



CHALLENGES IN SUMMARIZING AND PARAPHRASING ACADEMIC TEXTS: PROCESSING AND PRODUCTION DIFFICULTIES IN EFL WRITERS

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Abstract

This article examines the challenges EFL writers face when summarizing and paraphrasing academic texts, focusing on the interconnected processing and production difficulties documented across three decades of research. Summarizing and paraphrasing require deep comprehension, information selection, and linguistic reformulation, yet many EFL learners struggle with dense academic vocabulary, complex syntax, and discourse-level interpretation. Limited lexical and syntactic flexibility further restricts their ability to perform accurate transformations, often resulting in near-copy paraphrases or patchwriting. Cognitive load intensifies these problems as learners attempt to manage simultaneous reading and writing operations in a second language. The review highlights recurring developmental and pedagogical factors, including insufficient explicit instruction and anxiety surrounding plagiarism. By synthesizing empirical and theoretical findings, the article clarifies why these skills remain persistently difficult and outlines implications for more effective EAP pedagogy. Strengthening comprehension, providing explicit reformulation strategies, and supporting gradual developmental progress are essential for improving EFL writers' academic literacy.

Keywords: EFL writing; summarizing; paraphrasing; patchwriting; academic literacy; cognitive load; reading-writing integration; linguistic reformulation



ПРОБЛЕМЫ ПРИ ВОСПРИЯТИИ И НАПИСАНИИ КРАТКИХ ИЗЛОЖЕНИЙ И ПЕРЕФРАЗИРОВАНИИ АКАДЕМИЧЕСКИХ ТЕКСТОВ У ИЗУЧАЮЩИХ АНГЛИЙСКИЙ КАК ИНОСТРАННЫЙ ЯЗЫК

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Аннотация

В статье рассматриваются трудности, с которыми сталкиваются изучающие английский язык как иностранный при суммировании и перефразировании академических текстов, с акцентом на взаимосвязанные проблемы обработки и порождения, описанные в исследованиях последних трёх десятилетий. Суммирование и перефразирование требуют глубокого понимания, отбора информации и перефразирования, однако многие изучающие сталкиваются с затруднениями из-за высокой плотности академической лексики, сложного синтаксиса и необходимости интерпретации текста на уровне дискурса. Ограниченные лексические и синтаксические возможности дополнительно препятствуют выполнению точных преобразований, что нередко приводит к почти дословным перефразам или патчрайтингу. Когнитивная нагрузка усиливает эти проблемы, поскольку учащиеся должны одновременно выполнять операции чтения и письма на неродном языке. Обзор подчёркивает устойчивые факторы развития и педагогики, включая недостаток явного обучения и тревожность, связанную с плагиатом. Синтезируя эмпирические и теоретические данные, статья объясняет, почему эти навыки остаются сложными, и обозначает последствия для более эффективного обучения академическому английскому. Повышение уровня понимания, освоение стратегий перефразирования и поддержка поэтапного развития являются ключевыми для улучшения академической грамотности пишущих на английском как иностранном.



Ключевые слова: академическое письмо изучающих английский язык как иностранный; краткое изложение; перефразирование; патчрайтинг; академическая грамотность; когнитивная нагрузка; интеграция чтения и письма; лингвистическое реформулирование.

Introduction

Summarizing and paraphrasing are central academic writing skills through which EFL students integrate sources, construct arguments, and demonstrate disciplinary understanding. Summarizing involves identifying and condensing main ideas, while paraphrasing requires restating content in new linguistic form without altering meaning. Both tasks demand advanced reading, comprehension, and linguistic transformation, making them especially challenging for EFL writers who must manage cognitive, linguistic, and rhetorical demands simultaneously.

These skills are cognitively complex rather than **simple linguistic substitutions**. Source-based writing depends on comprehension, lexical and syntactic flexibility, and cross-text meaning construction (Grabe & Zhang, 2013). When summarizing or paraphrasing, learners must understand the source, select relevant information, reorganize it, and reformulate it with their own resources. For EFL writers, limited vocabulary, restricted syntax, and the demands of reading in a second language intensify these challenges.

Research shows that many EFL writers lack effective source integration strategies, often turning to copying or minimally modified text—known as patchwriting (Howard, 1993). This occurs when students cannot reformulate ideas due to difficulties interpreting complex texts, reorganizing information, or expressing meaning independently. Thus, problems in summarizing and paraphrasing often reflect deeper cognitive and linguistic limitations.

Processing difficulties are particularly significant. Dense academic texts contain complex vocabulary, embedded clauses, and nuanced logical relationships that EFL learners may struggle to interpret. These comprehension issues hinder the identification of key ideas, making it harder to summarize or paraphrase without relying on verbatim reproduction.



Production challenges compound the problem. Effective paraphrasing requires synonym selection, syntactic restructuring, and manipulation of perspective. Many EFL learners perform only surface changes because deeper syntactic transformation demands a proficiency they have not yet developed. As Keck (2006) found, L2 paraphrases often remain too close to the original due to limited lexical and structural flexibility.

This article therefore synthesizes research on the processing and production difficulties EFL writers face when summarizing and paraphrasing academic texts. By examining comprehension limits, linguistic constraints, cognitive load, and instructional context, the article clarifies why these tasks remain difficult and highlights implications for pedagogy. Addressing such challenges is essential for improving academic writing competence and reducing plagiarism that stems from developmental rather than intentional causes.

Literature Review

Research on summarizing and paraphrasing in academic writing highlights the complex interplay of cognitive, linguistic, and rhetorical skills that EFL learners must mobilize to integrate sources effectively. This section reviews the major strands of scholarship that illuminate the challenges faced by EFL writers, focusing on (1) theoretical perspectives on reading–writing integration, (2) comprehension and processing difficulties, (3) linguistic and reformulation challenges, and (4) developmental issues such as patchwriting. Together, these bodies of work provide a framework for understanding why summarizing and paraphrasing remain persistent obstacles in EFL academic literacy development.

Reading-Writing Connections in Source-Based Writing. Summarizing and paraphrasing are intrinsically connected to the integration of reading and writing processes. Research in applied linguistics emphasizes that source-based writing places heavy demands on comprehension, evaluation, and textual transformation (Grabe & Zhang, 2013). According to reading-to-write models, writers must first construct a mental representation of the source text, identify key ideas, and then reorganize and re-express these ideas in their own words. This interaction



between reading and writing means that difficulties in either domain can hinder summarizing and paraphrasing performance.

Esmaeili's (2002) work on reading-to-write assessment demonstrates that comprehension is a decisive predictor of learners' success in summary writing. When EFL learners struggle to interpret main points, infer relationships between ideas, or identify the rhetorical structure of texts, their summaries often lack coherence, accuracy, or relevance. Paraphrasing likewise relies on deep comprehension, as writers must fully understand the meaning and function of the original text before attempting to rephrase it. Thus, the literature clearly shows that summarizing and paraphrasing cannot be reduced to surface linguistic techniques; they require high-level conceptual and interpretive skills that many EFL learners have not yet developed.

Processing and Comprehension Challenges One significant thread of research concerns the cognitive load imposed by summarizing and paraphrasing tasks. These tasks require learners to juggle multiple operations—reading, selecting information, transforming textual structure, monitoring accuracy, and producing grammatically correct output. Cognitive load theory suggests that such multifaceted tasks may overwhelm learners' working memory, particularly when processing occurs in a second language (Sweller, 1994). For intermediate EFL learners with limited proficiency, the effort required simply to decode academic texts can leave little cognitive capacity for the additional operations of reformulation and synthesis.

Studies using think-aloud protocols provide direct evidence of these processing difficulties. For example, Yang and Shi (2020) found that EFL learners often misidentified main ideas, overlooked signal words indicating key relationships, and struggled to distinguish essential information from examples or elaboration. As a result, their summaries tended to be either overly detailed or overly vague. Similarly, research on paraphrasing reveals that learners frequently misunderstand nuances in the source text—such as hedges, concessive structures, or modality—which leads to inaccurate or distorted paraphrases (Shi, 2012). These findings underscore that comprehension difficulties are not simply linguistic but involve discourse-level interpretation and critical reading.



Vocabulary knowledge is another central predictor of summarizing performance. Numerous studies show that learners with limited lexical knowledge struggle to interpret academic texts and therefore cannot identify or condense the main ideas effectively (Nation, 2013). When faced with unfamiliar academic terminology, dense noun phrases, or complex syntactic structures, learners often revert to copying sentences verbatim because they cannot confidently restate the material in their own words. The comprehension bottleneck thus becomes a major obstacle to effective summarization and paraphrasing.

Linguistic and Reformulation Challenges. Even when EFL learners successfully comprehend a text, they may struggle with the linguistic transformations required to paraphrase or summarize it. Paraphrasing in particular demands flexibility in manipulating vocabulary, syntax, and discourse structures. A central contribution in this area is Keck's (2006) comparative study of L1 and L2 paraphrasing strategies. Keck found that L2 writers rely heavily on "near-copy" paraphrases—those that preserve substantial lexical and structural overlap with the source—whereas L1 writers more frequently produce "moderate" or "substantial" revisions. This pattern highlights EFL writers' limited capacity to perform deep reformulation at the lexical and syntactic levels. Lexical constraints play a crucial role in shaping these difficulties. Low-frequency academic vocabulary often has few obvious synonyms, and inappropriate substitutions can distort meaning or alter the original stance. EFL learners may therefore produce paraphrases that are either too close to the source or semantically inaccurate. Syntax presents an additional challenge: academic texts frequently use embedded clauses, passive constructions, nominalizations, and other complex structures. To paraphrase effectively, writers must be able to unpack or restructure these forms, yet many EFL learners lack the grammatical range to do so. This linguistic inflexibility forces learners to replicate the structure of the original text, leading to patchwriting.

Summarizing requires a different but equally demanding set of linguistic skills. While paraphrasing focuses on sentence-level reformulation, summarizing requires condensation, generalization, and the ability to produce superordinate expressions that capture the essence of the text. Research has shown that EFL



writers often resort to copying key phrases because they cannot generate the academic register or abstract lexical items required to express broad concepts (Hirvela & Du, 2013). This suggests that EFL summarizing difficulties are not only cognitive but also linguistic, reflecting gaps in learners' lexical depth, syntactic repertoire, and genre knowledge.

Patchwriting as a Developmental Phenomenon. The literature also emphasizes the role of patchwriting as a transitional strategy. Howard's (1993) foundational work argues that patchwriting should not be viewed solely as plagiarism but as a developmental phase through which writers learn to appropriate academic discourse. Subsequent research supports this interpretation, suggesting that patchwriting occurs when learners understand the text at a basic level but lack the linguistic resources to restate it independently (Pecorari, 2008). In this sense, patchwriting reflects partial comprehension combined with insufficient reformulation skills.

Patchwriting is especially common among EFL learners because they must negotiate source integration in a language that they have not yet fully mastered. Pecorari's (2008) analysis of university students' writing found that many instances of patchwriting stemmed from inadequate paraphrasing instruction rather than intentional misuse. Students often described being unsure how much they were allowed to change or feared misrepresenting the original ideas. These findings highlight the importance of explicit instruction in summarizing and paraphrasing strategies, as well as pedagogical approaches that address both comprehension and production components.

Methods

This study employs a **secondary research design** based on an **integrative literature review**, synthesizing findings from empirical and theoretical studies on summarizing and paraphrasing difficulties among EFL writers. An integrative review is appropriate for examining a complex literacy skill that has been investigated using diverse methodologies, including experimental studies, corpus-based analyses, think-aloud protocols, classroom research, and qualitative interviews. This approach enables the consolidation of knowledge across these



varied sources and supports the identification of recurring patterns related to processing and production difficulties.

The literature was collected from peer-reviewed journals in applied linguistics, TESOL, L2 writing, and English for academic purposes (EAP). Databases typically used in this field – such as Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC – were consulted to identify relevant studies published in the last three decades, although seminal earlier works were also included when foundational to the topic (e.g., Howard, 1993).

Studies were selected based on the following criteria:

1. **Population:** Research involving EFL or ESL writers at secondary, tertiary, or postgraduate levels.
2. **Focus:** Studies that examined summarizing, paraphrasing, source-based writing, or the cognitive/linguistic processes underlying these tasks.
3. **Methodology:** Empirical studies employing textual analysis, assessments of summary/paraphrase quality, think-aloud protocols, interviews, or classroom interventions; theoretical or conceptual papers offering influential frameworks.
4. **Relevance:** Research that explicitly addressed processing (reading and comprehension) and/or production (linguistic reformulation) challenges.

Studies focusing solely on native speakers or unrelated writing skills (e.g., narrative writing) were excluded.

Results (Synthesis of Literature)

The synthesis of the reviewed studies reveals a clear pattern: EFL writers face **dual challenges** when summarizing and paraphrasing—those related to **processing academic texts** and those related to **producing accurate and original reformulations**. These domains are interconnected, and weaknesses in one often amplify difficulties in the other.

Processing Difficulties. Nearly all studies reviewed point to **comprehension** as a primary barrier to effective summarizing and paraphrasing. Learners frequently struggle to identify main ideas, recognize text structure, and distinguish between major and minor points (Esmaeili, 2002; Yang & Shi, 2020). Dense academic language, unfamiliar terminology, and complex syntax further impede



comprehension. As a result, students often misrepresent key arguments or focus on peripheral details when writing summaries.

Many EFL learners **cannot accurately interpret** discourse markers, hedges, or relationships between ideas—such as cause-effect, concession, or emphasis. Studies show that misreading these rhetorical cues often leads to inaccurate paraphrases or summaries that distort the original meaning (Shi, 2012).

A recurring finding is that summarizing and paraphrasing impose significant **cognitive load**. Learners must simultaneously comprehend, select, condense, and reformulate information while monitoring accuracy. For many EFL writers, processing the L2 text already consumes substantial working memory, leaving limited capacity for transformation (Sweller, 1994). Think-aloud studies show frequent pausing, backtracking, and overreliance on source language wording under cognitive strain (Yang & Shi, 2020).

Production Difficulties. Lexical constraints severely hinder EFL learners' ability to reformulate text. Students often lack synonyms or cannot generate appropriate academic vocabulary. As a result, paraphrases frequently exhibit close copying or limited transformation—a finding consistently supported by research (Keck, 2006; Hirvela & Du, 2013).

EFL writers also **struggle to manipulate sentence structures**. Studies report that learners rarely break down long sentences, change clause structures, or shift grammatical voice. Limited syntactic flexibility results in paraphrases that mirror the source text's structure or summaries that rely heavily on copied phrases.

A significant portion of inaccurate paraphrases stems not from copying but from **incorrect transformation**. When writers attempt to change wording or structure beyond their proficiency level, they often unintentionally alter the meaning, omit critical qualifiers, or misrepresent the author's stance (Shi, 2012).

Developmental and Pedagogical Factors. Across studies, **patchwriting** appears as a recurring phenomenon among EFL learners. This suggests that copying-with-modification is not necessarily intentional plagiarism but often a developmental stage (Howard, 1993; Pecorari, 2008). Learners resort to patchwriting because they understand the content superficially or lack the linguistic tools for full paraphrasing.



Many studies highlight a gap in instructional approaches. Students often report **receiving limited explicit guidance** on paraphrasing strategies, summary writing processes, or genre expectations. This pedagogical deficit contributes to repeated mistakes and overreliance on copying.

Several studies note that fear of plagiarizing inadvertently leads students to copy more rigidly, stick closely to the source, or avoid source-based tasks altogether. **Writing anxiety** further complicates the production process, exacerbating cognitive load.

To generalize the above, the literature collectively suggests that EFL students' difficulties with summarizing and paraphrasing originate from interdependent challenges:

- inadequate comprehension,
- lexical and syntactic limitations,
- cognitive overload,
- developmental struggles such as patchwriting, and
- insufficient pedagogical support.

These findings underscore the complexity of summarizing and paraphrasing as academic literacy practices requiring holistic instruction.

Discussion

The purpose of this discussion is to interpret the synthesized findings, connect them to theoretical frameworks, and outline implications for pedagogy and research.

The results indicate that summarizing and paraphrasing problems among EFL writers stem from an interplay of **cognitive, linguistic, and rhetorical factors**. These findings reinforce reading-to-write theories suggesting that source-based writing depends on both comprehension and production abilities (Grabe & Zhang, 2013). Weaknesses in reading proficiency directly affect the quality of summaries and paraphrases, supporting the notion that reading and writing skills are inseparable in academic contexts.

The evidence also confirms that EFL learners' linguistic limitations—especially in vocabulary depth and syntactic flexibility—restrict their ability to perform the



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deep transformations required for effective paraphrasing. Keck's (2006) observation that L2 writers tend to produce near-copy paraphrases is echoed across multiple studies, suggesting this is not an isolated phenomenon but a systemic pattern.

Cognitive load emerged as a decisive factor influencing performance. The dual demands of processing and production appear overwhelming for many EFL writers, especially when comprehension is incomplete. This aligns with cognitive load theory's prediction that multitasking in unfamiliar linguistic contexts exceeds working memory capacity (Sweller, 1994). The prevalence of patchwriting supports the argument that learners resort to copying not out of misconduct but because they are navigating a developmental bottleneck (Howard, 1993; Pecorari, 2008).

Pedagogical Implications. Instruction should move beyond admonitions to "use your own words." Students benefit from **explicit modeling** of paraphrasing strategies, including lexical substitution, syntactic restructuring, and clause reduction. Summarizing should be taught as a process involving annotation, main-idea identification, note-taking, and staged drafting.

Because comprehension deficits underpin many difficulties, **reading** instruction – particularly focused on academic discourse structures – should be **integrated into EAP writing** courses. Tasks that scaffold text analysis, rhetorical awareness, and discourse interpretation can improve summary and paraphrase quality.

Educators should recognize patchwriting as a developmental stage and **provide formative feedback** rather than punitive measures. Diagnostic tools can help identify whether errors stem from comprehension gaps or linguistic limitations. Classroom environments that encourage experimentation with reformulation – not merely punishment for plagiarism – can reduce fear and improve performance.

Overall, the synthesized literature points to a complex network of cognitive and linguistic factors that shape EFL students' ability to summarize and paraphrase academic texts. Addressing these challenges requires integrated instruction, explicit scaffolding, and recognition of the developmental trajectory that learners follow as they acquire academic literacy in a foreign language.



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