

## Becoming Concise and Original: Paraphrasing Strategies of ESL

### University Writers

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#### Abstract

*Since ESL university writers face the academic expectation that they can control refined paraphrasing skills, language teachers need to understand the language demands of paraphrasing tasks to purposefully prepare students. This analysis considers the paraphrasing strategies of 18 university-admitted international students' attempts to write concisely and to use their own words in the retelling of events from a short narrative. Examination of the written paraphrases shows that students who more successfully met the task included subordinators rather than coordinators, achieved meaningful synthesis of ideas, and gave indirect evidence of judgments about main ideas and supporting details. The paper concludes with teaching implications based on the analysis of the students' paraphrasing strategies. Teaching implications include a need for explicit simultaneous instruction on the meaning and uses of subordination within the context of paraphrase instruction and a requirement for a multiple draft writing process oriented toward producing synthesis.*

#### Introduction

Often posing a sizable challenge to even native-speakers of English, paraphrasing in academic writing frequently causes ESL university writers to stumble into the pitfalls of plagiarism and heavy synonym borrowing. Factors associated with lower English proficiency, such as misunderstanding a text, lead to writers appropriating longer strings of words and syntactical structures from the original passage than native-speaking students (Liao & Tseng, 2010). Of concern, studies have shown that, despite explicit instruction on paraphrasing skills, English language learners lacked confidence in their ability to paraphrase in writing. Choy, Lee, and Sedhu (2014) found that ESL students' self-perceptions that they had a poor command of English grammar and an inability to judge the importance of ideas caused them to feel that they could not effectively apply instruction they had received on paraphrasing strategies. Likewise, Keck (2006) observed that non-native speakers were much more likely than native speakers to write paraphrases rated as near copies of the original source after studying students who were struggling to apply paraphrasing strategies learned in English composition courses. ESL students' struggles to

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paraphrase regardless of explicit paraphrasing instruction suggest the crucial nature of the role of grammatical development in paraphrase writing.

Paraphrase writing puts the burden on ESL writers of being fully capable of writing a retelling of a sentence or group of sentences to the degree that "both sentences would . . . be recognized as lexically and syntactically different while remaining semantically equal" (McCarthy, Guess, & McNamara, 2009). To fully address the additional demands of a successful paraphrase, conciseness and originality, ESL students need a certain linguistic maturity to condense and restate an outside source. Perera (1986) cites a writer's combination of clauses as a sign of increasing grammatical development and highlights the movement from using coordination to subordination as notable, with the emergence of relative clauses as a second indicator of maturity. Kaplan (1966) reinforces the importance of subordination in English paragraph development with the argument that coordination hinders the expected linear development of a text and results in parallelism. The shift from coordination to subordination allows writers tasked with paraphrase writing to move beyond minimally linking clauses of equal importance and to expand upon ideas and to make judgments about main ideas and supporting details.

Assuming ESL writers have the linguistic maturity that allows them to successfully paraphrase an outside source, their paraphrases must also clearly communicate relationships between the retold ideas, details, or events from the original source for an outside audience. Flower (1979) defines reader-based prose as a product-oriented text that communicates relationships between such ideas or events. As a text intended for an external audience, a successful paraphrase cannot reflect a process-based orientation that suggests the writer has not fully reconciled his or her understanding of the outside source. Paraphrase writing asks ESL students to transform their writer-based prose, written as a way to think through their retelling, into reader-based prose that purposefully and concisely communicates the content of the original source. Within this perspective, analysis of ESL university writers' combination of clauses and strategies for attempting conciseness and using their own words reflect the writers' grammatical development and suggest pedagogical implications for ESL writing instruction. This analysis investigates the strategies university-admitted ESL students use to attempt conciseness and originality when paraphrasing. First, the

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analysis will examine if a shift from coordination to subordination is supported by the writing samples. Then, the analysis will explore a link between the use of subordination and coordination and synthesis.

### **Method**

This analysis is based on writing samples from 18 university-admitted international students enrolled in an ESL writing support class, a course designed to help international students be successful college writers. Nine students were L1 Korean, two students were L1 Japanese, three students were L1 Chinese, and four students were L1 Arabic. The writing samples consisted of paraphrases the students wrote that retold the events of a short narrative. The paraphrases were extracted from the introductory paragraphs of five-paragraph-response essays in which students responded to a critical thinking question. The response essay created an authentic purpose for the students to engage in paraphrase writing. To understand a student's written response and stance on the critical thinking question in the body paragraphs, a reader would need access to the main ideas and supporting details from the original narrative through the paraphrase. The goal was for the paraphrase to enable a reader to be able to understand the student's response without reading the original narrative. Only the paraphrases were considered in this analysis.

The objectives were for the students' paraphrases to retell the relevant ideas and details from the narrative and for the students to restate the events using their own words without direct synonym substitution. Students were expected to write concisely but not in a condensed, summarized format. While the narrative contained 296 words, the majority of the text consisted of dialogue and extensive description with only one main idea. A three to four sentence limit was imposed because much of the length of the original text was stylistic, not expository, and did not need to be included in the paraphrase. Prior to writing the paraphrase, students received in-class, explicit instruction on the difference between paraphrase and summary writing, on how to avoid plagiarism, and on how to write paraphrases based on the meaning of the text. The students also received guided practice on determining the relevancy of ideas in paraphrase writing. The students did not receive any form related instruction within the paraphrasing instruction. However, the strategies the students were taught are not the focus of this analysis. This

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analysis presents only a snapshot of how students attempted conciseness and originality in their paraphrase writing.

With the purpose of analyzing the paraphrasing strategies of the writers, each writing sample was ranked from the most to least successful based on 1) conciseness, the ability to convey the required and most relevant information within the length requirement, and 2) originality, the ability to convey meaning through the use of the writer's own words. In a preliminary analysis of the writing samples, comparison of each paraphrase to the original narrative showed that students did not rely predominantly on substituting synonyms as a paraphrasing strategy. Instead, the writers largely linked ideas together with coordinating conjunctions in a manner that excused them from making judgments about which events were the most important. Therefore, this analysis describes how the students of limited English proficiency approach conciseness and originality through the perspective of the students' use of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. Secondly, this analysis also examines the effect of the coordination and subordination on the degree of synthesis achieved by the writing samples. To analyze this aspect of the language, all of the coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) and high-frequency subordinating conjunctions (because, when, after, so that, before, as soon as, even though, since, while) were identified in the paraphrases and tallied. The run-on sentences containing subordinating and coordinating conjunctions were examined, and statistical functions were performed on the aforementioned data.

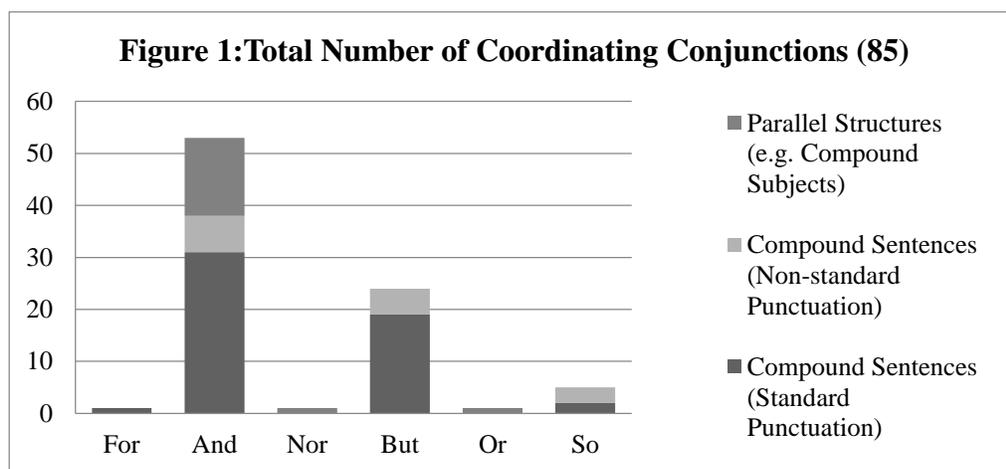
#### **Results of the Analysis**

Despite the prescribed length limit of four sentences, the students' paraphrases ranged from three to eight sentences with the average being five sentences long. This description is deceptive, however, as the inclusion of multiple coordinating conjunctions in each sentence allowed for an inflated linking of independent and dependent clauses. To illustrate, the average student included five coordinating and two subordinating conjunctions in the paraphrase. The following example of a sentence from an L1 Korean writing sample demonstrates the students' general treatment of coordinating conjunctions.

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There lived one couple whose name [sic] were Raoul **and** Marie **and** one day, Raoul went to a business trip **and** right after Raoul left, Marie went to see her boyfriend Pierre by paying money to the ferryman to cross the river, **but** when she was about to come back home, she realized that she had no money (L1 Korean).

While students met the length limit, the students' strategy of linking events together with coordinating conjunctions limited their success at attaining both conciseness and true originality. As demonstrated with the writing sample, this paraphrasing strategy results in sentences that tax processing and short-term memory. The most frequently used coordinating conjunctions were *and* (53 times) and *but* (24 times). The majority of the *ands* (58%) were punctuated in a way that conformed to standard mechanics, and 79% of the *buts* also conformed to standard mechanics. However, these data do not mean to imply that the conjunctions were situated within sentences with standard punctuation. *For*, *nor*, *or*, and *so* accounted for less than 1% of all coordinating conjunctions used in the writing samples.



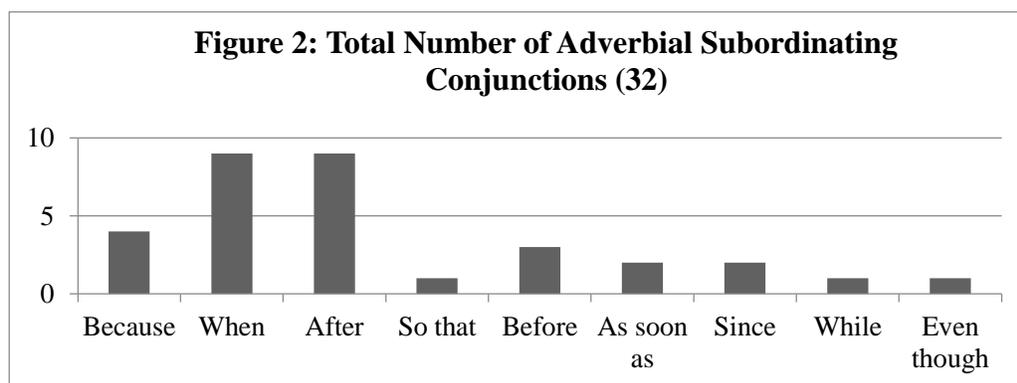
In contrast with the 85 coordinating conjunctions written in the paraphrases, only 32 subordinating conjunctions appeared in the writing samples. Fifteen of these subordinating conjunctions were used as introductory elements and formed subordinate clauses that were all punctuated in a standard way. The same L1 Korean example sentence shows the writer's use of subordinating conjunctions.

There lived one couple whose name [sic] were Raoul **and** Marie **and** one day, Raoul went to a business trip **and** right after Raoul left, Marie went to see her boyfriend Pierre by paying money to the

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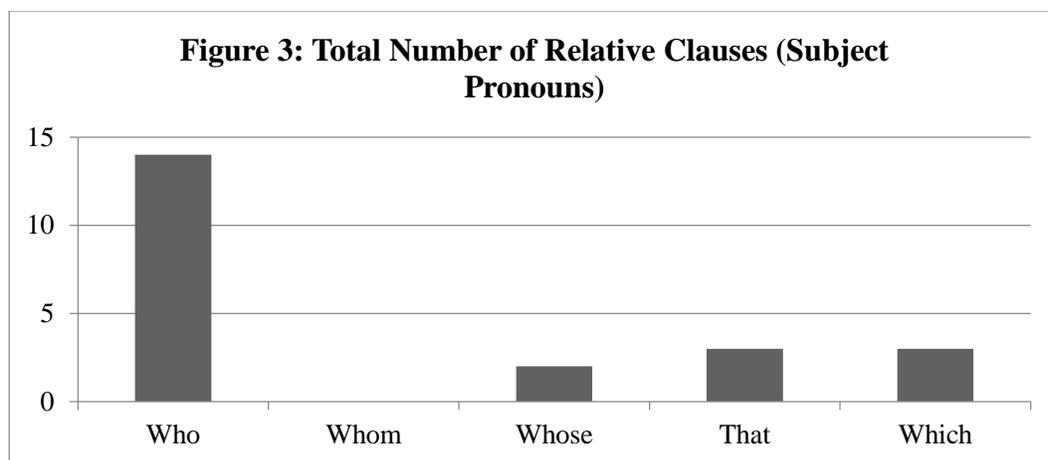
ferryman to cross the river, **but** when she was about to come back home, she realized that she had no money (L1 Korean).

While this writer only highlighted the relationships of addition and contrast through the coordinators *and* and *but*, the writer more effectively communicated time relationships with the use of the subordinating conjunctions *after* and *when*. Although the student combines the coordinating and subordinating conjunctions in an ineffective manner, the writer demonstrates increased grammatical development and linguistic maturity with the attempt to include more complex relationships between the narrative's events. The writer's increased grammatical development confirms the ability to show complex relationships between ideas, but the writing sample suggests the writer does not understand the benefit of doing so as a paraphrasing strategy. Of the subordinating conjunctions used in the writing samples, 75% represented subordinators of time relationships, while 22% showed cause and effect relationships with the remainder of the subordinators belonging to the contrast category.



Regarding the writers' strategies for originality, the students did demonstrate their ability to include their own words through their use of original relative clauses. Not including the previously mentioned introductory elements, the paraphrases contained 29 unique relative clauses, whereas the original text only contains two relative clauses. Only one of the 29 relative clauses was formed with no marker. Notably, 14 out of the 18 writing samples included at least one relative clause. The frequency of the relative clauses suggests that the students understood that the audiences reading their paraphrases needed extra information and speaks to the students' purposeful decision to include these clauses.

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### Application of the Analysis

The ranking of the writing samples revealed that the most successful paraphrases utilized subordinating conjunctions, achieved a higher degree of meaningful synthesis, and gave indirect evidence of judgments about main ideas and supporting details. The samples with these characteristics more effectively met the targets of conciseness and originality. To attempt conciseness when paraphrasing, the students tried to make up for their unwillingness or inability to make determinations about which ideas should have been included in the paraphrase by linking all ideas together with coordinating conjunctions. Specifically, only eight out of 18 students wrote paraphrases that fit the assigned length limit (3-4 sentences), which was set precisely so that students would have to make these judgments. Figure 1 shows that many of the coordinating conjunctions with independent and dependent clauses conformed to standard punctuation. Yet, the long strings of clauses often led to run-on sentences or sentences that lacked correct punctuation between the clauses. This strategy allowed the students to feel like they were not neglecting communicating the ideas of the narrative but failed them with respect to mechanical accuracy and stopped them from achieving true conciseness. The more successful paraphrases included subordinating conjunctions that linked independent and dependent clauses that provided important ideas for comprehension without linking them in a parallel, equivalent way.

In addition, the distinction between writer and reader-based prose suggests that the students' reliance on writing a large number of coordinating conjunctions to link ideas signals that they had not yet

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attained the ability to transform their narrative summaries into concisely synthesized writing. The less successful paraphrases failed to communicate the holistic importance of the narrative and instead, focused on each individual event. With little or no language to show causal relationships between events, these writers' strategies proved ineffective at producing reader-based, synthesized prose. In contrast, these writing samples reflected the seemingly misunderstood or unprocessed original narrative and appeared much like a first draft in the writing process. Finally, the writing samples that more closely aligned with the characteristics of reader-based prose indirectly gave evidence, through the use of subordinators and careful inclusion and exclusion of events, that judgments had been made concerning the identification of main ideas and supporting details from the narrative. The writer-based nature of the majority of the writing samples hindered true originality.

### **Implications for ESL Writing Instruction**

Given that ESL university writers' academic success benefits from the ability to apply paraphrasing skills, language teachers need to understand the language demands of paraphrasing tasks when making pedagogical choices. Since strategies for paraphrasing and identifying main ideas and supporting details alone fail ESL writers, writing instructors need to teach the forms and meaning conducive to paraphrase tasks. The analysis of the writing samples supports ESL writers' needs for underlying knowledge about language appropriate for paraphrase writing. The implication of this analysis for teaching ESL writing is that ESL writers need explicit, simultaneous instruction that addresses the meaning and use of subordination as a paraphrasing strategy. The instruction needs to occur within the introduction to paraphrase writing so that writers see how controlling the form facilitates the paraphrase writing process. The writing samples suggest that without understanding the subtle meaning and grammatical differences between conjunctions, students will choose those with which they feel the most comfortable—coordinating conjunctions. Since students may not understand that this form is stopping them from achieving conciseness, ESL teachers need to help students to see the positive effects the use of subordination will have on their paraphrase writing. This instruction should begin with the teaching of the meanings and uses of high-frequency coordinating and subordinating conjunctions and the modeling

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of appropriate situations where each can be used effectively in paraphrase writing. To paraphrase successfully, writers need to know which tools, coordinating or subordinating conjunctions, limit or expand upon the relationships of ideas or events they are restating. Without understanding how to use conjunctions to show relationships between ideas or events, writers cannot achieve the synthesized paraphrase demanded of them in writing tasks. Writing teachers need to demonstrate the contrasts between compound and complex sentences and how using the two sentence types effectively can lead to concise and effective paraphrases.

The act of paraphrasing requires that the writer not only have a complex understanding of the original text, but that the writer also produce a concise and original reader-based reiteration of the text's most essential ideas. When comparing the writing samples to Flower's (1979) definition of writer-centered prose, it is evident that the majority of the paraphrases lack true synthesis of the most important concepts from the original narrative. The majority of the students in this analysis present a writer-based reiteration that is evidenced through the high numbers of written *ands* and *buts*. This characteristic reflects the students' process of remembering the events and does not evolve into a true paraphrase that only communicates the larger, overall idea. To combat this ineffective strategy, instructors can impose a limitation on the number of coordinating conjunctions writers should use in their paraphrases and give guidelines for which subordinating conjunctions writers must include. Knowing when to use a form is equally as important for writers as how to use it, and this requirement helps writers to see how the inclusion of a form facilitates the quality of their writing. In addition, writing instructors need to clearly communicate their objectives for the paraphrase to be a finished, revised work that is intended to be read by a larger audience. Students should be required to write multiple drafts to transform their narrative-based paraphrases into a more synthesized final product.

### **Conclusion**

As evidenced by the analyzed writing samples, ESL writers begin to adopt strategies leading to conciseness and originality as they develop increasing linguistic maturity. The most successful writing samples contained more subordinating conjunctions, conveyed meaningful synthesis of ideas, and gave

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indirect evidence of judgments about main ideas and supporting details. The pedagogical implications of the analysis are that writing instructors should prepare ESL writers to purposefully apply explicit knowledge of the meaning and grammatical function of conjunctions to the paraphrase task to strengthen their paraphrase writing ability. ESL writers need the English language skills, such as understanding the appropriate uses of coordinating and subordinating conjunctions, that enable them to use their own words while concisely communicating the main ideas and supporting details of the original text.

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