ENHANCING PARAPHRASING SKILLS FOR THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *Paraphrasing is a core component of academic writing and a fundamental requirement for avoiding plagiarism and demonstrating academic literacy. However, first-year students at Hanoi Open University often struggle with paraphrasing because of limited lexical resources, overreliance on word-for-word translation, and insufficient awareness of source-integration conventions. This study investigates the effectiveness of a strategy-based instructional intervention designed to enhance students' paraphrasing competence. Using a quasi-experimental design, 100 first-year English-major students were divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental group received explicit training in paraphrasing strategies, including lexical substitution, syntactic transformation, idea restructuring, and citation techniques over an eight-week instructional period. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, analytic writing rubrics, and student perception questionnaires. Results indicate significant improvement in the experimental group in lexical variation, grammatical restructuring, and reduced dependence on the source text. Students also reported increased confidence and awareness of academic integrity. The findings suggest that systematic instruction grounded in academic literacy theory can substantially improve paraphrasing performance among EFL freshmen. Pedagogical implications for academic writing courses in Vietnamese higher education are discussed.*

Keywords: *paraphrasing skills, academic writing, EFL students, academic literacy, source use*

I. Introduction

Academic writing in English has become a central academic competence in higher education, especially in contexts shaped by internationalization and digital transformation. Within this environment, students are expected not only to use accurate language but also to engage critically and ethically with disciplinary knowledge. Paraphrasing therefore plays a pivotal role, as it connects reading comprehension, critical thinking, and academic integrity. Conceptually, effective paraphrasing involves reformulating source ideas through meaningful lexical, syntactic, and discourse changes while preserving original meaning. It reflects deep cognitive processing and signals a learner's developing academic literacy and socialization into scholarly discourse communities.

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Despite its importance, paraphrasing remains highly challenging for EFL learners. In Vietnam, pre-university English education has traditionally emphasized grammar and exam performance rather than higher-order writing skills. Consequently, many students enter university insufficiently prepared for the epistemological demands of academic writing, including paraphrasing, synthesizing sources, and constructing authorial voice. This issue is particularly visible among first-year English majors at Hanoi Open University (HOU), where students from diverse backgrounds must quickly meet university-level discourse expectations.

Classroom observations indicate frequent reliance on direct copying, patchwriting, or superficial synonym replacement. Such practices not only risk plagiarism but also reveal limited understanding of paraphrasing as a knowledge-construction process. The problem is intensified by the lack of systematic, explicit instruction in paraphrasing and by the growing use of AI writing tools, which may encourage surface-level reformulation. These conditions highlight the need for empirical research that treats paraphrasing as a distinct academic competence and evaluates targeted instructional approaches for first-year EFL students.

II. Theoretical foundation and research questions

2.1. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical perspective that brings together academic literacy theory, cognitive models of language processing, sociocultural learning theory, second language (L2) writing research, and scholarship on academic integrity. Within this synthesis, paraphrasing is conceptualized not as a peripheral linguistic technique but as a complex academic competence located at the intersection of language, cognition, and disciplinary knowledge construction.

** Academic literacy as a conceptual lens*

From an academic literacy perspective, writing is understood as a socially situated practice embedded in disciplinary discourse communities. Learning to write academically involves more than acquiring grammatical accuracy; it requires developing awareness of how knowledge is produced, represented, and negotiated. Paraphrasing functions as a critical mechanism in this process, enabling learners to appropriate and transform source knowledge. This conceptualization is supported by empirical evidence from Wette (2010), who demonstrates that explicit instruction in paraphrasing significantly enhances students' ability to engage with source texts in a more analytically grounded and academically appropriate manner.

** Cognitive processing and meaning transformation*

Cognitive theories emphasize that effective paraphrasing requires deep semantic processing, including comprehension, abstraction, and meaning re-encoding. Surface-level strategies such as synonym substitution reflect shallow processing. Empirical findings by Keck (2006) indicate that L2 learners predominantly rely on near-copy and minimally revised paraphrases, highlighting limited cognitive transformation. These patterns underscore the need for instructional approaches that

promote deeper engagement with meaning rather than mechanical reformulation.

* *Sociocultural mediation and scaffolded development*

Sociocultural theory offers a complementary perspective by framing paraphrasing development as a mediated, socially supported process. Learning occurs through interaction, feedback, and cultural tools, including language, instructional materials, and digital technologies. Within this view, paraphrasing competence develops through scaffolded practice situated in the learner's zone of proximal development. Teacher modeling, guided comparison between source and reformulated texts, peer collaboration, and structured feedback act as mediational means that gradually enable learners to internalize reformulation strategies. This theoretical orientation underpins the study's emphasis on explicit instruction and structured support.

* *Second language writing and source-based writing*

Research in L2 writing identifies paraphrasing as a central competence in source-based writing. Shi (2012) argues that textual borrowing should be understood as a developmental strategy shaped by linguistic constraints and task demands. From this perspective, patchwriting represents an intermediate stage rather than a failure. However, empirical studies also indicate that without explicit instruction, learners often remain at this stage, struggling to achieve syntactic flexibility and semantic accuracy.

* *Academic integrity as an ethical dimension*

Scholarship on academic integrity situates paraphrasing within an ethical framework. Inadequate paraphrasing competence is widely recognized as a major source of unintentional plagiarism among novice EFL writers. Empirical evidence suggests that instructional interventions integrating linguistic training with ethical awareness significantly improve both writing quality and responsible source use, reinforcing paraphrasing's dual linguistic and ethical nature.

Taken together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives position paraphrasing as a multidimensional academic literacy practice involving cognitive transformation, sociocultural mediation, linguistic control, and ethical awareness. Despite growing research, a critical gap remains, particularly in Vietnamese EFL contexts at the first-year university level, where empirical, intervention-based studies are still limited. This gap provides the foundation for the present study.

2.2. Research questions

Grounded in the theoretical framework, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. To what extent does strategy-based, explicit paraphrasing instruction improve the paraphrasing competence of first-year English majors at Hanoi Open University?

2. Which dimensions of paraphrasing competence (lexical variation, syntactic transformation, semantic accuracy, and academic tone) show the most significant development following the instructional intervention?

3. How do students perceive the instructional process and their own development in paraphrasing skills?

4. In what ways does improved paraphrasing competence relate to students' awareness of academic integrity and responsible source use?

These questions aim to generate both performance-based and perceptual evidence regarding the development of paraphrasing as an academic literacy competence in an EFL context.

III. Methodology

3.1. Theoretical framework

This study draws on academic literacy theory, cognitive learning theory, sociocultural perspectives, and research on academic integrity. Paraphrasing is viewed not as a mechanical language task but as a complex academic literacy practice combining comprehension, reformulation, and ethical source use.

From an academic literacy perspective, writing is socially situated within disciplinary discourse communities. Paraphrasing enables novice writers to appropriate knowledge and develop an academic voice. Cognitive theory highlights the need for deep semantic processing, where learners analyze meaning and re-encode ideas using new lexical and syntactic forms; surface synonym replacement reflects shallow learning.

Sociocultural theory frames paraphrasing development as a scaffolded, mediated process supported by interaction, feedback, and tools, including digital technologies. Finally, academic integrity research underscores paraphrasing as both a linguistic and ethical competence, essential for preventing unintentional plagiarism and ensuring responsible academic participation.

3.2. Research theoretical framework

The framework integrates three interdependent constructs: paraphrasing competence, instructional intervention, and academic integrity outcomes. Paraphrasing competence is operationalized as a multidimensional ability involving lexical variation, syntactic transformation, semantic accuracy, and appropriate academic tone, reflecting both linguistic control and discourse awareness. The instructional intervention functions as the mediating mechanism, providing explicit strategy instruction, scaffolded practice, analytic feedback, and guided use of digital tools as cognitive supports rather than replacements for learner effort. Academic integrity is positioned as a developmental outcome of improved academic literacy, expressed through reduced reliance on near-copy practices and more transparent use of sources. Learner cognition and perception are treated as contextual variables influencing how instruction is internalized and transferred to authentic writing tasks.

3.3. Research methodology

The study employs a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design to ensure methodological rigor within an authentic educational context. Two intact classes, totaling 100 students, were assigned as experimental (n=50) and control (n=50) groups and completed pre- and post-test paraphrasing tasks to measure instructional impact. Quantitative data are complemented by questionnaires, focus groups, and lecturer interviews to capture learner perceptions, strategies, and instructional processes. Secondary data, including course documents and student writing samples, provide contextual support.

Data analysis combines descriptive and inferential statistics to determine the significance of performance changes, alongside thematic analysis of qualitative

data to explain developmental patterns. Piloted instruments, analytic scoring rubrics, rater training, inter-rater agreement checks, and methodological triangulation ensure reliability and validity, enhancing the credibility and interpretive depth of the findings.

IV. Findings and discussion

4.1. Research findings

This section reports and interprets the study's empirical findings in a systematic, theory-informed manner. In accordance with the mixed-methods quasi-experimental design outlined in Chapter III, the findings are derived primarily from quantitative pre-test and post-test data, supplemented by qualitative evidence from questionnaires, focus group discussions, lecturer interviews, and document analysis. This section progresses from baseline assessment to post-intervention outcomes, followed by fine-grained dimensional analysis and learner attitudinal evidence.

**Baseline paraphrasing competence of first-year students*

Before the instructional intervention, a diagnostic paraphrasing pre-test was administered to both the experimental and control groups. This assessment served two purposes: first, to establish baseline equivalence between groups; and second, to identify prevailing paraphrasing patterns among first-year English majors at Hanoi Open University.

Table 4.1. Pre-test paraphrasing performance of experimental and control groups

(Maximum score: 10)

Group	N	Mean score	Standard deviation
Experimental group	50	5.42	0.78
Control group	50	5.38	0.79

(Source: Author's survey data)

As presented in Table 4.1, the pre-test results indicate that the two groups were virtually equivalent in paraphrasing competence, with a negligible mean difference (0.04) and comparable standard deviations. This initial equivalence strengthens internal validity, allowing post-test differences to be attributed to the instructional intervention rather than pre-existing variation.

Qualitative analysis reveals a consistent reliance on lexical substitution with minimal syntactic transformation, often resulting in awkward or distorted constructions. Many responses also retained the original text structure, reflecting limited discourse-level reorganization. These patterns align with what the literature describes as near-copy paraphrasing or patchwriting, indicating underdeveloped cognitive and linguistic resources for flexible reformulation.

Pedagogically, these findings underscore that paraphrasing difficulties emerge early in university study, thereby justifying the need for explicit instruction at the initial stage of academic writing development.

** Post-intervention paraphrasing performance*

Following the eight-week paraphrasing -focused instructional intervention, a post-test paraphrasing task was administered to both groups under conditions comparable to the pre-test. The post-test matched the pre-test in length, lexical density, conceptual load, and genre to ensure comparability and minimize test-related bias.

Table 4.2. Post-test paraphrasing performance of experimental and control groups

(Maximum score: 10)

Group	N	Mean score	Standard deviation
Experimental group	50	7.86	0.73
Control group	50	5.91	0.81

(Source: Author's survey data)

As shown in Table 4.2, the two groups diverge clearly, with the experimental group improving to 7.86 compared with the control group's modest gain to 5.91. This indicates a shift toward near-proficient paraphrasing in the experimental group, while progress in the control group remains limited.

The reduced score dispersion in the experimental group further suggests that the intervention was broadly effective, supporting more equitable learning outcomes. In contrast, the stable dispersion in the control group reinforces that paraphrasing competence does not develop through general instruction alone, but requires targeted pedagogical intervention.

* *Developmental change within groups*

To examine learning trajectories over time, pre-test and post-test scores were compared within each group.

Table 4.3. Within-group comparison of paraphrasing performance

Group	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Mean gain
Experimental group	5.42	7.86	+2.44
Control group	5.38	5.91	+0.53

(Source: Author's survey data)

Table 4.3 reveals a marked contrast in developmental gains, with the experimental group achieving a substantial increase (+2.44) compared to the control group's marginal improvement (+0.53). This disparity indicates that paraphrasing competence does not develop through general language exposure alone but requires explicit instruction and scaffolded practice.

The magnitude of gain in the experimental group provides strong empirical support for academic literacy models and affirms the intervention's effectiveness in facilitating meaningful learning outcomes.

* *Dimensional analysis of paraphrasing competence*

To move beyond aggregate scores and provide deeper explanatory insight, the analysis examined paraphrasing performance in the experimental group across four analytic dimensions: lexical variation, syntactic transformation, semantic accuracy, and academic tone.

Table 4.4. Experimental group performance by paraphrasing dimension

(Maximum score per dimension: 2.5)

Group	Pre-test mean	Post-test mean	Mean gain
Lexical variation	1.41	2.02	+0.61
Syntactic transformation	1.18	2.11	+0.93
Semantic accuracy	1.52	1.98	+0.46
Academic tone	1.31	1.75	+0.44

(Source: Author's survey data)

As shown in Table 4.4, the largest gains are in syntactic transformation, followed by lexical variation. While improvements in semantic accuracy and academic tone are more moderate, they nonetheless indicate meaningful cognitive and discourse development.

Notably, the greatest improvement occurs in syntactic transformation (+0.93), underscoring the effectiveness of explicit instruction in sentence restructuring (e.g., clause reordering, nominalization, and voice change). Lexical variation (+0.61) also improved considerably, suggesting a shift from surface-level synonym substitution toward more contextually appropriate lexical choices.

Although gains in semantic accuracy (+0.46) and academic tone (+0.44) are less pronounced, they remain pedagogically significant, reflecting deeper engagement with source texts and emerging control of formal academic discourse features.

** Learners' perceptions and attitudinal development*

Learner perceptions were examined through post-intervention questionnaires administered to the experimental group.

Table 4.5. Students' perceptions of paraphrasing instruction and academic integrity

Statement	Mean rating (1-5)
Confidence in paraphrasing academic texts	4.35
Awareness of plagiarism risks	4.48
Usefulness of structured paraphrasing instruction	4.52
Ability to critically evaluate AI-generated paraphrases	4.22
Willingness to apply paraphrasing strategies in future writing	4.46

(Source: Author's survey data)

Table 4.5 summarizes students' perceptions of the instructional process and their development in paraphrasing competence. The results indicate high levels of learner engagement and perceived benefit, with notable gains in confidence and heightened awareness of academic integrity. The strong endorsement of structured instruction suggests that explicit guidance was experienced as enabling rather than restrictive.

Importantly, students also demonstrated a high capacity to critically evaluate AI-generated paraphrases, indicating that the intervention fostered reflective and evaluative skills rather than technological dependency. This finding underscores the potential for integrating AI tools into academic writing pedagogy without compromising learning integrity.

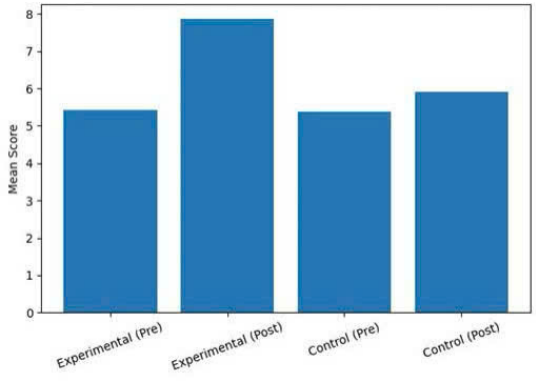


Figure 4.1. Comparison of pre-test and post-test mean scores

(Source: Compiled by the author)

Figure 4.1 visually illustrates the contrast in paraphrasing performance between the experimental and control groups before and after the instructional intervention. While both groups started at nearly identical levels on the pre-test,

the post-test results show a pronounced divergence. The experimental group exhibits a substantial increase in mean score, whereas the control group shows only marginal improvement. This visual pattern reinforces the statistical findings and provides intuitive evidence that the targeted paraphrasing instruction drove the performance gains.

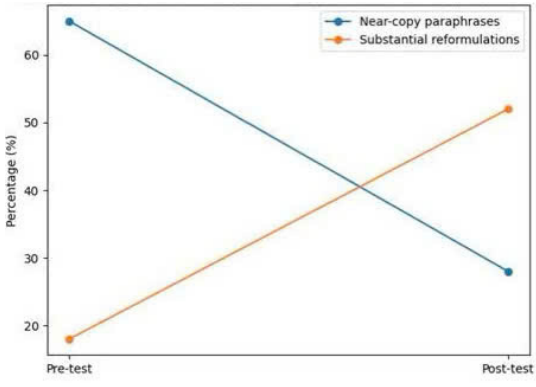


Figure 4.2. Shift in paraphrasing strategy distribution (experimental group)

(Source: Compiled by the author)

Figure 4.2 captures a qualitative transformation in students' paraphrasing strategies within the experimental group. The sharp decline in near-copy paraphrases, accompanied by a substantial rise in flexible reformulations, indicates a fundamental shift in how students engage with source texts. Rather than relying on surface-level lexical substitution, learners increasingly demonstrated structural reorganization and meaning-based reformulation, which are hallmarks of advanced academic literacy.

4.2. Overall assessment

Synthesizing the quantitative and qualitative evidence, the study demonstrates that the paraphrasing-focused instructional intervention produced robust, multidimensional improvements in first-year students' paraphrasing competence. Gains were observed not only at the surface linguistic level but also at deeper syntactic and discourse levels, suggesting meaningful cognitive engagement with source texts. From an academic integrity perspective, the reduction in near-copy strategies and increased awareness of plagiarism norms indicate that enhanced paraphrasing competence contributes directly to more ethical academic writing practices. Importantly, the intervention's effectiveness across a heterogeneous cohort underscores its pedagogical robustness and potential scalability within similar EFL contexts.

4.3. Discussion

The findings corroborate and extend existing international scholarship on paraphrasing in EFL contexts. Consistent with established theories, explicit instruction and scaffolded practice emerged as critical drivers of paraphrasing development. However, the present study advances the field by providing experimentally grounded evidence at the first-year undergraduate level in Vietnam, an under-researched yet pedagogically crucial stage of academic socialization. The pronounced gains in syntactic transformation reaffirm the centrality of sentence-level restructuring in paraphrasing competence. At the same time, the more gradual improvement in semantic accuracy highlights the enduring cognitive complexity of meaning preservation, suggesting the need for sustained instructional support beyond a single intervention cycle.

Importantly, the study contributes to ongoing debates surrounding AI-assisted writing. By demonstrating that guided tool use can coexist with genuine skill development, the findings challenge simplistic dichotomies that portray

technology as either inherently beneficial or detrimental. Instead, they point toward a nuanced pedagogical model in which technology functions as a mediational resource within a principled instructional framework.

V. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that paraphrasing competence among first-year EFL students does not develop incidentally but requires explicit, strategy-based instruction, sustained scaffolding, and systematic feedback. The findings confirm that a structured instructional intervention can produce substantial improvements not only in lexical and syntactic control but also in deeper dimensions of academic literacy, including meaning transformation and responsible source use. Importantly, the observed shift from surface-level modification to meaning-oriented reformulation suggests that paraphrasing development reflects broader cognitive and discourse-level maturation rather than isolated linguistic gains.

From a pedagogical and institutional perspective, these findings carry direct implications for key stakeholders in higher education. For department heads and curriculum designers, it is recommended that paraphrasing be positioned as a core component of first-year academic writing courses, with clearly defined learning outcomes, assessment rubrics, and structured instructional sequences. Embedding paraphrasing instruction early in the curriculum can support students' transition into academic discourse communities and reduce reliance on inappropriate source-use practices.

For teacher educators and academic staff, the results highlight the need for professional development programs that equip instructors with effective strategy-based teaching approaches, including scaffolded practice, model analysis, and formative feedback mechanisms. Such pedagogical alignment is essential to ensure consistency and effectiveness across writing programs.

At the policy level, the study suggests that institutional leaders and higher education policymakers shift from compliance-oriented models of academic integrity to developmental frameworks that integrate skill-building with ethical awareness. Policies should therefore support integrating paraphrasing instruction into curriculum standards and encourage the principled use of digital tools, including AI-assisted writing technologies, as mediational resources rather than substitutes for learning.

Overall, the study provides robust empirical support for rethinking paraphrasing not as a peripheral writing skill but as a foundational element of academic literacy. Systematic, stakeholder-informed implementation of paraphrasing instruction can enhance both the quality and integrity of student writing in EFL higher education contexts.

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NÂNG CAO KỸ NĂNG DIỄN ĐẠT LẠI CHO SINH VIÊN NĂM NHẤT TẠI TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC MỞ HÀ NỘI

Nguyễn Thị Thủy[1]

Tóm tắt: *Diễn đạt lại là một thành tố cốt lõi của viết học thuật và là yêu cầu nền tảng nhằm tránh đạo văn cũng như thể hiện năng lực học thuật. Tuy nhiên, sinh viên năm nhất tại Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội thường gặp nhiều khó khăn trong việc diễn đạt lại do vốn từ vựng hạn chế, xu hướng phụ thuộc vào việc dịch từng từ và nhận thức chưa đầy đủ về các quy ước tích hợp nguồn tài liệu. Nghiên cứu này nhằm đánh giá hiệu quả của một can thiệp giảng dạy dựa trên chiến lược, được thiết kế nhằm nâng cao năng lực diễn đạt lại của sinh viên. Sử dụng thiết kế bán thực nghiệm, 100 sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành Ngôn ngữ Anh được chia thành nhóm đối chứng và nhóm thực nghiệm. Nhóm thực nghiệm được đào tạo tường minh về các chiến lược diễn đạt lại, bao gồm thay thế từ vựng, biến đổi cú pháp, tái cấu trúc ý tưởng và kỹ thuật trích dẫn, trong thời gian tám tuần. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua bài kiểm tra trước - sau, bảng tiêu chí chấm viết phân tích và bảng hỏi về nhận thức của người học. Kết quả cho thấy nhóm thực nghiệm có sự cải thiện đáng kể về mức độ biến đổi từ vựng, tái cấu trúc ngữ pháp và giảm phụ thuộc vào văn bản nguồn. Sinh viên cũng ghi nhận sự gia tăng về mức độ tự tin và nhận thức đối với liêm chính học thuật. Những phát hiện này cho thấy việc giảng dạy có hệ thống, dựa trên lý thuyết năng lực học thuật, có thể cải thiện đáng kể kỹ năng diễn đạt lại của sinh viên EFL năm nhất. Trên cơ sở đó, bài viết đề xuất một số hàm ý sư phạm đối với các học phần viết học thuật trong giáo dục đại học tại Việt Nam.*

Từ khóa: *kỹ năng paraphrasing, viết học thuật, sinh viên EFL, năng lực học thuật, sử dụng nguồn tài liệu*

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