

EFL STUDENTS' PARAPHRASING STRATEGIES IN WRITING RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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Abstract

This study investigates the paraphrasing strategies and challenges faced by EFL students during research proposal writing, comparing manual and digital methods. Conducted at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung with 10 participants from the English Education Department, the study used a qualitative descriptive-comparative design through questionnaires and interviews. Findings show that manual paraphrasing challenges include understanding complex texts and maintaining clarity, while digital methods often fail to convey intended meaning and risk plagiarism. Students addressed these issues through strategy use—manual techniques like synonym replacement and practice, and digital methods with tool selection and revision. A combined approach proved most effective, balancing clarity, originality, and efficiency. This study highlights the value of integrating both methods to support academic writing in EFL.

Keywords: EFL Students, Paraphrasing Strategies, Manual Paraphrasing, Digital Paraphrasing, Academic Writing Challenges, Research Proposals

INTRODUCTION

This study presents a comprehensive foundation for understanding the significance of paraphrasing in academic writing, especially for students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). The chapter begins by contextualizing the essential role that English plays in the academic development of university students and the challenges they face in meeting the demands of academic literacy. The researcher emphasizes how writing, particularly paraphrasing, is not merely about linguistic performance but also about intellectual engagement, requiring students to interpret, evaluate, and reproduce complex information in a new form. This skill becomes especially crucial in the context of academic integrity and avoiding plagiarism.

The narrative continues by explaining how writing, in general, is an intricate and multi-dimensional activity that merges creativity with precision. In the academic realm, writing is a way for students to participate in scholarly dialogue, convey ideas clearly, and contribute to their field (Akkaya & Aydin, 2018; Aydin & Baysan, 2018). However, this task is especially difficult for EFL students who often struggle to comprehend complex texts in English. The chapter cites scholars like Lahuerta (2020) and Zhou and Hiver (2022), who acknowledge that academic writing involves not just fluency but also critical engagement with sources.

Moving forward, the introduction narrows its focus to the act of paraphrasing in writing a research proposal—a genre of writing that demands clarity, organization, and originality. Paraphrasing, in this context, is defined not only as substituting words with synonyms but also as reconstructing entire sentence structures while preserving the original meaning (Akbar, 2020; Fitria, 2024). The research draws upon experts like Bailey (2014) and Mariani et al. (2021) to highlight how paraphrasing is a higher-level writing skill, and one that many students find challenging to master.

The study further identifies that EFL students frequently rely on both manual and digital means to paraphrase. Manual paraphrasing often requires deep language knowledge and critical thinking, while digital paraphrasing tools offer convenience but pose risks related to plagiarism and loss of meaning (Ardelia, 2019). Observations from the researcher suggest that students tend to employ strategies like using synonyms, reordering sentence structure, and editing tool-generated outputs, but they often lack clarity on which strategy works best. This highlights the need to investigate not just the use of tools but the thinking behind their use.

Ultimately, the introduction articulates the research questions that guide this study: (1) What are the challenges that EFL students encounter when paraphrasing source content in their research proposals? and (2) What strategies do they employ, both manually and digitally? The purpose of this investigation is to explore how students manage the demands of paraphrasing and whether certain strategies, particularly combinations of manual and digital methods, prove more effective than others in academic writing contexts.

METHOD

This research outlines the research design, approach, and procedures used in this study to explore EFL students' paraphrasing strategies in writing research proposals. This research adopts a qualitative design with a descriptive comparative approach, which is appropriate given the aim to examine the in-depth experiences of students using different paraphrasing strategies. According to Sugiyono (2010), qualitative research seeks to understand phenomena from the participants' perspectives, allowing for detailed exploration of their thoughts, behaviors, and strategies. The comparative aspect of the study lies in the investigation of two distinct paraphrasing methods—manual and digital—used by the participants, providing a basis for identifying similarities, differences, and potential effectiveness.

The selection of participants was purposive, involving ten EFL students from the 2020 cohort of the English Education Department at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung. The participants were divided into two groups: five students who regularly use manual paraphrasing techniques and five who primarily rely on digital paraphrasing tools. These students were selected based on their experience in writing research proposals and their active engagement in the paraphrasing process. By focusing on a small yet targeted sample, the research ensures an in-depth understanding of individual experiences and contextual factors influencing their choice of paraphrasing strategy. This sampling method allows the researcher to concentrate on the quality and richness of the data rather than generalizing the findings across a larger population.

In terms of data collection techniques, the researcher employed both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaires included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about students' paraphrasing practices, challenges, and preferences. These questions provided a broad overview of the students' initial approaches and tools. The semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, allowed for a more nuanced exploration of students' thinking processes, difficulties encountered, and the strategies they developed to overcome paraphrasing issues. This combination of instruments ensures triangulation, enhancing the credibility and validity of the findings by capturing multiple perspectives and experiences.

The data gathered from the questionnaires and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved identifying key themes and patterns that emerged from the participants' responses. The researcher organized the data into categories such as paraphrasing techniques, types of challenges, and tool preferences. Each transcript was examined in detail to determine recurring strategies or insights that students shared. The analysis also involved a comparative lens, where similarities and differences between manual and digital paraphrasing approaches were highlighted. Through this process, the researcher could discern how specific methods influenced the clarity, originality, and academic integrity of students' writing.

Lastly, the methodology chapter includes a research timeline that details the stages of the study from planning, data collection, and analysis to final reporting (Creswell, 2014). This timeline serves as a guide to ensure that the research was conducted systematically and within the planned schedule. The researcher maintained ethical considerations by ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation throughout the study. Overall, the methodology employed in this research supports a comprehensive and reflective examination of how EFL students navigate the complex task of paraphrasing in academic writing, particularly within the high-stakes context of research proposal development.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings

The results of the study present rich insights into the paraphrasing experiences of EFL students and the specific strategies they employ while writing their research proposals. Through the analysis of questionnaires and interviews, it became evident that students using manual and digital methods encountered both shared and unique challenges. Those who relied on manual paraphrasing reported investing considerable time and mental effort in comprehending source materials before rephrasing them in their own words. They acknowledged that paraphrasing was not merely about replacing words with synonyms, but required a deep understanding of the original text. These students frequently mentioned difficulties with grammar, sentence structure, and maintaining coherence when rewording content manually.

Manual paraphrasers typically employed a range of linguistic strategies to achieve clarity and originality. They used techniques such as substituting synonyms, changing the voice of sentences (active to passive and vice versa), and restructuring sentence patterns. Some participants revealed that reading the original text multiple times helped them internalize the meaning, which they then attempted to express in simpler, clearer language. Despite the difficulty, many manual paraphrasers believed their method allowed them to produce more natural and academically appropriate sentences. However, the downside of this approach was the amount of time required and the cognitive load involved, especially when dealing with unfamiliar or technical vocabulary.

Conversely, students who used digital paraphrasing tools described a different set of experiences. These participants emphasized the convenience and speed offered by software like QuillBot and Grammarly. Digital tools were used to automatically generate paraphrased versions of source material, which students then reviewed and edited. While some students appreciated the tools' assistance with grammar and vocabulary, they also expressed concerns about the reliability of the results. Often, the paraphrased output lacked coherence or altered the original meaning, necessitating careful post-editing. This step was crucial to ensure that the final version preserved the integrity of the source while adhering to academic standards.

The most notable finding was the emergence of a hybrid strategy adopted by several participants. These students combined both manual and digital techniques to optimize their paraphrasing process. For example, they would input text into a digital paraphrasing tool to get a rough draft and then manually edit it to improve accuracy and flow. Others began by manually

summarizing a source and later checked their version using AI tools for grammar and stylistic refinement. This blended approach was seen as the most effective, allowing students to balance efficiency with critical thinking and originality. These students reported feeling more confident in the quality of their work and more secure against the risk of plagiarism.

In summary, the results demonstrate that both manual and digital paraphrasing approaches have distinct strengths and limitations. Manual paraphrasing fosters deeper comprehension and allows for greater customization, but it demands more time and skill. Digital tools enhance productivity and help with language accuracy, yet often require additional editing to correct errors or mismatched meanings. The combined method offered a practical solution, bridging the gaps between both strategies. These findings suggest that paraphrasing is a multifaceted skill, and students benefit most when they are equipped with a range of strategies and the ability to critically assess the output of digital tools.

Discussion

1. The challenges EFL students encounter when paraphrasing the source content in their proposal

The discussion reveals that EFL students face multiple challenges when attempting to paraphrase source material, whether manually or digitally. In manual paraphrasing, students struggle with deeply understanding the original text, especially if it contains complex academic vocabulary or abstract ideas. This difficulty is compounded by their limited grammar mastery, which often leads to awkward sentence constructions or meaning distortion. Furthermore, students find it hard to maintain the balance between rewording a sentence and preserving its original meaning, leading to fears of accidental plagiarism.

Students using digital paraphrasing tools face a different set of problems. Although tools like QuillBot offer convenience and speed, they often produce paraphrased texts that are either grammatically flawed or semantically inaccurate. Students reported that digital tools sometimes altered the intended meaning of the original sentence or failed to adapt to the academic tone required in formal writing. Additionally, because these tools cannot fully grasp contextual subtleties, their outputs require careful post-editing, which students may not always be equipped to do effectively.

Another challenge faced by students is time pressure and workload. When students are overwhelmed by multiple academic tasks, they tend to rely more heavily on digital tools, which may lead to a passive learning experience. Instead of learning how to paraphrase through practice, students may depend on AI outputs without fully understanding the content they are paraphrasing. This results in surface-level revisions and limited skill development.

Overall, the discussion highlights that while both methods present useful advantages, neither fully eliminates the core problem: the need for comprehension, academic language competence, and critical thinking. The challenges identified point to a gap in paraphrasing instruction in the curriculum, where students are left to figure out strategies independently, often through trial and error.

Therefore, the study recommends more structured training and guided practice in paraphrasing, emphasizing both comprehension of content and linguistic reformulation, to help EFL students overcome these persistent challenges in academic writing.

2. The strategies do EFL students employ when paraphrasing content in the process of arranging a research proposal using AI (digitally) and not using AI (manually)

The findings of the second research question show that students who paraphrase manually adopt several active and reflective strategies. These include reading the original text multiple times to internalize meaning, identifying key ideas, and then expressing them in their own

words using synonyms or by altering sentence structures. They also rely on techniques such as converting active to passive voice (and vice versa), summarizing, and simplifying long or complex phrases. These strategies are rooted in understanding rather than direct substitution, which helps students produce clearer, more original paraphrases that reflect their voice.

Students who use digital tools like QuillBot often begin by inputting the original sentence into the software and then selecting from different paraphrasing “modes” (such as formal or creative). While these tools quickly generate alternate versions of the input, students are aware that the first output is rarely perfect. Most participants edit the result, adjusting vocabulary and sentence flow to better fit their academic context. This post-editing process reflects a strategy of combining machine output with human judgment, showing a level of awareness about the limitations of AI (Zhao & Resnick, 2015).

Some students develop a hybrid approach, which the study highlights as particularly effective. These students use digital tools to speed up the process but rely on manual revision to maintain meaning, tone, and coherence. For example, a student might use a digital tool to generate a first draft, then manually revise it based on their understanding of the source and target audience. This strategy helps balance the need for efficiency with the demand for academic quality.

Interestingly, both groups, manual and digital, use trial-and-error as a core strategy. Students often attempt several versions of a sentence before choosing the one that best conveys their intended meaning. They also rely on peer feedback or re-reading the paraphrased content aloud to check for clarity. While their methods differ in execution, the underlying goal is the same: to produce paraphrased content that is accurate, clear, and original.

In conclusion, the discussion shows that successful paraphrasing depends not just on the tools or methods used, but on students' ability to reflect, evaluate, and revise. Training students to combine these strategies, rather than relying on one approach, will empower them to become more independent and ethical academic writers.

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the perspectives of students on the use of ChatGPT as a supporting tool in writing research proposals, as well as the challenges they faced during the process. The findings reveal that students generally view ChatGPT as an effective tool that significantly aids in generating ideas, refining writing, and enhancing the overall quality and efficiency of their academic work. ChatGPT's ability to provide instant feedback, simplify complex topics, and offer structured content has been highly valued by students, leading to a more streamlined and less overwhelming writing process.

However, the research also uncovered several challenges associated with using ChatGPT. These challenges primarily stem from the need for precise and well-crafted prompts to obtain relevant and accurate information from the tool. Students experienced difficulties when ChatGPT provided biased, outdated, or irrelevant information, which often necessitated additional research and verification. Despite these challenges, students have developed effective strategies, such as refining prompts and supplementing ChatGPT's outputs with external sources, to overcome these obstacles and maximize the tool's benefits.

In conclusion, while ChatGPT is a valuable asset in the research proposal writing process, it should be used as a complement to traditional academic skills. Its effectiveness largely depends on the user's ability to manage and refine the input provided to the tool. Thus, the careful integration of ChatGPT with critical thinking and manual research methods can lead to the production of high-quality, academically rigorous proposals.

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