

PARAPHRASING TECHNIQUES AND CHALLENGES IN EFL ACADEMIC WRITING: EVIDENCE FROM INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates paraphrasing techniques, quality, and challenges in EFL academic writing among undergraduate students at IAIN Parepare, Indonesia. Adopting a qualitative approach, data were collected from a paraphrasing test and semi-structured interviews involving 19 English Education students. The analysis integrates Pieterick's framework of paraphrasing strategies, Keck's taxonomy of paraphrasing quality, and Shi's model of learner challenges, supported by thematic coding using NVivo 15. The findings reveal that semantic strategies, particularly synonym substitution, are the most dominant technique (42%), indicating students' reliance on surface-level transformations. In terms of quality, the majority of students (84%) fall into the Moderate Revision category, suggesting partial modification with limited structural and conceptual transformation. The study also identifies linguistic and cognitive challenges as the primary constraints, including limited vocabulary and difficulties in comprehending and reconstructing meaning from source texts. These findings demonstrate that paraphrasing is a complex cognitive-linguistic process shaped by the interaction between language proficiency and higher-order thinking skills. The study contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated perspective that links paraphrasing strategies, quality, and learner challenges within a unified analytical framework. Pedagogically, the findings highlight the need for instructional approaches that move beyond synonym substitution toward developing critical reading, vocabulary expansion, and idea restructuring skills to support more effective and original academic writing.

Keywords: Academic writing, Cognitive-Linguistic Process, EFL learners, Paraphrasing Quality, Paraphrasing Strategies

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental competence in higher education, as it enables students to construct knowledge, engage in scholarly communication, and fulfill academic requirements such as essays, theses, and research publications. In EFL contexts such as Indonesia, this competence becomes more complex due to the dual challenge of mastering both academic conventions and a foreign language (Esperanzate, 2025; Pane, 2023). Unlike English-speaking environments, Indonesian students generally have limited exposure to English in their daily lives, which constrains their linguistic development and affects their

ability to produce effective academic texts (Riski et al., 2025; Wahyuningsih, 2018). Consequently, academic writing is often perceived as a demanding skill, requiring not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to organize ideas coherently, synthesize information, and express meaning with precision (Hasan et al., 2025; Ahmed & Sayed, 2022).

In many Indonesian higher education institutions, including Islamic universities such as IAIN Parepare, academic writing is an essential component of the curriculum. However, students frequently encounter persistent difficulties, particularly when dealing with source-based writing tasks. These challenges are often associated with limited academic vocabulary, insufficient reading practices, and a lack of explicit instruction in paraphrasing and source integration. Previous studies have shown that EFL students commonly struggle with academic writing due to inadequate language proficiency and limited exposure to academic discourse conventions (Kotamjani et al., 2018; Vinh, 2024). As a result, students tend to approach writing tasks procedurally—focusing on completing assignments rather than developing deeper academic literacy skills.

One of the most critical aspects of academic writing is paraphrasing, which enables students to integrate information from sources while maintaining originality. Paraphrasing involves restating ideas using different lexical and syntactic forms without altering the original meaning, and it reflects the writer's ability to process and reconstruct information (Thadphoothon, 2017; Trinh & Nguyen, 2022). In the current academic landscape, where plagiarism detection tools such as Turnitin are widely used, paraphrasing has become a crucial strategy for maintaining academic integrity (Ayunda & Aisya, 2021; Setiawan et al., 2023). Moreover, effective paraphrasing demonstrates not only ethical writing practices but also deep comprehension and critical engagement with source texts (Widodo et al., 2022; Yahia & Egbert, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, paraphrasing is increasingly viewed as a complex cognitive-linguistic process that requires the integration of linguistic knowledge and cognitive skills (Isnaeni & Putera, 2024). Linguistically, students must possess sufficient vocabulary and grammatical competence to express ideas in varied ways. Cognitively, they must understand the source text, identify key ideas, and reorganize them coherently (Madani & Ardianti, 2020). However, previous studies consistently indicate that EFL students experience significant difficulties in both dimensions. Linguistic challenges such as limited vocabulary and weak grammatical control are widely reported (Alaofi, 2020; Aprianto et al., 2024; Mahmoud & Ben, 2025), while cognitive challenges include difficulties in comprehending complex texts and reconstructing meaning (Atilano, 2025; Maneechote, 2022).

As a consequence of these limitations, students tend to rely on surface-level paraphrasing strategies. Several studies have found that synonym substitution is the most commonly used technique among EFL learners, often accompanied by minimal structural modification (Çeşme, 2022; Lia, 2024; Maneechote, 2022). In many cases, students also copy phrases directly from the source text, resulting in what is known as *patchwriting*—a transitional writing strategy where learners attempt to incorporate source material but fail to transform it sufficiently (Anaktotoy et al., 2025; Yavich, 2024). This phenomenon reflects

a lack of deep engagement with the text and increases the risk of unintentional plagiarism (Kotamjani et al., 2018; Roe et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the persistence of surface-level paraphrasing is closely related to instructional practices in higher education. In many classrooms, paraphrasing is taught implicitly, with limited emphasis on how to reconstruct meaning at the conceptual level. Students are often encouraged to “change words” rather than to reinterpret ideas, reinforcing a narrow understanding of paraphrasing as a lexical activity. The growing use of AI-based paraphrasing tools further complicates this issue. While such tools can assist students in generating alternative expressions, they may also reduce students’ cognitive engagement and lead to over-reliance on automated outputs (Sulistyaningrum, 2021; Hasan et al., 2025; Alammar & Amin, 2024). This raises concerns about the development of authentic academic writing skills in the digital era.

Despite the growing body of research on paraphrasing in EFL contexts, most studies tend to examine paraphrasing strategies, quality, or challenges separately. There is still limited research that integrates these dimensions into a unified analytical framework to explain how students’ strategy use is related to the quality of their paraphrasing and the challenges they experience. Previous studies, for instance, have examined paraphrasing techniques (Aprianto et al., 2024), source use and textual borrowing (Chen & Wang, 2022), and students’ perceptions of paraphrasing difficulties (Alaofi, 2020), yet few have attempted to synthesize these aspects into a comprehensive model.

To address this gap, the present study adopts an integrative analytical framework by combining Pieterick’s (2003) taxonomy of paraphrasing strategies (semantic, syntactic, and organizational), Keck’s (2006) taxonomy of paraphrasing quality, and Shi’s (2010) framework of paraphrasing challenges (linguistic, cognitive, and affective). This integrated approach enables a more holistic understanding of paraphrasing as a cognitive-linguistic process by linking how students paraphrase (strategy), how well they perform (quality), and what difficulties they encounter (challenges). By situating this study within the context of IAIN Parepare, the research also provides contextual insights into how Indonesian EFL students navigate the demands of academic writing in Islamic higher education settings.

Based on these considerations, this study addresses two main research questions: (1) What paraphrasing techniques are commonly used by English Education students in academic writing? and (2) What challenges do students encounter when applying these techniques? By answering these questions, this study contributes to the literature by offering an integrated perspective on paraphrasing and providing pedagogical implications for improving students’ academic writing competence and promoting academic integrity.

METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to explore students’ paraphrasing strategies and the challenges they encountered in academic writing. According to (Creswell & Poth, 2018), qualitative research aims to explore the meaning given by individuals or groups to a social or humanitarian problem. This approach was selected as it enables an in-depth examination of linguistic practices and learners’ perspectives based on both written products and experiential accounts. The study focused on two main aspects: (1) identifying

paraphrasing strategies using (Pieterick, 2003) (syntactic, semantic, and organizational levels), and (2) assessing paraphrasing quality and plagiarism risk using (Keck, 2006) taxonomy. In addition, (Shi, 2010) framework was adopted to analyze students' challenges across linguistic, cognitive, and affective dimensions. This design was considered appropriate because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of both the process and the outcome of a student's paraphrasing performance.

Research Participants

The participants were 19 fourth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at IAIN Parepare, South Sulawesi. They were selected purposively based on their enrolment in an academic writing course relevant to the study focus. The sample size was considered adequate for qualitative research, as it prioritized depth of analysis over generalization, thus allowing for a detailed exploration of students' paraphrasing practices. In qualitative research, the focus is on the richness and depth of information, not on statistical generalizations. For the interview phase, a snowball sampling technique was employed to identify participants who experienced varying levels of difficulty in paraphrasing, allowing for richer and more representative insights into students' challenges.

Instruments and Data Collection

Data were collected using two main instruments: a paraphrasing test and semi-structured interviews. The paraphrasing test required students to rewrite three paragraphs of an academic text on The Influence of social media on Adolescent Mental Health (231 words). The text was selected due to its contextual relevance to students' academic level. The assignment requires students to paraphrase the text individually in a limited amount of time to ensure that the results reflect their true abilities without external assistance.

The interview protocol consisted of an open-ended guiding question designed to elicit students perceived difficulties in paraphrasing. For example, students were asked questions such as: "What difficulties/challenges do you have when paraphrasing the text?".

To ensure depth of data, probing questions were employed based on (Shi, 2010) framework, focusing on linguistic, cognitive, and affective challenges. A triangulation approach was applied by combining written data (paraphrasing outputs) and verbal data (interview responses) to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Analytical Framework and Assessment Criteria

This study systematically integrated three analytical frameworks. First, (Pieterick, 2003) taxonomy was used to identify paraphrasing techniques at the syntactic, semantic, and organizational levels. Second, (Keck, 2006) taxonomy was applied to evaluate paraphrasing quality based on the percentage of lexical overlap with the source text, categorized into Near Copy (>50%), Minimal Revision (20–49%), Moderate Revision (1–19%), and Substantial Revision (0%). Third, (Shi, 2010) framework (2010) was used to classify students' challenges into linguistic, cognitive, and affective domains. These frameworks functioned as coding schemes to establish systematic and objective analysis,

enabling the identification of relationships between paraphrasing strategies, quality of output, and underlying student difficulties.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. Written data from the paraphrasing test were analyzed using (Pieterick, 2003) and (Keck, 2006) taxonomies to identify strategies and assess quality.

Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding, supported by NVivo 15 software. The coding process was carried out in several stages: (1) initial coding to identify key themes, (2) categorization based on the (Shi, 2010) framework, and (3) selective Coding/Matrix Query. NVivo 15 was used to organize, code, and visualize data systematically, allowing patterns and relationships between themes to be identified more clearly.

The analysis process involved coding students' responses, categorizing them into the three domains of (Shi, 2010) framework, and mapping the relationships between paraphrasing strategies, quality levels, and the challenges experienced by students. This integrated analysis enabled a comprehensive understanding of how students' internal constraints influenced their paraphrasing performance.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the credibility and validity of the findings, this study applied theoretical triangulation by integrating multiple analytical frameworks (Keck, 2006; Pieterick, 2003; Shi, 2010) In addition, data triangulation was carried out by comparing findings from the paraphrasing test and interview data. Member checks are also implemented by confirming the interpretation of selected interviews with participants to ensure their accuracy. Reliability is improved through the use of consistent coding procedures and clear categorization criteria, ensuring that the analysis remains systematic and transparent.

RESULTS

This study analyzed the paraphrasing performance of students based on data obtained from paraphrasing tests and interviews. The analysis focused on identifying paraphrasing techniques, evaluating the quality of students' work, and examining the challenges they encountered in academic writing.

Data from the paraphrasing test were used to identify the dominant techniques employed by students based on (Pieterick, 2003) taxonomy, which included syntactic, semantic, and organization of ideas. In addition, the quality of students' paraphrasing was assessed using (Keck, 2006) taxonomy, which categorized the results into Near Copy, Minimal Revision, Moderate Revision, and Substantial Revision.

Table 1. Students' paraphrasing techniques

Techniques	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Semantic	8	42%

Syntactic	4	21%
Organization of Ideas	3	16%
Combined (Semantic & Syntactic)	4	21%
Total	19	100%

Table 1 presents the distribution of paraphrasing techniques employed by the students. The findings indicate that semantic strategies were the most frequently used, applied by 8 students (42%). This was followed by syntactic strategies and combined strategies (semantic and syntactic), each employed by 4 students (21%). In contrast, the organization of ideas was the least utilized technique, with only 3 students (16%) applying it.

Evidence of these techniques can be observed in the students' paraphrasing outputs. For instance, Participant 1 replaced words directly without modifying the sentence structure. The original phrase "...become a global concern" was rewritten as "...become a global worry," reflecting a reliance on synonym substitution. Similarly, Participant 2 replaced the word "adolescent" with "teenager," indicating a surface-level lexical change rather than deeper structural transformation.

Table 2. Students' paraphrasing quality

Categories	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Near copy	1	5%
Minimal revision	1	5%
Moderate revision	16	84%
Substantial revision	1	5%
Total	19	100%

Table 2 presents the classification of students' paraphrasing quality based on Keck's (2006) taxonomy. The findings indicate that the majority of students were categorized under *Moderate Revision*, accounting for 16 students (84%). In contrast, *Near Copy*, *Minimal Revision*, and *Substantial Revision* were each identified in only one student (5%). These results suggest that while most students attempted to modify the source text, their paraphrasing remained limited in terms of structural and conceptual transformation.

This pattern is evident in students' paraphrasing outputs. For example, Participant 3 was able to alter certain lexical elements but largely retained the original sentence structure. The source sentence, "The influence of social media on adolescent mental health has become a global concern," was paraphrased as "The impact of social media toward teenagers' mental health is now a world concern." Although some lexical substitutions are evident (e.g., *influence* → *impact*, *adolescent* → *teenagers*, *global* → *world*), the paraphrased version maintains a similar syntactic structure and overall meaning. This indicates limited transformation, which is characteristic of the *Moderate Revision* category.

Following the analysis of the paraphrasing test, the study further examined interview data to identify the challenges experienced by students during the paraphrasing process. The interviews aimed to explore students' perceptions of their difficulties and the underlying

reasons for their choice of paraphrasing strategies. The distribution of these challenges is presented in figure 1.

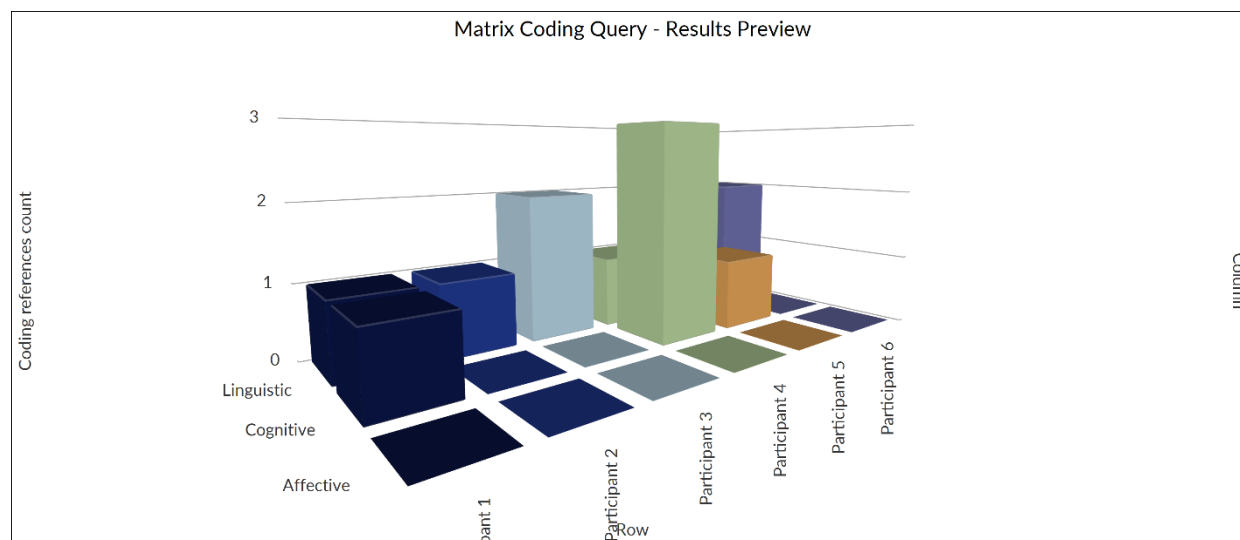


Figure 1. 3D Bar Chart of Interview Coding Results

This chart illustrates the results of the interview data coding conducted using NVivo 15. The data were categorized into three main domains: linguistic, cognitive, and affective difficulties. The findings reveal that linguistic difficulties were the most dominant category, followed by cognitive difficulties, while no affective difficulties were identified in the dataset.

Linguistic challenges

This category accounted for the highest frequency of coded data. Students consistently reported that their primary difficulty in paraphrasing was limited vocabulary, particularly in selecting appropriate synonyms and constructing grammatically accurate sentences. The interview data further indicate that students often relied on dictionaries due to insufficient lexical knowledge. In some cases, students initially believed they understood the source text, but later realized discrepancies in meaning upon closer examination. Additionally, several participants noted that the complexity of the language used in the source text made comprehension more difficult.

As one participant stated, *"Maybe because I don't have a deep knowledge of synonyms, I have to look up words in the dictionary."* This response highlights how limited vocabulary knowledge constrains students' ability to paraphrase effectively, leading them to depend on surface-level lexical substitution.

Cognitive Challenges

Cognitive difficulties were identified in five coded instances and were primarily related to students' ability to comprehend and reconstruct the meaning of the source text. Several

participants reported experiencing inconsistencies in their understanding, where their initial interpretation differed from the actual meaning after further reflection. Others indicated that the complexity of academic language made it difficult to fully grasp the content.

For example, one participant explained, *“I already understand it one way, but when I check the actual meaning, it turns out to be different.”* Another participant noted, *“The language is too difficult and too complex to understand.”* These responses suggest that difficulties in deep comprehension hinder students’ ability to reorganize and express ideas accurately in their own words.

Overall, the interview findings indicate that students’ paraphrasing difficulties are primarily concentrated in the linguistic and cognitive domains. Linguistic challenges are closely related to limitations in vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, while cognitive challenges stem from difficulties in understanding and reconstructing meaning. No evidence of affective difficulties, such as anxiety or lack of motivation, was found in this study.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that students’ paraphrasing practices are predominantly shaped by the interplay between linguistic limitations and cognitive processing constraints. The dominance of semantic strategies (42%) indicates that students primarily rely on surface-level transformations, particularly synonym substitution, rather than engaging in deeper restructuring of ideas. This finding is consistent with previous studies which report that EFL learners tend to treat paraphrasing as a lexical replacement activity rather than a meaning-making process (Çeşme, 2022; Lia, 2024; Maneechote, 2022). Such reliance suggests that students’ understanding of paraphrasing remains procedural rather than conceptual.

From a cognitive-linguistic perspective, this tendency reflects a limited ability to reconstruct meaning from source texts. As argued by Isnaeni and Putera (2024) and Trinh and Nguyen (2022), effective paraphrasing requires not only linguistic knowledge but also higher-order cognitive processes, including comprehension, interpretation, and reorganization of ideas. The present findings support this view, as students’ dependence on synonym substitution indicates that they are able to identify lexical equivalence but struggle to transform underlying ideas. This aligns with Thadphoothon (2017), who emphasizes that paraphrasing is fundamentally a process of meaning reconstruction rather than mere linguistic manipulation.

The predominance of paraphrasing outputs categorized as Moderate Revision (84%) further reinforces this interpretation. According to Keck (2006), Moderate Revision reflects partial transformation, where some lexical and structural changes are present, but the overall organization and meaning remain closely aligned with the source text. In this study, students’ paraphrases demonstrate limited syntactic variation and minimal reorganization of ideas, suggesting that they have not yet achieved substantial independence from the original text. Similar patterns have been reported by Chen and Wang (2022), who found that EFL students often remain at intermediate levels of paraphrasing due to constraints in both language proficiency and comprehension.

Importantly, the findings also highlight that linguistic limitations play a central role in shaping students' paraphrasing strategies. Students reported difficulties in selecting appropriate synonyms and constructing grammatically accurate sentences, which confirms previous research identifying vocabulary limitation as a major barrier in EFL academic writing (Alaofi, 2020; Aprianto et al., 2024; Mahmoud & Ben, 2025). These limitations force students to adopt compensatory strategies, such as minimal lexical substitution, rather than more complex syntactic transformations. In this sense, semantic paraphrasing becomes a "safe strategy" that allows students to modify text without risking grammatical errors.

However, linguistic limitations alone do not fully explain students' paraphrasing performance. The interview data indicate that cognitive challenges—particularly difficulties in understanding the meaning of source texts—also significantly affect students' ability to paraphrase effectively. Students reported confusion when interpreting complex academic language, which often led to misinterpretation or incomplete understanding of the text. This finding is in line with Madani and Ardianti (2020) and Atilano (2025), who argue that paraphrasing difficulties are closely linked to reading comprehension and the ability to identify main ideas. Without sufficient comprehension, students are unable to reconstruct meaning and instead rely on surface-level modifications.

The interaction between linguistic and cognitive constraints explains the emergence of patchwriting observed in this study. As noted by Anaktotoy et al. (2025) and Yavich (2024), patchwriting occurs when students partially copy source text while making minor lexical changes, reflecting an intermediate stage of writing development. This phenomenon is not necessarily a result of intentional plagiarism but rather a consequence of limited proficiency and incomplete understanding. As Roe et al. (2024) and Kotamjani et al. (2018) suggest, patchwriting often reflects students' struggle to balance source use with originality, particularly in EFL contexts where linguistic resources are limited.

Another important finding is the absence of affective challenges as a dominant factor. Unlike some previous studies that highlight anxiety or lack of motivation as barriers to writing, this study found that students' difficulties are primarily linguistic and cognitive. This suggests that, in this context, students' challenges are more related to skill and knowledge deficits rather than emotional factors. One possible explanation is that students are already accustomed to academic writing tasks but lack the necessary tools to perform them effectively. This finding contributes to the ongoing debate on the role of affective factors in EFL writing by suggesting that their influence may be context-dependent.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings reveal important implications for academic writing instruction. The current tendency to treat paraphrasing as a lexical exercise may limit students' development of deeper writing skills. As Widodo et al. (2022) and Yahia and Egbert (2023) emphasize, effective paraphrasing instruction should focus on developing both linguistic resources and cognitive strategies, including critical reading, idea mapping, and text transformation. In addition, the increasing use of AI-based paraphrasing tools (Sulistyaningrum, 2021; Alammar & Amin, 2024) suggests the need for pedagogical approaches that promote responsible and reflective use of such tools, ensuring that they support rather than replace cognitive engagement.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating the interconnected relationship between paraphrasing strategies, quality, and challenges. By integrating Pieterick's (2003), Keck's (2006), and Shi's (2010) frameworks, the findings provide empirical support for understanding paraphrasing as a multidimensional process. Specifically, the study shows that linguistic competence influences the choice of paraphrasing strategy, while cognitive processing determines the quality of the output. This integrated perspective extends previous research that has tended to examine these aspects in isolation.

In the context of Indonesian higher education, particularly at IAIN Parepare, the findings highlight the need for more explicit and systematic instruction in paraphrasing. Students require not only knowledge of techniques but also guided practice in transforming ideas and understanding source texts deeply. Without such support, students are likely to remain at the level of surface paraphrasing, which limits their ability to produce original and high-quality academic writing. Therefore, improving paraphrasing competence should be seen as part of a broader effort to develop students' academic literacy and critical thinking skills.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that paraphrasing in EFL academic writing is not merely a mechanical activity of lexical substitution but a complex cognitive-linguistic process that requires the integration of language proficiency and higher-order thinking skills. The findings reveal a systematic pattern in which students' reliance on semantic strategies—particularly synonym substitution—and their dominance in the Moderate Revision category reflect underlying limitations in both linguistic resources and cognitive processing. These results suggest that students are operating at a transitional level of paraphrasing, where partial transformation occurs but full conceptual reconstruction of meaning has not yet been achieved.

More importantly, this study highlights the interdependent relationship between paraphrasing strategy, output quality, and learner challenges. Linguistic competence, particularly vocabulary mastery and grammatical control, shapes the strategies students employ, while cognitive abilities—especially reading comprehension and idea restructuring—determine the extent to which paraphrasing results demonstrate originality. This integrated relationship confirms that difficulties in paraphrasing cannot be addressed through isolated linguistic training alone but require a more holistic approach that combines language development with cognitive skill enhancement.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the field of EFL academic writing by proposing a multidimensional perspective on paraphrasing through the integration of Pieterick's (2003) strategy framework, Keck's (2006) quality taxonomy, and Shi's (2010) challenge model. This triadic framework provides a more comprehensive lens for understanding paraphrasing as a dynamic process, moving beyond fragmented analyses that treat strategy, quality, and difficulty as separate constructs. In doing so, the study advances current discussions on source-based writing by positioning paraphrasing as an indicator of both linguistic competence and cognitive engagement.

Pedagogically, the findings underscore the need to reconceptualize how paraphrasing is taught in EFL classrooms. Instruction should move beyond surface-level practices, such as synonym replacement, toward approaches that foster deeper engagement with texts. This includes integrating critical reading strategies, explicit instruction in idea transformation, and scaffolded practice in restructuring sentences and organizing ideas. In addition, vocabulary development should be systematically embedded within writing instruction to support more flexible and accurate expression. Given the increasing use of AI-based paraphrasing tools, educators also need to guide students in using these technologies critically and responsibly, ensuring that they complement rather than replace cognitive effort.

In the context of Indonesian higher education, particularly at IAIN Parepare, this study highlights the urgent need for more explicit and structured support in developing students' academic literacy. Without targeted intervention, students are likely to remain at the level of surface paraphrasing, which limits their ability to produce original and academically acceptable texts. Therefore, improving paraphrasing competence should be seen as a strategic priority in enhancing the overall quality of students' academic writing and maintaining academic integrity.

Finally, this study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size and the focus on a single institutional context may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research is recommended to explore paraphrasing practices across diverse educational contexts, incorporate longitudinal designs, and examine the impact of instructional interventions or AI-assisted tools on students' paraphrasing development. Such studies would further enrich our understanding of how EFL learners develop the ability to engage critically and independently with academic texts.

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