success in complex ones still limited 3. Some errors in grammar remained	errors in grammar remained	error
Vocabulary	The original words remained	A few common words (A1-A2 level) changed.	Some words (or words at B1 level) changed precisely	Several words (or words at B2 level) changed	All alternatives being effective
Spelling	Incorrect spelling in simple words	Correct in most common words	Correct in all common words, not in more difficult words (allow 4-5 errors)	Correct in all common words and most difficult words. (allow 1-3 errors)	Correct
Punctuation & Capitalization	1. Using punctuation improperly 2. Incorrect capitalization	1. Correct punctuation except within sentence ones 2. Wrong use in capitalization	1. Incorrect punctuation in few cases 2. Correct capitalization in most cases	1. Only one incorrect punctuation 2. Correct capitalization	1. Correct punctuation 2. Correct capitalization
Citation	No citation	Copy of original citation	Changed citation style, but incorrect	Partially completed citation and correct	Correct

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