



Enhancing Paraphrasing Skills for First-Year Students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University

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Abstract

This study investigates paraphrasing skills among first-year students at Hanoi Open University, addressing a crucial aspect of academic writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Through a mixed-methods approach, involving a survey of 75 students and faculty interviews, the research reveals significant challenges in paraphrasing proficiency. Key findings include low confidence in paraphrasing abilities (60% lacking confidence), infrequent use in classes (85% never using the skill), and misconceptions about paraphrasing techniques (40% relying on copying). Despite these challenges, 80% of students recognize paraphrasing's importance, and 83% express a desire to improve. Primary obstacles identified are limited vocabulary (45%) and difficulty in sentence restructuring (30%). The study highlights a critical gap between awareness of paraphrasing's importance and practical application skills. Recommendations include integrating regular paraphrasing exercises across courses, implementing targeted vocabulary and sentence restructuring workshops, and developing online resources for self-study. This research contributes to understanding EFL students' paraphrasing challenges and provides practical strategies for enhancing academic writing instruction in Vietnamese higher education contexts.

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1. Introduction

Paraphrasing, a cornerstone of academic writing, poses a significant challenge for first-year students at Hanoi Open University, where English is taught as a foreign language. This essential skill, which involves restating ideas in one's own words, is crucial for demonstrating comprehension, integrating sources, avoiding plagiarism, and developing critical thinking abilities. As students transition from high school to university-level academic expectations, the mastery of paraphrasing becomes increasingly important. However, many struggle with this aspect of academic literacy, highlighting a need for targeted intervention. This study aims to investigate the current state of paraphrasing skills among first-year students at Hanoi Open University and to propose effective strategies for improvement. By examining the current skill levels, identifying main challenges, exploring students' perceptions of paraphrasing's importance, and developing enhancement strategies, this research seeks to contribute to the improvement of academic writing instruction. The findings of this study have the potential to not only benefit Hanoi Open University but also similar institutions across Vietnam, addressing a critical need in higher education for more effective paraphrasing instruction and support.

2. Literature Review

Paraphrasing, a complex cognitive process integral to academic writing, involves restating an author's ideas using different words and structures while preserving the original meaning. It serves multiple crucial functions: demonstrating comprehension, facilitating idea synthesis, and maintaining academic integrity. For EFL students, particularly those transitioning to university-level studies, mastering this skill presents significant challenges.

These include limited vocabulary, difficulties with syntactic reformulation, and cultural-linguistic barriers. Research by Keck (2006) ^[11] and Shi (2012) ^[24] indicates a strong correlation between paraphrasing proficiency and overall academic writing ability, yet many EFL students struggle, often resorting to patchwriting or excessive quotation. Common paraphrasing techniques, such as synonym substitution, sentence restructuring, and idea reorganization, require not just linguistic skill but also critical thinking and deep text comprehension. Studies by Hirvela and Du (2013) ^[9] and Howard et al. (2010) ^[10] emphasize the need for explicit instruction in these techniques, integrated within a broader framework of academic literacy. As universities like Hanoi Open University strive to enhance their students' academic writing skills, understanding and addressing these paraphrasing challenges becomes increasingly crucial, highlighting the need for targeted research and pedagogical interventions in this area.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to examine paraphrasing skills among first-year students at Hanoi Open University, combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. The research involved 75 first-year English majors, aged 18-20, selected through purposive sampling, and five faculty members from the English Department. Data collection utilized two primary instruments: a survey questionnaire for students and semi-structured interviews for faculty. The student survey, comprising 8 closed and open-ended questions, assessed self-perceived paraphrasing abilities, usage frequency, conceptual understanding, perceived importance, challenges, and improvement desires. Faculty interviews explored observations of student skills, common mistakes, current teaching methods, and improvement suggestions. The survey was administered during class sessions, while individual faculty interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent. Quantitative data underwent descriptive statistical analysis, with open-ended responses coded for thematic patterns. Interview data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify key insights into challenges and potential solutions.

4. Results

4.1 Student Survey Results

4.1.1 Self-perceived Paraphrasing Ability

The survey results regarding students' self-perceived paraphrasing ability reveal a significant challenge in academic writing skills among first-year students at Hanoi Open University. A striking 60% of respondents reported lacking confidence in their ability to paraphrase fluently, while only 35% expressed assurance in their skills, with a small 5% uncertain about their capabilities. This distribution highlights a critical skills gap, suggesting that the majority of students struggle with this essential aspect of academic writing. The high percentage of students acknowledging their limitations indicates a widespread awareness of the issue, which could serve as a motivational factor for targeted improvement efforts. However, the 35% expressing confidence may benefit from objective assessment to ensure their self-perception aligns with actual proficiency. These findings underscore the urgent need for curriculum evaluation and the implementation of more focused instruction and practice in paraphrasing techniques.

Addressing this skills gap is crucial for enhancing students' overall academic writing competence and preparing them for the rigorous demands of university-level scholarship.

Table 1: Students' Self-perceived Paraphrasing Ability

Response	Number of Students	Percentage
Yes	26	35%
No	45	60%
Not sure	4	5%
Total	75	100%

*Source: Survey results, 2024

4.2 Frequency of Paraphrasing Use in Classes

The survey results regarding the frequency of paraphrasing use in classes reveal a critical gap in the practical application of this essential academic skill among first-year students at Hanoi Open University. An overwhelming 85% of respondents reported never using paraphrasing skills in their classes, while only 15% indicated occasional use, and strikingly, not a single student reported always employing this technique. This alarming distribution suggests a significant disconnect between the theoretical importance of paraphrasing and its actual implementation in academic settings. Such findings point to potential issues within the curriculum, possibly indicating insufficient emphasis on or opportunities for paraphrasing practice. The complete absence of regular users further underscores the severity of this problem, hinting at possible misconceptions about the nature and appropriate use of paraphrasing. These results highlight an urgent need for curriculum review and the development of targeted strategies to integrate paraphrasing more consistently across various courses and assignments. Addressing this issue could significantly enhance students' academic writing skills and better prepare them for the rigorous demands of university-level scholarship.

Table 2: Frequency of Paraphrasing Use in Classes

Frequency	Number of Students	Percentage
Sometimes	11	15%
Never	64	85%
Always	0	0%
Total	75	100%

*Source: Survey results, 2024

4.3 Paraphrasing Techniques Used by Students

The analysis of paraphrasing techniques used by first-year students at Hanoi Open University reveals concerning trends in their approach to this crucial academic skill. Among the 75 students surveyed, a significant 40% (30 students) reported relying primarily on copying when attempting to paraphrase, indicating a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept. This high percentage suggests that many students may be inadvertently engaging in plagiarism or patchwriting rather than effective paraphrasing. Meanwhile, 35% (26 students) stated they select key information, which, while a step in the right direction, falls short of true paraphrasing. Only 25% (19 students) actually attempt to rewrite information in their own words, the essence of effective paraphrasing. This distribution paints a picture of a student body struggling with the core principles of paraphrasing, highlighting a critical need for targeted instruction and practice. The prevalence of copying and mere information selection over genuine rewriting suggests that students may lack the confidence, skills, or understanding necessary to engage in proper

paraphrasing. These findings underscore the urgency of implementing more effective teaching strategies to help students grasp the concept of paraphrasing and develop the skills to apply it correctly in their academic writing.

Table 3: Paraphrasing Techniques Used by Students

Technique	Number of Students	Percentage
Copy	30	40%
Select key information	26	35%
Rewrite	19	25%
Total	75	100%

*Source: Survey results, 2024

4.4 Perceived Importance of Paraphrasing

The survey results concerning students' perception of the importance of paraphrasing reveal a striking contrast between awareness and practice among first-year students at Hanoi Open University. Of the 75 students surveyed, an overwhelming majority of 80% (60 students) recognized paraphrasing as essential, demonstrating a high level of theoretical understanding of its significance in academic writing. This widespread acknowledgment of paraphrasing's importance is particularly noteworthy when juxtaposed against the previously reported low frequency of its use in classes. Interestingly, only 10% (8 students) viewed paraphrasing as not important, while another 10% (7 students) were unsure of its significance. This distribution suggests that most students are cognizant of the value of paraphrasing in their academic pursuits, despite their struggles with its application. The disconnect between this high level of perceived importance and the previously reported low confidence and infrequent use of paraphrasing skills points to a complex challenge in academic skill development. It indicates that mere awareness is insufficient for skill acquisition and application, highlighting the need for more practical, hands-on approaches in teaching paraphrasing. This gap between recognition and practice presents both a challenge and an opportunity for educators to leverage students' awareness as a motivational foundation for improving paraphrasing skills through targeted, practical interventions.

Table 4: Students' Perception of Paraphrasing Importance

Perception	Number of Students	Percentage
Essential	60	80%
Not important	8	10%
Not sure	7	10%
Total	75	100%

*Source: Survey results, 2024

4.5 Difficulties in Paraphrasing

The analysis of difficulties encountered in paraphrasing by first-year students at Hanoi Open University reveals a multifaceted challenge in acquiring this crucial academic skill. Among the 75 students surveyed, the most prevalent obstacle, cited by 45% (34 students), was limited vocabulary, underscoring the fundamental role of lexical knowledge in effective paraphrasing. Following closely, 30% (23 students) reported difficulty in restructuring sentences, highlighting the complex cognitive task of reformulating ideas while maintaining original meaning. Understanding the original text posed a challenge for 15% (11 students), indicating that comprehension issues also impede successful paraphrasing. Notably, 10% (7 students) expressed fear of unintentional

plagiarism, suggesting an awareness of academic integrity coupled with uncertainty about proper paraphrasing techniques. This distribution of difficulties paints a picture of students grappling with multiple aspects of the paraphrasing process, from basic language skills to higher-order thinking and academic ethics. The predominance of vocabulary and sentence restructuring challenges points to specific areas where targeted instruction could yield significant improvements. Furthermore, the range of difficulties identified underscores the complexity of paraphrasing as a skill, requiring a multifaceted approach to teaching that addresses linguistic competence, cognitive strategies, and ethical considerations in academic writing.

Table 5: Difficulties Encountered in Paraphrasing

Difficulty	Number of Students	Percentage
Limited vocabulary	34	45%
Difficulty in restructuring sentences	23	30%
Understanding the original text	11	15%
Fear of unintentional plagiarism	7	10%
Total	75	100%

*Source: Survey results, 2024

4.6 Desire for Skill Improvement

The survey results regarding students' desire to improve their paraphrasing skills reveal a highly positive attitude towards learning and skill development among first-year students at Hanoi Open University. Of the 75 students surveyed, an overwhelming majority of 83% (62 students) expressed a clear desire to enhance their paraphrasing abilities. This strong inclination towards improvement stands in stark contrast to the previously reported low confidence and infrequent use of paraphrasing skills, suggesting a recognition of the skill's importance and a willingness to address perceived deficiencies. Notably, not a single student responded negatively to the prospect of improvement, while 17% (13 students) indicated that their desire to improve depends on various factors. This distribution paints a picture of a student body that is largely motivated and open to learning, providing a fertile ground for educational interventions. The absence of outright resistance to improvement, coupled with the high percentage of eager learners, suggests that targeted paraphrasing instruction could be well-received and potentially highly effective. This positive attitude presents a valuable opportunity for educators to implement enhanced teaching strategies, workshops, or additional resources aimed at developing paraphrasing skills. The results underscore the potential for successful skill development initiatives, provided they are designed to harness and maintain this existing motivation among students.

Table 6: Students' Desire to Improve Paraphrasing Skills

Response	Number of Students	Percentage
Yes	62	83%
No	0	0%
Depends	13	17%
Total	75	100%

*Source: Survey results, 2024

Overall, these results reveal a significant gap between students' awareness of the importance of paraphrasing and their actual skills and practice. The data highlights specific

areas for improvement, particularly in vocabulary development and sentence restructuring techniques. The strong desire for improvement among students suggests that targeted interventions could be well-received and potentially highly effective in enhancing paraphrasing skills among first-year students at Hanoi Open University.

5. Discussion

5.1 Analysis of Factors Affecting Students' Paraphrasing Skills

The results of this study reveal a complex interplay of factors affecting the paraphrasing skills of first-year students at Hanoi Open University. The low self-perceived ability in paraphrasing (60% lacking confidence) coupled with infrequent use in classes (85% never using the skill) points to a significant gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. This discrepancy aligns with findings from Hirvela and Du (2013) ^[9], who noted similar challenges among EFL students in integrating paraphrasing into their academic writing practices.

The prevalence of copying (40%) as a paraphrasing technique indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept, echoing Shi's (2012) ^[24] observations of Chinese EFL students relying heavily on patchwriting. This suggests that the issue extends beyond Hanoi Open University and is a common challenge in EFL contexts.

Limited vocabulary emerged as the primary difficulty (45%), followed by sentence restructuring (30%). These findings corroborate Keck's (2014) ^[12] research, which highlighted vocabulary limitations as a significant barrier to effective paraphrasing among L2 writers. The combination of these challenges underscores the need for a multi-faceted approach to paraphrasing instruction, addressing both linguistic and cognitive aspects of the skill.

5.2 Comparison with Previous Research

The high recognition of paraphrasing's importance (80%) among students, despite low practical application, aligns with Howard et al.'s (2010) ^[10] findings on the disconnect between awareness and practice in academic writing skills. This suggests that mere knowledge of a skill's importance is insufficient for its effective implementation.

The difficulties reported by students in this study, particularly in vocabulary and sentence restructuring, mirror those identified in broader EFL research. For instance, Pecorari's (2003) ^[17] work on plagiarism and paraphrasing among international students highlighted similar challenges, emphasizing the need for explicit instruction in paraphrasing techniques.

5.3 Proposed Strategies for Enhancing Paraphrasing Skills

Integrated Paraphrasing Exercises: Incorporate regular paraphrasing activities across various courses to increase practical application, addressing the current lack of use in classes.

Vocabulary Enhancement Programs: Develop targeted vocabulary building exercises, focusing on academic language to address the primary challenge faced by students.

Sentence Restructuring Workshops: Conduct dedicated sessions on sentence restructuring techniques, providing students with practical tools for reformulating ideas.

Explicit Instruction on Paraphrasing Techniques: Implement clear, step-by-step guidance on effective paraphrasing

methods, as suggested by Howard et al. (2010) ^[10].

Technology-Aided Learning: Utilize online resources and tools for self-study and practice, catering to the 83% of students expressing a desire to improve their skills.

Peer Review Sessions: Introduce collaborative paraphrasing exercises to foster peer learning and increase confidence in applying the skill.

5.4 Implications for Teaching and Learning

The findings of this study have several implications for academic writing instruction at Hanoi Open University and similar EFL contexts:

Curriculum Review: There is a clear need to reassess how paraphrasing is taught and integrated into the curriculum, ensuring more opportunities for practical application.

Teacher Training: Faculty may benefit from additional training on effective methods for teaching paraphrasing, focusing on addressing the specific challenges identified in this study.

Assessment Practices: Incorporating paraphrasing more explicitly into assignment criteria and assessments could encourage increased use and proficiency.

Student Awareness: While students recognize the importance of paraphrasing, efforts should be made to bridge the gap between this awareness and actual practice.

Long-term Skill Development: Given the foundational nature of paraphrasing in academic writing, a long-term, progressive approach to skill development throughout the degree program may be beneficial.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex challenges faced by first-year EFL students in mastering paraphrasing skills. The findings underscore the need for a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to paraphrasing instruction that addresses both linguistic and cognitive aspects of the skill. By implementing targeted strategies and fostering a supportive learning environment, Hanoi Open University can significantly enhance students' paraphrasing abilities, thereby improving their overall academic writing proficiency.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study investigated the paraphrasing skills of first-year students at Hanoi Open University, revealing several critical insights: **Low Confidence and Usage:** 60% of students lack confidence in their paraphrasing abilities, with 85% never using these skills in class; **Misconceptions about Techniques:** 40% of students rely on copying rather than proper paraphrasing, indicating a fundamental misunderstanding of the concept; **Recognition of Importance:** Despite low usage, 80% of students recognize the importance of paraphrasing in academic writing; **Primary Challenges:** Limited vocabulary (45%) and difficulty in sentence restructuring (30%) emerged as the main obstacles to effective paraphrasing; **Desire for Improvement:** 83% of students expressed a strong desire to enhance their paraphrasing skills.

These findings highlight a significant gap between students' awareness of paraphrasing's importance and their practical ability to apply this skill effectively in academic contexts.

6.2 Limitations of the Study

While this research provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged: **Sample Size:** The study was limited to 75 first-year students from one university, which may not be fully representative of all EFL students in

Vietnam; Self-Reporting: The reliance on self-reported data may not always accurately reflect students' actual skills or practices; Context Specificity: The study focused on a specific EFL context at Hanoi Open University, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings to other institutions or countries; Lack of Objective Skill Assessment: The study did not include a practical assessment of students' paraphrasing abilities, relying instead on self-perception and reported usage.

6.3 Suggestions for Future Research

To build upon this study's findings, future research could: Conduct a longitudinal study to track the development of paraphrasing skills over the course of students' academic careers; Implement and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed enhancement strategies through action research; Expand the study to include multiple universities across Vietnam for a more comprehensive understanding of EFL students' paraphrasing skills; Incorporate objective assessments of paraphrasing skills to correlate with self-reported data; Investigate the perspectives of instructors and their teaching practices related to paraphrasing to provide a more holistic view of the issue.

6.4 Practical Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed for enhancing paraphrasing instruction at Hanoi Open University: Curriculum Integration: Incorporate regular paraphrasing exercises across various courses to increase practical application and familiarity with the skill; Targeted Skill Development: Implement focused workshops on vocabulary enhancement and sentence restructuring techniques to address the primary challenges faced by students; Technology-Enhanced Learning: Develop online resources and interactive tools for self-paced practice and assessment of paraphrasing skills.; Faculty Development: Provide training for instructors on effective methods for teaching and assessing paraphrasing skills; Awareness Campaigns: Launch initiatives to bridge the gap between students' awareness of paraphrasing's importance and their actual practice; Collaborative Learning: Encourage peer review and group paraphrasing exercises to foster a collaborative learning environment and increase confidence in skill application.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical need for enhanced paraphrasing instruction in EFL contexts, particularly at Hanoi Open University. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing targeted strategies, the university can significantly improve students' paraphrasing skills, thereby enhancing their overall academic writing proficiency. This, in turn, will better prepare students for the demands of higher education and future professional endeavors where effective communication and academic integrity are paramount.

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