Errors in Paraphrasing
and Strategies in Overcoming Them

Yoke Len Loh
lyl@ums.edu.my
Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning,
Universiti Malaysia Sabah

ABSTRACT

Paraphrasing is an important skill in academic writing. Poor paraphrasing may lead to a distortion of the original author's idea, concept or message and even alleged plagiarism. It is a demanding skill since it engages both reading and writing skills. Consequently, ESL (English as a second language) learners, particularly those with low proficiency in English, make numerous errors when paraphrasing. This study seeks to identify these errors so that preventive measures such as effective pedagogic strategies and learning activities can be devised and conducted to reduce these errors. The subjects were 50 undergraduates taking an English academic reading and writing course at a Malaysian public university. The data comprised 95 answers to two questions on paraphrasing in the final examination paper for this course. The results revealed errors at three levels, namely linguistics (grammar, syntax, and lexis), conventions (writing and paraphrasing), and semantics (content of message). In addition, there was evidence of plagiarism in the subjects' answers. However, the focus of this paper would only be on errors related to the paraphrased content. In order to facilitate learners in horning their skills in paraphrasing, two pedagogical strategies are proposed. It is hoped that by implementing these strategies, ESL learners will be confident in using their own words to paraphrase academic texts with minimal errors.

INTRODUCTION

Writing an academic essay is a common form of continuous assessment and a course requirement at institutes of higher learning. In many public universities in Malaysia, the undergraduates are given the option to write their academic essays or term papers in either Malay or English. Local students who possess a better command of English prefer to write in English. Furthermore, majority of the references in their fields of study are in English. However, students taking English language courses do not have this bilingual option regardless of their proficiency levels in English.

The Ministry of Higher Education of Malaysia recognises the significant role of the English language as a medium of global communication in diverse fields, particularly in mathematics, science, information communication technology, and international business. In response to the ministry's call to improve the English proficiency levels of undergraduates in public universities, the English Language Unit at the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, conducts four English language courses for students who obtained MUET (Malaysian University English Test) Band 1 and Band 2. Students with MUET Band 3 to Band 6 are required to take only one English language course during their first semester. The courses for students who lack proficiency in English are taught over four semesters. These courses are Communicative English Grammar, English for Oral Communication, English for Reading and Writing, and Academic Reading and Writing respectively. It is the fourth and the last course that students are required to write an academic essay comprising six paragraphs with a length of 1,000 to 2,000 words.

Statement of Problem
Undertaking the task of writing an academic essay in the English language seems quite an insurmountable challenge to ESL learners who are not capable of writing a grammatically correct sentence. Being unfamiliar with the genre and register of an academic essay, students at the tertiary level face difficulties in emulating the conventions of this academic community, even if they write in Malay. Hence, the problems encountered by them are compounded by linguistic and rhetorical unfamiliarity. In addition, they need to read and comprehend academic texts before citing experts' opinions, research findings, and ideas. If their interpretation of the text is inaccurate, the message or content which they produce will be distorted, especially when they use their own words to express it. Their paraphrased versions are frequently punctuated by grammatical, lexical, and syntactical errors as well as incorrect writing and paraphrasing conventions.

English language instructors do address these errors when teaching academic writing. They take certain measures to intervene and assist their students in writing academic essays. With reference to recommended text books on academic writing, instructors teach them strategies on how to paraphrase. However, several of these strategies could actually lead to certain forms of plagiarism, such as substituting words in sentences and changing the voice from active to passive form or vice versa. In the former strategy, students would select a few words in

each sentence and replace them with synonyms, without changing the structure of the sentence. In the latter strategy, students would either reverse the position of the independent clause and dependent clause or switch between the active and passive forms using the words of the original author. It is acknowledged that "changing a few words or rearranging words or clauses is not paraphrasing. In fact, it's plagiarism" (Utexas, n.d., para. 2). These are a few of the challenges faced by students in their academic writing as well as instructors in teaching written academic genres.

Aim and Objectives
This study aims to identify errors made by students when paraphrasing academic texts and to suggest strategies in assisting students to be familiar with the concept of paraphrasing and the skills involved. The specific objectives are as follows:
  a) To identify errors made by 50 students in paraphrasing two quotations
  b) To determine the relative frequency among the errors identified
  c) To ascertain errors related to the contents of subjects' paraphrases
  d) To propose two appropriate pedagogical strategies in teaching paraphrasing skills

Research Questions
In line with the objectives mentioned in 1.2, this study seeks to answer the following questions.
    RQ1: What are the errors made by 50 students in paraphrasing two quotations?
    RQ2: How do these errors rank in terms of frequency?
    RQ3: What are the errors related to contents of the subjects' paraphrases?

Definition of terms
Certain key words and terms used in this paper including 'errors, paraphrasing, academic writing, writing conventions, and paraphrasing conventions' will be delineated within the scope of this paper. To begin with, 'errors' in the linguistic sense are inaccurate representations of grammar, lexis, and semantics of a language, which is the English language in this study. Errors defer from mistakes because the language user consistently makes them and they are a part of their linguistic repertoire. They produce the errors without realising that they are wrong. Furthermore, they are incapable of correcting their own errors because they lack the linguistic knowledge.

Secondly, 'paraphrasing' is one of the two in-text citation techniques utilised by a writer who needs to quote another writer's ideas, opinions or research findings in his/her own text. To do this, the writer uses his/her own words. The meaning denoted in the paraphrased version must be similar to the original text although the lexis and syntax differ. Thirdly, 'academic writing' is presenting one's ideas with references to other experts and citing them in their written text. The written product contributes further knowledge in that particular field.

Fourthly, 'writing conventions' involve the mechanics of writing, namely punctuation marks, capital letters, and spelling. Lastly, 'paraphrasing conventions' refer to punctuation marks, such as full stops, commas, colons, and brackets. These conventions also include the author's name or surname, year of publication, and abbreviations such as 'p.' for one page, 'pp.' for pages, and 'para.' for paragraph.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions and Significance of Paraphrasing
According to Merriam-Webster online dictionary (n.d.), the first known use of the word 'paraphrase' was dated back to 1548. It originated from Latin 'paraphrasis' and Greek 'paraphrazein' which means 'to point out' (ibid). A paraphrase (as a noun) is "a restatement of a text, passage, or work, expressing the meaning of the original in another form" by expressing, interpreting, or translating with latitude – giving the meaning of a passage in another language (Definitions.net, n.d.). Similarly, paraphrasing (as a verb) is "the act or process of restating or rewording' (Dictionary.reference, n.d.). In the light of these definitions, paraphrasing or "rewording of another writer's text, explanation, argument, or narrative" is approximately equal in length as the original but differs significantly in its lexis and syntax (Trupe, 2005, para. 1).

The ability to paraphrase accurately showcases one's expertise as a critical reader and thinker, and a skillful writer (Colorado University, n.d.). In addition, it enhances the quality of one's work (Utexas, n.d.). For instance, paraphrasing is used to discuss another writer's argument directly, to provide expert evidence or support, and to present a conflicting opinion (Trupe, 2005). It is also an important skill because it prevents the writer from over quoting (Purdue OWL, 2010). Furthermore, the cognitive process in successful paraphrasing will result in an accurate comprehension of the original text (ibid). When a paraphrase is presented well, it can be much more concise than the original (Utexas, n.d.).

Characteristics of Good Paraphrasing
The characteristics of a good paraphrase are listed below.
1. The source is acknowledged using correct citation conventions (Utexas, n.d.).
2. The sentence structure and word choice are altered (Hedstorm, n.d.).
3. The basic meaning of the original text is retained (Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, n.d.).

These features may not be evident in ESL learners' attempts to paraphrase academic texts due to myriad causes, such as differences in academic culture, lack of time, overload of assignments, and ignorance of the do's and don'ts in paraphrasing.

Errors in Paraphrasing
To reword or rephrase an expert's idea, writers are required to "express the same message in different words" (Webster Dictionary, n.d.). Being novice writers, ESL learners tend to commit plagiarism either consciously or unconsciously because they do not follow or know the guidelines. Several of the errors identified by previous researchers are listed below.

1. The source is not cited (Hedstorm, n.d.).
2. The original sentence structure is retained although a few words are altered (ibid).
3. The voice (active to passive and vice versa) is changed while maintaining the original words (Roig, n.d.).
4. Only the tense is changed (ibid).
5. Sentence patterns are rearranged with writing style and language of original text intact (Lester & Lester, 2009).
6. The writer's own thoughts, opinions, analysis, and interpretation are included in the paraphrase (UCLA, n.d.).
7. There is distortion in meaning between the original and paraphrased texts (Colorado University, n.d.).

The errors mentioned are among those more commonly found in ESL learners' paraphrases. The first four errors are closely related to plagiarism, whereas the last two are considered as inaccurate paraphrasing.

Instructions on Paraphrasing
Since paraphrasing is a valuable skill, especially in academic writing, language instructors coaching tertiary learners give precedence in teaching this skill. Consequently, various sets of instructions are developed by academic staff from ESL writing / support centres. Below are three helpful sets of guidelines.

The following strategy in organising research information is advocated by UCLA (n.d.).
1. Prepare four different sets of cards and label them as 'quote, summary, paraphrase, and own ideas'.
2. On the front of the card:
   In the upper left corner, write Q, S, P or Me.
   In the upper right corner, write the topic.
   In the centre, write a quotation, summary, paraphrase or own idea.
3. On the back of the card:
   Write the citation details (author's name, title of reading material, publisher, publication year, and place, page, website, retrieval date, paragraph, etc.)

This systematic manner of organising research information is a preventive measure against negligent plagiarism. This strategy also provides quick retrieval of information required.

A six-step approach to paraphrasing is recommended by Purdue University (Purdue OWL, 2010). This approach is suitable for proficient language learners.

1. Read the text until its meaning is completely understood.
2. Paraphrase the text on a note card without referring the original text.
3. At the top of the note card, write the topic of the paraphrase using a key word or phrase. Below the paraphrase, write a few words to indicate how it will be used.
4. Check the paraphrase against the original to ensure that all pertinent information is accurately expressed in the paraphrase.

5. Any technical or specialised terms borrowed directly from the original text should be written within quotation marks or inverted commas.
6. Write down the reference for the original text, including the page or paragraph number, on the note card.

Another six-step approach to paraphrasing cited in Ahn (1999) would be more appropriate for low language proficiency learners.
1. Read the text twice.
2. Circle unfamiliar words or phrases.
3. Find their definitions using the dictionary or glossary.
4. Read the text again, replacing unfamiliar words or phrases with their definitions.
5. Read and rewrite the text.
6. Edit the paraphrase, checking for errors and cohesion.

Although different sets of instructions on paraphrasing exist, it is necessary to adapt them to suit the different linguistic needs of learners. It is the aim of this paper to propose another two sets of guidelines to meet the needs of low language proficiency learners.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Subjects, and Sample
A qualitative approach was utilised in this study. The subjects comprised 50 students (16 males and 34 females) who were in the first, fourth or fifth semester. The English language course they took was Academic Reading and Writing at the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, UMS. It was in this course that they were taught citation. They are from nine different schools in UMS, with 64 % of them from the arts-based stream. Their ages range from 20 to 25 years old; the majority of whom are 21 (32 %) or 22 (42 %) years old. Their MUET (Malaysian University English Test) results are from band 1 to band 4. A large proportion of the subjects have obtained MUET band 2 (42 %) or band 3 (52 %). They are from diverse races and ethnic groups, namely Malay (26 %), Chinese (24 %), Indian (10 %), Kadazandusun (20%), Bugis (8 %), Bajau (4 %), Sungai (2 %), Iban (2 %), Bidayuh (2 %), Bisaya (2 %). These subjects were selected because they were taught by the researcher.

The sample comprised 95 answers written by the subjects during their final examination of UB00402 Academic Reading and Writing course. These answers were responses to a question which required them to paraphrase two quotations (Appendix A). The answers constituted 8 % of the whole paper. The first quotation comprises 87 words and the topic is related to time management. The second quotation consists of 66 words on writing and reading skills. This sample was chosen because it is the subjects' original writing without assistance from any resources, such as dictionaries, and their friends. Although 50 answer scripts were selected, there were only 47 answers for the first question and 48 for the second that could be analysed. There was a subject who did not attempt the two questions while another two subjects did not attempt a question each. For question 1, another subject used the direct quotation method of citation

instead of paraphrasing. Therefore, this answer was excluded from the sample. From a potential total of 100 answers, only 95 were analysed.

Instrument

A checklist comprising three levels of analysis, namely linguistics (Level 1), conventions (Level 2), and semantics (Level 3) was used to analyse errors made by the subjects. These levels are further divided into seven categories. In Level 1, the categories are grammar, lexical choices, and syntax. The categories in Level 2 are writing conventions and paraphrasing conventions. Level 3 has two categories which are content in student's paraphrased answers, and plagiarism. These seven categories are further divided into sub-categories comprising smaller grammatical units and detailed descriptions of errors. The checklist was developed by the researcher after a pilot analysis of 20 answers. Throughout the analysis, new categories and sub-categories were added when necessary. This was done to avoid the 'blinkers' effect and to make it possible for unlisted errors to be detected. Please refer to Appendix B for the complete checklist.

Data Collection Procedure

The 50 subjects paraphrased two quotations given in the final paper for UB 00402 Academic Reading and Writing course during the final examination conducted in May 2010. It was a two-hour paper. The answer scripts were collected, marked, and graded by the researcher before the data were analysed.

Data Analysis

The answers were analysed according to subjects and not questions. This enabled the researcher to record the occurrence of each sub-category of errors only once for each subject. Errors that were repeated by the same subject were not recorded. Then the number of occurrences for each error type was summed up and converted into percentage for comparison and ranking purposes. The category with the highest percentage was identified as the most frequent error made by the subjects.

RESULTS

Research Questions 1 and 2
RQ1: What are the errors made by 50 students in paraphrasing two quotations?
RQ2: How do these errors rank in terms of frequency?

Table 4.1   Types of errors and their ranking in terms of frequency

Ranking	Sub-category of errors (according to category)	Number of Errors	Percentage
1	Grammar	243	44.1
2	Content	79	14.3
3	Lexis	68	12.3
4	Plagiarism	57	10.2
4	Paraphrasing conventions	57	10.2
6	Writing conventions	40	7.7
7	Syntax	7	1.2
	Total	551	100

As shown in Table 4.1, there are seven categories of errors made by 50 subjects, with an average of 10 errors by each subject. The results show that they are very weak in their grammar (44.1 %) followed by content (14.3 %), lexis (12.3 %), plagiarism (10.2 %), paraphrasing conventions (10.2 %), writing conventions (7.7 %), and lastly, syntax (1.2 %). This linguistic incompetence may be due to their vague understanding of the English grammar. Their lack of knowledge and inability to apply the rudiments of grammar become predominantly evident in their writing. Errors in content, vocabulary, writing conventions, and especially syntax were relatively lesser compared to grammatical errors due to plagiarism. When plagiarism was detected, these errors were kept to the minimum because of direct copying, substitution of synonyms without changes in sentence structure, and rearrangement of phrases or clauses. Although the subjects were taught the conventions used in paraphrasing, errors were relatively prevalent in their paraphrases. The occurrences of these seven categories of errors may be caused by insufficient practice and infrequent use.

Research Question 3
RQ3: What are the errors related to contents of the subjects' paraphrases?

The types of content errors made by the subjects were alteration, incomprehensible meaning, reduction, and addition of information in descending order of frequency (Table 4.2). The high incidence (48.1 %) for altering the meaning of the original text may reveal that the effort of subjects to paraphrase is hindered by their incomplete comprehension of its content. Secondly, the subjects who reduced the content information could be summarising instead of paraphrasing due to time constraint. Thirdly, the incomprehensible paraphrases produced by the subjects may reveal that they are either unable to comprehend the original text or to express themselves. The reason for their inability to produce accurate paraphrases could be due to their limited lexical knowledge in English. Lastly, in their attempts to use their own words, the subjects may have expressed their own opinions based on their miscomprehension of the original text or misrepresentation of the content information.

The errors identified may point to the fact that much practice using the right strategies is required to assist the subjects in overcoming the incompetency in their paraphrasing skills.

Table 4.2   Types of content errors

Category 6	CONTENT			
Sub-category	Detailed descriptors	Freq.	%	Example
a	Adding own ideas not stated in quotation / additional information	9	11.4	… so we are the great people.
b	Reducing ideas / leaving out important information	17	21.5	From this paragraph, the writer advise to people to improve our self to more better although the time always not enough to complite the all jobs.
c	Altering / modifying ideas (deviation)	38	48.1	… human minds explore and explain everything with writing and reading …
d	Incomprehensible / vague meaning (partial)	15	19.0	While ability and skills to think clearly may value ourself in all aspect and pattern of life.
	Total	79	100	

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Implications
It is an advantage for language instructors to be aware of the weaknesses in their learners' attempt to paraphrase academic texts. Once instructors are well informed, they can draw up contingency plans to assist their learners in overcoming these weaknesses. For instance, grammar can be taught within the context of the paraphrase to reduce grammatical errors. Since several of the paraphrasing errors made by the subjects could be attributed to discreet use of paraphrasing strategies available in textbooks on academic writing such as changing word form, using synonyms, and changing word order (Tunceren & Cavusgil, 2006), instructors should provide proper guidelines, and exercises to eliminate any misconceptions of paraphrasing. Hence, it is vital for instructors to remind their learners to adhere to the features of good paraphrasing and ensure that they do not "commit negligent plagiarism" (Hedstorm, n.d., para.4).

Recommendations
Based on the findings of the present study, two strategies are recommended to enhance the paraphrasing skills of low language proficiency students. The first proposed corrective measure to facilitate learners in acquiring the skills of paraphrasing involves two phases that focus on two language skills, namely writing and reading. The second strategy aims to train learners to become autonomous in paraphrasing academic texts.

First Strategy

This is an initial strategy in paraphrasing that aims to give learners a right concept of what good paraphrasing is. In the two phases, learners are to work in pairs or a small group of three so that they have their peers to support them in their learning process. In the first phase, they learn to reword their own introductory paragraph of a six-paragraph essay which is the normal requirement of an academic reading and writing course. In the latter phase, they learn to restate an expert's idea which they need to incorporate in their essays.

First Phase: Learning to write one's ideas twice using different words
1. In the first phase, learners are instructed to select a controversial issue related to their field.
2. Then, they are required to state their opinion and give a reason to support their stand.
3. They compose a paragraph consisting of two introductory sentences about the issue, another sentence stating their opinion, and lastly, one sentence stating the rationale for their stand.
4. After completing the four-sentence paragraph, learners have to rewrite these sentences using different words without changing their original meaning.
5. They are allowed to reduce the number of sentences by constructing complex sentences.
6. Next, they are asked to compare the two paragraphs and check their meanings to ensure that they are consistent.
7. This exercise can be repeated by getting learners to work in pairs. They exchange their introductory paragraphs and rewrite their partner's.
8. Then they provide feedback on their partner's paraphrasing, paying attention to its meaning, lexical choices, and tenses.

Second Phase: Paraphrasing expert's ideas
1. Students select ideas which they are going to use in their essay from articles gathered by themselves.
2. They paraphrase these ideas.
3. They ask their partner to compare their paraphrased version with the original.
4. Based on their partner's feedback, they edit their work.
5. Steps 3 and 4 are repeated until a satisfactory piece of paraphrasing is achieved.
   This strategy requires students to play a more active role through peer feedback, editing, and rewriting. The discussion between the two learners would generate more accurate paraphrasing and provide language awareness. They would gain practical insights on paraphrasing skills. It also frees the instructor who will then be able to pay individual attention to learners with low proficiency level in English.

Second Strategy

The objective of this six-step strategy is for learners to gain confidence in paraphrasing. Using this strategy, they would learn to adhere to the text contents and rephrase them in their own words. It is suitable for paraphrasing in an examination condition whereby it would be unnecessary to transfer information into a graphic organiser if time factor is a constraint.

1. Read the text and identify the topic and the controlling ideas. Circle the topic and underline the controlling ideas.
2. Identify the supporting details.
3. Transfer the information (topic, controlling ideas, and supporting details) using own words into an appropriate graphic organiser.
4. By referring to the graphic organiser, construct a sentence that links the topic, first controlling idea, and related details.
5. Repeat step 4 for the other controlling ideas and related details.
6. Edit the sentences in terms of coherence and insert appropriate logical connectors.

In the second strategy, a graphic organiser is introduced so that learners can get a clearer picture to enhance their comprehension of the academic text they are reading. In addition, they are trained to use their own words when they construct new sentences. At the same time, the contents (topic, controlling ideas, and details) of the original text are fully utilised. In this way, the contents of the original text will be intact and its meaning will be maintained.

Conclusion

ESL learners who lack proficiency in English language are most likely to be ensnared in a vicious cycle of being poor readers and poor writers. The limited lexical knowledge possessed by these learners proves to be a hindrance in their effort to comprehend academic texts. In addition, they are unable to express expert's thoughts using appropriate academic vocabulary. Consequently, they face difficulties in paraphrasing academic texts and produce numerous errors in the process of doing so. The current study revealed that the most frequently occurring errors are grammar based, followed by errors in content, lexis, paraphrasing and writing conventions, and lastly, syntax. Two strategies are proposed to initiate learners into the art of academic writing, particularly paraphrasing. It is hoped that these strategies would be able to enlighten instructors on how to guide learners in paraphrasing academic texts. Learners will eventually be able to paraphrase academic texts accurately and reduce errors to the minimum with ample practice.

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About the Author

Yoke Len Loh is a dedicated and well-versed educator in the field of teaching English as a second language (TESL). She teaches English for oral communication, reading, writing, academic purposes, occupational purposes, research purposes as well as basic to advanced grammar, and designs English language courses at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). She conducts research in different aspects of TESL and applied linguistics.

APPENDIX A

SECTION II: PARAPHRASING (8 MARKS)
Paraphrase the following quotations.

1. "There is never enough time to do all the work that seems to be essential in order to do a thorough job, but if you have a handover date, then somehow the work has to be completed in the specified time. It is unlikely you will be able to keep rigidly to a timetable, but some attempt should be made to devise a schedule so that you can check progress periodically and, if necessary, force yourself to move from one stage of the research to the next." (Bell, 2005: 35)

2. "Writing and reading are how our minds explore and explain our world. The use of language is what makes us human; it is how we argue, how we tell stories, how we learn, how we creatively and politically express ourselves. Thinking clearly and critically about your reading strategies and your writing process will greatly enhance your ability to express yourself in all areas of your life." (Chaffee, McMahon and Stout, 2005: 1)

APPENDIX B

Category	Error type	Frequency
	LEVEL 1: LINGUISTICS	
1	**GRAMMAR**	**243**
a	S-V Agreement/be	28
b	Tense - verb form	13
c	Pronoun - personal, reflexive, possessive, relative; changing pronouns	28
d	Word class	19
e	Preposition	14
f	Article	20
g	Omission	31
h	Verb form (passive, perfect, present, past)	24
i	Gerund	5
j	Infinitive	14
k	Mismatch between determiners / quantifiers or possessive pronouns and count / non-count nouns (plural vs. singular)	41
l	Comparatives	1
m	Negative	1
n	Repetition / Redundancy	4
2	**LEXICAL CHOICES**	**68**
a	Informal / inappropriate words	36
b	Informal / inappropriate phrases	32
3	**SYNTAX**	**7**
a	Embedded / indirect questions	3
b	Simple sentences	0
c	Compound sentences	1
d	Complex sentences / conditionals	3
	LEVEL 2: CONVENTIONS	
4	**WRITING CONVENTIONS**	**40**
a	Coherence: Illogical sequences, causes and effects	2
b	Cohesion: Inappropriate semantic markers / linkers	6
c	Spelling	28
d	Punctuation	2
e	Abbreviation	2
5	**PARAPHRASING CONVENTIONS**	**57**
a	Inappropriate punctuation	7
b	Inappropriate attribution signals / reporting verbs	2
c	Omission of words	11
d	Inappropriate information (e.g. page number)	27
e	Inappropriate indirect speech	6
f	Inappropriate positioning of reference	4
	LEVEL 3: SEMANTICS	
6	**CONTENT OF MESSAGE**	**79**
a	Adding own ideas not stated in quotation / additional information	9
b	Reducing ideas / leaving out important information	17
c	Altering / modifying ideas (deviation)	38
d	Incomprehensible / vague meaning (partial)	15
7	**PLAGIARISM**	**57**
a	No acknowledgement to source	14
b	General acknowledgement to source	2
c	Repositioning words / phrases / clauses	13
d	Substituting words without changing the sentence structure	12
e	Omission of words / phrases without changing the sentence structure	3
f	Copying partial phrases / clauses without changing their positions	13