DEVELOPING PARAPHRASING SKILLS

Viorica CEBOTAROŞ,
dr., lect. univ.
Universitatea de Stat „Alecu Russo" din Bălţi

Abstract: *Scrierea academică reprezintă nu doar exprimarea propriilor idei, ci şi prezentarea lor drept reacţie de răspuns la ideile altor cercetători. Includerea „vocilor" altor cercetători în propriul text reprezintă o adevărată provocare pentru studenţii care se află la debutul activităţii de cercetare. Articolul se axează pe unul din mijloacele de utilizare a ideilor celorlalţi drept suport pentru lansarea propriilor opinii – parafraza. Ne propunem să relevăm câteva tehnici pe care studenţii le-ar putea utiliza pentru parafrazarea ideilor altor cercetători.*

Keywords: academic writing, paraphrasing skill, paraphrasing strategies, plagiarism.

Being a social, conversational act, academic writing involves "entering into conversation with others" (Graff, Birkenstein 2010: xvi). In written academic conversation other researchers' ideas serve as "a launching pad" for one's own views (Graff, Birkenstein 2010: 3). Thus, research is rarely something one does absolutely on one's own. In many cases it builds upon previous studies, representing a response to what others have written and a step forward, contributing, in such a way, to the advance of knowledge. Participating in such conversations seems a challenging undertaking for many students – novice writers in academic English. They

find it difficult to incorporate other ideas into their own research and very often, since they fail to do it properly, they may be accused of plagiarism. To avoid such accusations, it is important to indicate very clearly and according to the existing norms what ideas have been taken from whom, thus making a clear delineation between the ideas of others and one's own ideas.

One way to use others' ideas in one's own writing is to paraphrase them. Paraphrasing is defined as "a writing skill in which you "rephrase" (rewrite) information from an outside source in your own words without changing its meaning" (Oshima, Hogue 1998: 90). It is an important skill required in academic writing. There are several reasons why this skill should be developed. Firstly, it proves student's comprehension of the original text. The student's ability to express the ideas from the original text in his/her own words serves as an indicator that the text was understood. Conversely, reliance on the original wording indicates lack of genuine comprehension. Secondly, paraphrasing represents one way of using other people's ideas for support when writing one's own research, incorporating, in such a way, previous research into the current one. Last, but not least, it helps to avoid plagiarism.

Practice shows that a lot of students find it difficult to acquire the paraphrasing skill. One needs good mastery of vocabulary and of grammar to write an acceptable paraphrase. My teaching experience has shown that very often students find it hard to understand what paraphrasing really involves. Since paraphrasing requires using one's own words to report someone else's writing, many students tend to believe that substituting words from the original text with their synonyms is enough for an acceptable paraphrase. However, paraphrasing involves more than a mere substitution of certain lexical items with their synonyms. A very important aspect is changing the sentence structure. Without it, the paraphrased version will still be considered plagiarism. When combined, these two elements (changing vocabulary and changing the sentence structure) result in a proper paraphrase.

Changing the sentence structure is the biggest challenge students face. In many cases their paraphrases contain the same grammatical structure as the original, with words being replaced by their synonyms.

Even if the source is indicated, such a paraphrase will be considered plagiarism. Another challenge is the appropriate choice of synonyms. The existence of several synonyms for a word places the student in a predicament – which one best fits in the given context? Since not all synonyms work well in all contexts, students should be careful about their choices. One more problem arises from the fact that students often fail to make a distinction between words that can be replaced by their synonyms and specialized vocabulary, which should remain unchanged. In their attempt to create a variant that will render the meaning of the original text with the help of other words, students tend to overdo it, substituting almost all the words with their synonyms. This results in a poor paraphrase.

To make learning paraphrasing a more successful activity, one should start with paraphrasing sentences that contain vocabulary and grammar structures that are known to students. The more unknown words and the more complex grammar structures the original sentence contains, the more difficult the paraphrasing task will seem to the students. Another important issue is to paraphrase texts from the students' field of study. Students are more likely to know the technical vocabulary and it will be easier for them to understand the idea expressed in the original text. Since I work with language students, the sentences I select for paraphrasing are taken from language studies, mostly from David Crystal's works.

The first exercise on paraphrasing that I give students is a multiple choice exercise, in which they have to determine the best paraphrase of a sentence and to explain their choice. Such an exercise aims at raising their awareness of what paraphrasing involves. What follows is a discussion of the features that make the selected variant a successful paraphrase and of the reasons the other variants are less successful. Here is an example I used in class and the discussion that followed:

Original text: *Half the budget of an international organization can easily get swallowed up in translation costs* (source: D. Crystal "English as a global language", 2003).

Paraphrase 1 (P1): Half of the budget of an international organization is allowed for translation fees.

Paraphrase 2 (P2): International organizations invest a lot of money in translation.

Paraphrase 3 (P3): Translation expenses can amount to almost 50% of the money of an international organization (Crystal 2003).

It is easy to notice that the first part of P1 coincides with the original text (*Half of the budget of an international organization*), a thing which is not acceptable in paraphrasing. Besides, no credit is given to the author.

Although some good changes have been made in P2 (the singular noun (*organization*) replaced by a plural one (*organizations*), the verb *invest* appropriately chosen to collocate with the noun *money*, which replaced the noun *budget*), there are some weak points as well, and namely, an indefinite determiner (*a lot of* money) replaced the more concrete one (*half* the budget). Similarly to P1, P2 offers no information about the source.

In P3 the grammar structure of the original sentence has been changed. The order in which the information is presented in the original is reversed in P3. Thus, the subject of the paraphrased sentence (*translation expenses*) does not coincide with the subject of the original one (*half the budget*). The determiner *half* has been replaced with the numeral *50%*, which is a good strategy to use when paraphrasing. Several words have been replaced by their synonyms: *costs – expenses*, *budget – money*. The last important element – the source is indicated. All these features make P3 an acceptable paraphrase.

The analysis of the strong and weak points of different paraphrases contributes to raising students' awareness of what paraphrasing means. This is a good exercise that helps students understand what they should or should not do when paraphrasing. Following this discussion, I ask students to point out several requirements for a successful paraphrase. Next, their list is completed with other paraphrasing strategies, taken from different sources on academic writing (Sowton 2012; Wallwork 2011):

1. Replacing words from the original text with synonyms;
2. Replacing some words from the original text with their definitions (if possible) e.g. *linguistics* to *the study of language*;
3. Changing the voice of the sentence;
4. Changing the parts of speech – from verb to noun, from noun to verb, from noun to adjective, from adjective to adverb, from one category of noun to another category of noun (e.g. *science* to *scientist*)

5. Changing nouns and pronouns from singular to plural and vice versa;
6. Changing the verb form, for example, from *–ing* form to infinitive and vice versa;
7. Combining sentences from the original text by using conjunctions or relative pronouns;
8. Using expressions denoting time, numbers and dates creatively (e.g. *in six months* to *in half a year; half the budget* to *50% of the money*).

To avoid plagiarism it is important to use a combination of techniques, not just one. When used together, these techniques make it possible to "disguise" the original. Another recommendation is not to replace absolutely all the words with their synonyms. Technical words remain unchanged as well as recognized expressions people from a certain field are aware of, such as *English for specific purposes*. The similarity between the sentence structure of the paraphrased version and the one of the original text makes the two variants look alike, being a clear indicator that the paraphrase is not appropriate.

The first step towards a successful paraphrase is to understand the original text. After students read the original text (several times if it is necessary), I ask them to explain what they understood. To make the task easier and to check whether the students really understood the original text, they have to render it as if they were talking to a friend of theirs who has not read the original. In such a way text comprehension – the key element of a successful paraphrase – may be checked. Next, we focus on the vocabulary and grammar changes that can be made by using the strategies mentioned above. The last step is checking the meaning of the paraphrased version against the original. If the meaning has not been distorted, if the paraphrased version is significantly different from the wording of the original and if credit has been given to the author of the original text, the paraphrase is successful and can be used to support the researcher's ideas not risking to be accused of plagiarism.

References

Graff, Gerald; Birkenstein, Cathy, *They say, I say. The moves that matter in academic writing*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2010.

Oshima, Alice; Hogue, Ann, *Writing Academic English*, New York, Addison Wesley Longman, 1998.

Sowton, Chris, *50 steps to improving your academic writing*, Reading, Garnet Education, 2012.

Wallwork, Adrian, *English for writing research papers*, New York, Springer, 2011.