

Paraphrasing and Its Usefulness to Students Preparing for the *TOEIC*[®] Listening & Reading Test

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Paraphrasing means expressing another author's ideas in different words. It is an indispensable skill for academic writing. Students familiar with it can also improve their score on standardized tests designed to assess their receptive language skills. This paper will present an overview of paraphrasing techniques and explain how they can be useful to students preparing for the TOEIC[®] Listening & Reading Test. It will also provide some tips on how to develop paraphrasing skills.

Introduction

Paraphrasing means expressing what someone else said or wrote using different words and structures. There are several techniques that can be used to write a paraphrase: using synonyms, using compensatory strategies, and changing sentence structure. Usually, a combination of all 3 techniques is used (Karapetyan, 2013).

Synonyms are words that have a similar meaning (e.g. *beautiful*, *pretty* and *attractive*). However, they are not always interchangeable, as their usage often depends on the context. Correct use of synonyms demonstrates a high level of language proficiency, and it is a useful technique to rephrase and repeat key words and ideas (Karapetyan, 2013).

According to Sharpe (as cited in Karapetyan, 2013), when we do not know or cannot remember a synonym of a word, we can use different compensatory strategies:

- substituting adjectives with their antonyms and the negative particle not (e.g. *dangerous* – *not safe*),
- using generic verbs instead of verbs with specific meanings (e.g. *ask* – *inquire*),
and

- description or explanation (e.g. *stallion – adult male horse*).

A good paraphrase is not only a restatement of the original idea; it must differ both in vocabulary and syntactic structure. The structure of a sentence can be changed in many ways. Karapetyan (2013) lists some simple methods including:

- changing parts of speech (We must *protect* the *environment*. – *Environmental protection* is important.),
- changing the voice (Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin. – Penicillin was discovered by Alexander Fleming.), and
- relative clauses (Japanese comics are enjoyed by many foreigners. They are called *manga* in Japanese. – Japanese comics, which are called *manga* in Japanese, are enjoyed by many foreigners.).

Expressions including time, numbers and statistics can be paraphrased in a variety of ways (Alexander College Writing & Learning Centre, n.d.):

- time can be converted into different units (e.g. 1 week – 7 days, 2 days ago – 48 hours ago) or expressed in more general terms (e.g. 11 a.m. – before noon, 3 p.m. – in the afternoon),
- multiples can be expressed in different ways (e.g. 2 times – twice, double),
- statistics can be reversed (e.g. 70% of the users liked the new product. – 30% of the users did not like the new product.) or generalized (e.g. 80% of the users liked the new product. – The majority of the users liked the new product.).

While paraphrasing is most commonly used in academic writing, it can also be useful when taking standardized tests, as “it helps to recognize and match the ideas in the questions with the similar ideas expressed both in the reading and listening material” (Karapetyan, 2013, p. 2).

Paraphrasing on the TOEIC® Listening & Reading Test

The TOEIC® (Test of English for International Communication) Listening & Reading Test is a multiple-choice test for assessing the receptive English language skills of English language learners (Institute for International Business Communication, n.d.-a). It consists of 200 questions, separated into two sections (100 questions each), which are further divided into 7 parts. The Listening section is administered first and lasts 45 minutes. There are 4 parts in this section –

Photographs (Part 1), Question-Response (Part 2), Short Conversations (Part 3) and Short Talks (Part 4). It is immediately followed by the Reading section, which lasts 75 minutes and consists of 3 parts – Incomplete Sentences (Part 5), Text Completion (Part 6) and Reading Comprehension (Part 7). The test results are shown as “Score” and range from 10 to 990 points (5 to 495 for each section) (Institute for International Business Communication, n.d.-b).

To score highly on the test, students must be adept at a number of linguistic skills, such as familiarity with different native speaker accents and conversational English, vocabulary and grammatical understanding. Similarly, students also need to be adept at test-taking skills, such as familiarity with question types, time management, and efficient information processing (*Oxford Tactics*, 2010).

Students at the intermediate proficiency level (*TOEIC*[®] score around 600 points) typically have problems with connecting information within the text, understanding difficult vocabulary and grammatical constructions, and they do not understand most paraphrased information (Institute for International Business Communication, 2007).

The item options (answer choices) in Part 3 (Short Conversations), Part 4 (Short Talks) and especially in Part 7 (Reading Comprehension) are often paraphrased. This can present a difficulty for students who rely on finding matching words and phrases in the text and the question (Institute for International Business Communication, 2007). Understanding paraphrased information is therefore key to achieving a high score on the *TOEIC*[®] Listening & Reading Test.

Tips for practising

Most students are familiar with techniques to improve their vocabulary and grammar skills, but many of them are not adept at paraphrasing. When preparing for the test, it might therefore be beneficial for students to practise the above-mentioned techniques as they will help them to recognize paraphrased information.

A monolingual dictionary can be of great assistance when practising paraphrasing. It includes a lot of additional information about a word, such as their definition and example sentences. Many such dictionaries are available online, and they often include links to related words and synonyms.

Another good way to familiarize oneself with paraphrasing is to use practice tests. When checking their answers, students should compare the words and expressions used in the text with the correct answer choice, and try to identify what paraphrasing techniques were employed.

Conclusion

Paraphrasing can be a useful skill in a variety of situations. University students are often required to write essays and research papers. Writing such a paper without the use of paraphrasing is virtually impossible if one does not want to be accused of plagiarism. Knowing how to paraphrase can help us to communicate effectively with people with a variety of language proficiencies. If someone cannot understand what we are saying, we can simply restate it using easier words. In addition to improving our productive language skills, paraphrasing can also help us to get better at reading and listening tasks. Learning how to paraphrase might seem time-consuming, but it is worth mastering.

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