

Verbal Paraphrasing Technique: A Case of University English-Major Students' Perceptions and Implementation

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Abstract

This present study aims to explore how university English-major students perceive oral paraphrasing technique as well as to find out how their actual verbal paraphrasing is implemented. In a design of both qualitative and quantitative research, questionnaires, recorded classroom observation and semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data from adult EFL learners in the context of higher education in Vietnam. The findings may contribute to the knowledge about students' perception of oral paraphrasing and their execution so that theoretical and practical support can be given timely. The values of this research is that it would greatly facilitate oral paraphrasing teaching technique, the quality of language instruction and improving language skills in the language classroom.

Keyword: paraphrasing orally, accuracy, fluency, speaking skills

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Introduction

Paraphrasing is a well-known technique for its usage of monitoring one's comprehension. If a learner cannot restate mentally or to another person, that student is supposed to not have fully grasped the intended message of the writer. If a reader is overly dependent on the actual words used by the writer when required to do a paraphrasing performance, evidence of their genuine comprehension is hardly found out. Paraphrasing is both a strategy for the students and an assessment tool for the teacher to assess students' comprehension of a text and social content. Therefore, much effort and attention were paid to written paraphrasing training. However, the over use of written paraphrasing has effectively hindered students' ability to express themselves (Ismail & Maasum, 2009) which can be seen as the most important general goal in instruction (Tompkins & Hoskisson, 1995). To measure a successful language learner, he or she should be sent to situations where he/ she is required to interpret the interlocutors' intended message accurately and prolong the

conversation meaningfully (Lockett, Pflieger, & Reithinger, 2007). As Harris and Sipay (1990) observed, "being able to restate another's thoughts in one's own language clearly and unambiguously is a crucial test of whether the thoughts were understood" (p. 537). Thus, paraphrasing is proven to be one of the most suitable measurements to check and train learners' ability of interpreting and speaking.

In fact, after witnessing the failure of students on integrating something orally conveyed during language instruction, the researcher seriously considered dealing with students' ability of oral paraphrasing as a main part of the researcher's study. However, no research has been conducted so far to explore the perceptions of the language learners towards the verbal paraphrasing. Consequently, this study seeks to fill this gap and to deepen the work in detail to find out what students perceive of restating one's thought verbally, how their oral paraphrasing would be like. Speaking classes can be seen as the main context as research has shown that it is imperative to use the language spoken as a tool and bridge to

helping them learn and practice paraphrasing skills (Orellana & Reynolds, 2008).

Research methodology

a. Research design

Since the objective of this study is seeking the answers to the descriptive question of 'what' and to the explanatory question of 'in what ways' for a particular educational program, it is found that a case study approach is an appropriate strategy to be adopted (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2011)

b. Research participants

77 university third-year English-major students (52 female and 15 male) attended to this research. They are aged between 20 to 23, taught in three classes separately and have a mixed language ability. All of the participants have not yet got involved in any official paraphrasing classes, lessons or activities held by the Faculty of Foreign Languages or by other language instructions.

c. Research instruments

The research instruments used to collect data for this study were questionnaires and recorded semi-structured interviews. Recorded class observation, in addition,

was used as the main and official research tool to collect the reformulated samples.

d. Research procedures

Questionnaires

Prior officially being applied, the questionnaire was throughout examined so that the quality of the content, appropriateness of the format and the Vietnamese illustrations were all qualified. Questionnaires were presented to the participants during fifteen minutes before the classes began. The administration lasted 30 minutes in total, including time for a short introduction and instructions. The time is long enough for each respondent to guarantee that she/he has enough time to think and shows his/ her opinions. After all respondents finished, their questionnaire sheets were collected. The reliability of the questionnaire was analysed by using SPSS software version 20. The piloted result was $\alpha = .698$ which was just a bit under degree of reliability.

Recorded Class observation

Each group was required to summarize a short passage whose topic is relevant to that of their speaking material. After the

allotted time, each group presented the main ideas of their reading passage briefly in their own words. The listeners were allowed to ask the presenter to clarify their ideas till they grasped the speakers' intended messages. The presenter could be all of the members of his group. They can support each other in the work of stating their ideas verbally for the purpose of conveying their ideas to the listeners accurately and sufficiently. Members of other groups were required to reformulate the presenter's thought verbally. There was almost no intervention made by the researcher, except her pronunciation correction for the presenters. The correction does nothing to do with the quality of the study since the data was recorded right after the participants started to summarize and rephrase. The researcher visited the three classes and conducted classroom observation during 60 minutes per class.

Literature review

1. Perception

Perception can be defined as a "complex process by which people select, organize, and interpret sensory stimulation into a meaningful and coherent picture of

the world" (Berelson & Steiner, 1964, p. 88). In the same vein, perception is "about receiving, selecting, acquiring, transforming and organizing the information supplied by our senses" (Barber & Legge, 1976, p. 7).

It is suggested from a psychological perspective that individuals' perceptions have a directive influence upon their decision-making and the outcome of their decisions; thus, it is not surprising that organization theorists are now interested in relationships between perceptions and various aspects of organizations. This present study is not an exceptional case as its focal goal is building the link between students' perception and their decision.

2. Definition of paraphrasing

Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines paraphrasing as the "restatement of a text, passage or work giving the meaning in another form. According to Cambridge Learner's Dictionary paraphrase is "to express something that has been said or written in a different way, usually so that it is clearer". Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines it as "to express what somebody has said or written using different words, especially in order to

make it easier to understand". It can be clearly seen that no matter how the term paraphrase is defined, this act is primarily related to speaking skills where students are expected to make use of their own language knowledge to paraphrase. Iordanskaja, Kittredge, & Polgere (1991) considered the term under the linguistic angle. According to them, paraphrase is the act of rephrasing of a sentence such that the new and original one would generally be evaluated as lexically and syntactically different while remaining semantically equal. For the above-mentioned point, semantic completeness, lexical difference, and syntactic difference are recognized as the three distinct components of an effective paraphrase. In other words, the sample of paraphrasing must be evaluated according to those components.

2.1 Semantic completeness

Semantic completeness refers to the degree to which a student's paraphrase (user response) has the same meaning as the sentence targeted for paraphrasing (target sentence). Semantic completeness is evaluated without regard to word or structural overlap between sentences.

Thus, if the user response is exactly the same as the target sentence, then it is also semantically the same. According to Aaron (2010), he stated that paraphrases must precisely reflect the ideas, tone, and emphasis of the source. Even though the speakers use their own words and sentence structure, the reformulated sentences/ utterances must be true to the original and objectively reflect the ideas/ thoughts of the source, not the paraphraser's opinion. Paraphrasing allows language learners to restate ideas from other so that the reformatted language may better suit a voice, flow, or line of argument (Golightly & Sanders, 1997; Hawes, 2003).

2.2 Lexical difference and Syntactic difference

Lexical difference refers to the degree to which the different words were employed in the user response, regardless of syntax or semantics. Such a response would be rated very highly for lexical discrepancy, regardless of the fact that the word order has been changed. Syntactic difference refers to the degree to which different syntax (i.e., parts of speech and phrase structures) is employed in the user

response, regardless of the words used. Sharing the same viewpoint, Howard writes in his book that the paraphraser should use their own fresh vocabulary, phrasing and sentence structures, not the sentence structures phrasing and words of the source.

Paraphrasing is often defined as putting a passage from an author into “your own words.” But what are “your own words”? How do the paraphrase practitioners’ produce reformulated sentences different from the source statically and semantically?

3. How to deal with an oral paraphrasing?

The University of Wisconsin’s Academic Misconduct where plagiarism is taken seriously, published the handout called Acknowledging, Paraphrasing, and Quoting Sources to help readers avoid plagiarizing. According to the authors, when paraphrasing, the learners need to do some changes in the structure and the words.

Consider the following passage from *Love and Toil* (a book on motherhood in London from 1870 to 1918), in which the

author, Ellen Ross, puts forth one of her major arguments:

Love and Toil maintains that family survival was the mother’s main charge among the large majority of London’s population who were poor or working class; the emotional and intellectual nurture of her child or children and even their actual comfort were forced into the background. To mother was to work for and organize household subsistence. (p. 9)

According to the writer, students are expected to do some lexical change such as “The mother’s main charge,” “Among the . . . poor or working class,” “Working for and organizing household subsistence,” or “The emotional and intellectual nurture” Or “Mothers,” “A mother,” “Children,” “A child.” It is the author’s suggestion that using synonyms or phrases that expresses the same meaning to alter ones in the original sources. However, the shared language or terminology should be left unchanged.

The composers also recommended that, at this stage, so that the learners can have a good performance on syntactic changes, they might also break up long

sentences, combine short ones, expand phrases for clarity, or shorten them. In this process, learners will naturally eliminate some words and change others:

Children of the poor at the turn of the century received little if any emotional or intellectual nurturing from their mothers, whose main charge was family survival. Working for and organizing household subsistence were what defined mothering. Next to this, even the children's basic comfort was forced into the background.

According to experts working in the field of teaching paraphrasing at Higher Score, Canada's number one test preparation centre, in order to produce effective verbal paraphrasing, the paraphrasers are advised to use different vocabulary with the same meaning. Similarly, the findings from a study conducted by Choy and Lee (2012) to investigate the effects of teaching paraphrasing skills to students learning summary writing in ESL, reveals that when reformulating core points in a passage, the paraphrasers were expected to make use of synonymous lexicon. The researchers also stated that if the paraphrasing practitioners are less than

100% certain of finding the synonymous lexicon, they had better change the word order of a phrase or sentence. Furthermore, they claimed that paraphrasers are allowed to change, add or cut some other words as long as the meaning of the source is still reserved.

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Findings

This present study aims at investigating students' perception of oral paraphrasing technique and their verbal paraphrasing implementation. Therefore, the results will be reported in the way that the consistency between what they thought and what they behaved can be drawn. Since the other focus of the study is on examining how they restate other' thought verbally, perception and decision about sub-skills required for an effective paraphrasing are also reported. As for these reasons, the data are segmented into the four categories. It is the first section where students perceived about certain sub-skills accurately but failed to apply. It is the second area where students perceived about certain sub-skills accurately and got successful in implementing. It is the third category where students did not perceive of certain sub-skills but they are presented in their actual application. It is the last section where students did not perceive about certain sub-skills and they were absent from their practicality.

Accurate perception, but unsuccessful execution

Syntactic differences

The majority of the participants (87.3%), when being requested about the necessity of making the reformulated version different from the source syntactically, collectively manifested their agreement on it. The reason for their agreement on changing structure is as reflected by the comments of student J:

Restating something orally is like working under pressure...If required to select an appropriate grammar, it is hard for me because I have limited time to think or choose the suitable kind of grammar. When speaking, I have to organize syntactic feature of a certain kind of grammar and put them in the right place...I can but with simple and familiar structures.

In reality, however, only 7.2% of the reformulated utterances consisting of well-presented syntactic discrepancy while the majority of reformulated samples (65.8%) reserved grammatical features of the source. The percentage of participants supported the idea of changing the structures during paraphrasing process is significantly higher than that of samples paraphrased with the change of grammar.

Thus, there is a weak stability between their thinking and what they actually behaved. It is pitiful that despite being the right track, what they actually implemented can be seen as genuine evidence of their inability to paraphrase.

Lexical difference

Most of the participants (51 out of 77) agreed to change vocabulary while restating other's thought orally. Student J commented:

I thought I am not good at grammar. I cannot change the structures. Now, if I do not change the vocabulary, I repeat not paraphrase. It is just like repetition or "re-reading" other's thought...not real speaking.

Student H commented likewise:

If I change, I will replace the words in the source by synonyms not antonyms....the use of antonyms requires small changes in structures to make the meaning semantically similar.

Similar to the case of syntactic change. The stability between what the participants perceived and what they behaved is hardly got caught. The similarity in term of lexicon between the reformulated utterance and the source

automatically ensues the absence of word order changes. Only 2% of paraphrased samples including word order changes, although 71.8% of participants agreed to do that.

Semantic confirmation

78.2 % of the participants said that at the time of restating other's thoughts, confirming what they mentioned is a must. Student H showed his opinion in detailed, as follows:

Why don't we confirm to check if our integration of their thought is correct?...verbal paraphrasing allows us to check the author.....When I responded to my questionnaire, I agreed that the meaning of the source cannot be changed in the paraphrased speech. If I don't ask them to make me clear, I guess it is impossible for me to keep their points in my talk. If I don't understand, I will make use of something to finish my part.

In reality, the participants did not let their behaviour affected by their thinking. There exist no paraphrased case where the paraphraser's confirmation is recorded. It is the prediction that students may encounter troubles in their actually oral paraphrasing later.

Accurate perception and successful execution

Evaluation other's comments or thoughts

69.3% of the informants did not consider the fact of judging or evaluating the other person's comments during paraphrasing time is what an effective paraphraser should do. The students revealed more about this in the interview. For example, two students named Y commented:

Paraphrasing their ideas is not something we do like debating or arguing. So making judgement on their ideas is not necessary.

I dare not do this because I do not believe my ideas is correct or not. So I don't judge their ideas. How do I look if they judge my ideas back?

It can be true to say that decision is the product of perception. This is true in this case, where no sample in which paraphraser made any evaluation of the original speakers was recorded. Right from this point, it can be easily seen that what the informants thought were steadily consistent with what they performed in reality. It is more likelihood of the students to create an efficient oral

reformulating performance in this sub-skill. They are on the right track theoretically and practically.

Inaccurate perception, but successful execution

Semantic reservation

When being asked about the importance of reserving the meaning of the source in the reformulated utterances, 96.2% of the informants disapproved of meaning reservation. The participants provided the researcher further explanation in the interview. For example, student G commented:

If you paraphrase something without changing the meaning or the source, I think you do not paraphrase. You are repeating the saying of others.

Likewise, student D commented:

I will be negatively judged by other students and even the speaker. They will say that I steal or borrow their opinion and that I have limited thinking.

In reality, when they practiced restating other' thoughts verbally, the participants or the paraphrasers surprised the researcher. None of them, despite refusing to reserve the semantic features of the source at first, re-produced a speech

whose semantic meaning is different from the meaning of the source. Although no case was analysed to catch the semantic difference between the reformulated utterances and the source, the similarity level of semantic meaning of the reformulated version to the source is not completely the same. Especially, the percentage of samples whose meaning of the source is wholly kept is 49.2% while the meaning of the source is relatively or partly reserved is 40% and 10.8% respectively.

The obvious inconsistency between what the informants perceived and what they implemented, in reality, can be easily caught. Regardless the fact that the majority of the informants showed their disagreement on the idea of paraphrasing without altering the meaning of the original speech, when being asked to execute paraphrasing, nearly half of them behaved in the right way. This leads to the conclusion that the participants have the potentiality to qualify one of the components of an effective paraphrase, semantic completeness.

Unchanging terminologies

27 out of 77 is the number of informants who showed their disapproval on altering the terminologies during their oral paraphrasing implementation. In other words, the majority of participants are inclined to use other words to replace for the terms. The underlying reason for their support of making terminology changed is the impossibility. Student P responded:

I was taught that terminology is like proper names. It is something named by people specializing in that area... People may not know the meaning of terminology. If we don't explain, they may not know...so, use another way to explain.

When dealing with the recorded data, the researcher found that none of the participants made a decision on altering terminology. The consistency between their thinking and their decision is ill-presented. Although the majority of participants were not on the right track of having terminology changed, none of them, in their actual paraphrase practice, let their thinking affected their behaviour.

Addition or deletion of words

Regarding the statement “while paraphrasing, a learner can remove words

from the source or add some to the reformulated utterance as long as the semantic meaning stays the same”, the mostly chosen option is “disagree”. The interviewees kept the researcher informed of the reason behind their disagreement. For example, the students V and M admitted:

Choosing incorrect word to add will lead to the situation where the meaning is not like what it was in the source.

I strongly believe that removing or inserting some vocabularies, but keeping the meaning is impossible. No way. I don't think so. Maybe my idea is subjective, but I have a sentence “I go to the market to buy fish”. If you remove the verb go or noun fish, how can the meaning be kept? Similar? No similarity at all.

From their perception, the paraphrasers were expected not to do any lexical deletion or addition if they were required to restate other's thought. In fact, no case of lexical addition or deletion was not recorded. In their actual execution, the participants inserted or removed vocabularies in almost all of the cases according to their paraphrasing demands.

However, what should be taken into great consideration is that, the percentage of formulated cases, after being deleted or added some words, showed the similarity in term of meaning was quite high (94.6%). It can be said with certainty that the participants master this sub-skill of oral paraphrasing.

naccurate perception but unsuccessful execution

Meaning clarification

73.1% of the participant revealed that asking the speaker clarify what they said before they reformat verbally is not necessary. The reason is presented by students A as follows:

...not because they don't speak clearly, but because I do understand. I don't know the meaning of the vocabulary. I know the structure, but don't get the meaning...a thousand times I ask them to repeat, I still don't understand. Maybe I can't paraphrase successfully.

However, in reality, none of the cases in which the paraphrasing practitioners asked the speakers to restate their speech in other similar or more understandable version, was recorded. That leads to some situations where the meaning of the

source was distorted partly (as reported above). From this point, it can be easily seen that participants' perception of the importance of grasping the speakers' main points before conducting reformulating verbally and their actual decision did not match.

Discussion and conclusions

This present study aims at investigating students' perception of oral paraphrasing technique and their verbal paraphrasing performance. Throughout the data analysis, it is true to say that there exists an inconsistency between their paraphrasing thinking and decision in varied cases where they perceived in one way, but acted in the other are observed. Especially, the participants did not agree on adding or removing words from the source to preserve the meaning of the source, to name but a few, but in reality, what they did is completely opposite to what they thought. There exist other cases where the participants agreed on changing the structures, confirming the speakers' comments and the like, however, in their real implementation, their behaviour had nothing to do with their words. These recorded data made it a great contribution

to highlight a mismatch between the participants' perception and implementation. If it is their limited knowledge about paraphrasing, more support that is theoretical should help them to correct their thinking. If they are mistaken in their actual performance, more opportunities that are practical should be given.

Another point worth discussing that emerged from the data is if the participants in this study have potential ability to conduct oral paraphrasing. It is observed that the participants, in some situations, behaved in acceptable manners while paraphrasing, although at first their perception about what they would do was not accurate. If the researcher makes a conclusion about their potential for paraphrasing, basing on this evidence, the conclusion seems to be subjective. That is because, in reality, the majority of the participants failed to reformulate utterances with the change of words, or the change of the structure of the source while lexical and syntactic difference is officially served as the criteria of a written or verbal paraphrasing performance.

Although the focus of this study is on investigating if there is any mismatch between the participants' perception about oral paraphrasing and their actual implementation, some further discussion of that which was mentioned above should be made. As paraphrasing is one of the most indispensable techniques for their later academic life, the value of this study is on providing language teachers a chance to diagnose problems learners might encounter. In doing such, the language teachers can come up with timely solutions to deal with them establishing a better understanding of how much accuracy of students' perception and these dimensions contribute to overall paraphrasing quality would facilitate teaching paraphrasing.

Oral paraphrasing should be frequently applied in language instruction because of its wide range of benefits to the learners. For example, restating other' thoughts verbally assists learners in building up confidence, getting more motivation in learning speaking, rechecking their own pronunciations, activating vocabulary, developing their sense of appropriate word choice or keywords location through

the growing awareness of intonation, improving their grasp of English syntax by requiring them to play around with it. Kirkland & Saunders (1991) stated that "getting students involved in reformulating other's thoughts not only gives language learners a reason to utter out, but also encourages them "to keep practice speaking and keep learning together" (p. 2). Vale, Feunteun (1995) also reported in their study that "retelling develops the entire critical component involved in the communication process, improves listening skill, enhances verbal expression, increases comprehension, and creates mental images". In this study, the students were required to deal with tasks where they integrated all modes of communication, from reading and note taking to listening and speaking. Vacca and Vacca (1999) stated, "students who experience the integration of writing and reading are likely to learn more content, to understand it better, and to remember it longer" (p. 262). While paraphrasing has traditionally been viewed as a student study skill (Anderson & Armbruster, 1984), it can also be useful to promote reading

comprehension skills (Harris & Sipay, 1990 ; Katims & Harris 1997 ; Shugarman & Hurst, 1986). Listening and speaking, or social interaction, has also been found to aid in comprehension. Almasi and Gambrell (1997) found that "providing opportunities for students to interact with one another and to challenge others' ideas during discussions supports higher-level thinking" (p. 151).

Although the present study is significantly beneficial to some extent, there exist some unavoidable limitations. The sample size was relatively small and not diverse. Future research with a larger population and more extended time can help to achieve better views. Problems that paraphrasers encountered should be a part of a researcher's focal goal.

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