

Secret agents: Teaching complex noun phrases & nominalisation to developing academic writers

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Why focus on noun phrases/nominalisation?

1. There's no escape

- “Nominalizations of verbs and adjectives are ubiquitous in academic and professional discourse in English.” (Hinkel, 2002)
- Biber & Gray (2010): “Instead of dependent clauses, academic writing relies heavily on phrases to add information.” (p. 7)

Sample Abstracts [1]

- The Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998 unleashed unprecedented policy and political changes in Asia. With many governments' capacity to manage their economies discredited and the pernicious effects of the lack of protection system exposed, governments adopted transformative policy changes.
- One of the great fundamental problems facing modern medicine is the seemingly inevitable emergence of resistance to drugs such as antibiotics by bacteria, or the resistance to chemotherapy by cancer cells.

Sample Abstracts [2]

- **The Asian economic crisis of 1997-1998** unleashed **unprecedented policy and political changes in Asia.** With **many governments' capacity to manage their economies** discredited and **the pernicious effects of the lack of protection system** exposed, **governments** adopted **transformative policy changes.**
- **One of the great fundamental problems facing modern medicine** is the seemingly inevitable emergence of **resistance to drugs such as antibiotics by bacteria, or the resistance to chemotherapy by cancer cells.**

Why focus on noun phrases/nominalisation? (contd)

2. Students tend not to be familiar with this area of grammar

- Not highlighted by most textbooks/teachers (see Willis, 1990)
- “Many native speakers of the [English] language, unless they are journalists, academics or bureaucrats, live happy and fulfilled lives without ever needing to produce such convoluted phrases.” (Willis, 2003)
- “Although teaching the uses of gerunds and abstract nominalizations is not particularly exciting, these structures are essential for the development of students' academic language skills.” (Hinkel, 2004)

What problems do (my) students face?

Reading

- Misidentification of headwords / head nouns when reading
(e.g. “The fast-growing social network, made possible by recent advances in technological communication, gives youth an easy and convenient way to be involved in civic affairs and social change.”)
- Simply getting lost in the density of the text

Writing

- Subject-verb agreement
- Confusion between noun phrases and clauses
(e.g. “Students have a low level of English causes many problems.”)
- Incorrect production of noun phrases
- Headwords in Chinese are always found at the end of a noun phrase (see Hung, 2005).
- Post-modification in the form of full or reduced relative clauses is therefore a challenge for Chinese students.

What do students need to know about noun phrases?

Determiners, pre-modifiers, headwords and post-modifiers

- “Chang’s seminal work on syntactic structure is often considered...”
- “The three most important elements contributing to student success are...”
- “The increasing difficulty some young professionals have in maintaining a healthy work-leisure balance has prompted...”

What do students need to know? [2]

Determiner[s]	Pre-modifier[s]	Headword	Post-modifier[s]
Possessives (Chang's) Numerals (Four) Articles (The) Quantifiers (Many)	Adjectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seminal • stronger • highest • rising • developed Adverbs pre-modifying adjectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increasingly complex Nouns as pre-modifiers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • computer software engineer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work • elements • company • chemicals • situation • method Etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepositional phrases (...in China) • Relative clauses (...which leads to) • “to-” infinitives (...to ensure) • “-ing” phrases/clauses (...causing an increase) • “-ed” phrases/clauses (...created in 1996) • “of” + “-ing” phrases (...of solving)

Nominalisation (1)

- The use of abstract nouns created from verbs or adjectives
- Occur (v.) >>> occurrence (n.)
- Easy (adj.) >>> ease (n.)
- Far more common in academic text than any other text type (see Biber *et al*, 1999)
- Allows more content words to be packed into a clause (lexical density)
- Useful for discussing abstract concepts (e.g. “negative externality”)
- 2012: “legacy” vs “sustainability”
- Nominalisations in the form of general nouns can provide anaphoric reference to preceding ideas

(e.g. “Chamberlain believed that a policy of appeasement would halt Nazi expansion. **This failure** to understand Hitler’s intentions led to...”)

- Nominalisations can be “sneaky”
(<http://www.telenex.hku.hk/telec/grammar/e2area4.htm>)
- Can be used to “eliminate” the agent (see Eggins, Wignell & Martin, 1993)
- Abstract nouns are frequently post-modified by *that*- clauses

(e.g. “The argument that technology enriches education has many detractors.”)

Nominalisation (2)

- Students are sometimes advised to avoid nominalisation
- Such advice sometimes seems to involve something like a straw man argument
- <http://jaffeerevises.com/scholarly%20prose%20b.htm>

“A fumigation occurred.”

- Strong views:
 - “typical academic slop”
 - Helen Sword (2012): “Zombie nouns”
 - <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/zombie-nouns>
 - Eggins et al (1993): “The second folk notion about grammatical metaphor [i.e. turning processes into participants]...”
 - “...is that it’s BULLSHIT. It is contrived deliberately to hide the fact that you’ve got nothing to say.” (p. 93)
- Critical EAP versus the man from Ottawa

Nominalisation (3)

- Pragmatic self-refutation?
- <http://preciseedit.wordpress.com/2012/01/17/action-verbs-good-nominalizations-bad/>
 - “As the number of nominalizations increases, the reader’s difficulty understanding also increases.”
 - Every time you add another nominalization, your reader will find it more difficult to understand [your text].
- <http://thegrammargang.blogspot.hk/2009/04/style-tips-avoiding-over-nominalization.html>
 - “An overuse of nominalizations is one major cause of ‘clunkiness.’”
 - If you over-use nominalizations, you will cause your writing to be clunky.
- <http://www.hcde.washington.edu/files/people/docs/Nominalizations.pdf>
- increased comprehensibility of nominalized prose for NNSs

Nominalisation (4)

- Sometimes even “pro-nominalisation” sources gloss over interesting/useful details:

Active voice	Passive voice	Nominalisation
<i>Academic skills lecturers teach <u>the students</u> how to write essays during Orientation Week.</i>	<i><u>Students</u> are taught how to write essays by academic skills lecturers during Orientation Week.</i>	<i>During orientation week, the teaching of academic writing skills for students ...</i>
<i><u>Students</u> learn about <u>referencing and plagiarism</u>.</i>	<i><u>Referencing and plagiarism</u> is learned <i>by the students</i>.</i>	<i>Student learning about referencing and plagiarism ...</i>
<i>Lecturers and students at the university use Turnitin to identify plagiarism in assignments</i>	<i><u>Turnitin</u> is used <i>by lecturers and students</i> at the university to identify plagiarism in assignments.</i>	<i>The use of Turnitin for plagiarism identification by university lecturers and students ...</i>

Activities & resources for noun phrases & nominalisation

Activity 1: “Sales pitch”

Analysis of L2 text... shows that in academic texts advanced NNS writers employ significantly fewer gerunds and nominalizations than first-year NS students without formal training in writing (Hinkel, 2002a, 2003b). The outcome of the NNS shortfalls in the uses of these lexical features is that L2 academic text – both spoken and written – appears to be far less academic than may be expected in college and university settings. In addition, given their lack of academic vocabulary needed to convey abstract concepts, L2 writers may simply be unable to explain their ideas and adequately demonstrate their familiarity with readings and material. Therefore, using gerunds and abstract nominalizations can make students' texts appear less childish and simple and, ultimately, lead to better grades in mainstream courses. (Hinkel, 2004)

Activity 2: . Informal to formal transformation activity: “packing”

- **(focus on nominalisation)**
- “Unpacking” is a more commonly used activity (see Jones & Lock 2011)

If you're at university and you want to get good results, you've got to be able to understand and write complex noun phrases.

The ability to decode and create complex noun phrases is an essential skill required by any student enrolled in university and intent on academic success.

Informal/formal transformation activity [2]

More informal:

Lots of us don't like the canteen because:

- there are too many people when it's lunch time or dinner time
- the food is horrible
- the price of sandwiches keeps going up
- too many construction workers are there

More formal:

Among the frequently-made criticisms regarding the CityU canteen are the following:

- overcrowding during meal times / peak periods
- poor food quality
- continual/frequent increases in the price of sandwiches
- the presence of large numbers of customers not connected with the institution, such as construction workers from nearby sites

Activity 3:

Building competition [1]

(Focus on noun phrase construction)

- Start from a simple N + V (+ N) sentence, e.g.
“Learning causes frustration.”
- Students are asked to build lengthy sentences by increasing the complexity of noun phrases.

Building competition [2]

- Most of the university **students** in Hong Kong between 18 and 20 years old, who have graduated from secondary school, which requires critical thinking and standard language skills, **hope** to....
- There are some seminars about how to manage different kinds of business operation systems, from small companies to large well-developed international firms, given by three popular experts from the Business Administration Department of City University of Hong Kong who study Business System Management around the world.
- All ten beautiful, sexy, charming and young ladies selected by the most popular association in Hong Kong, called Hong Kong Beauty, ...

Activity 4:

Competition - finding the biggest/best (worst?) noun phrase

An example from the abstract for a CityU public lecture:

“This paper introduces **the idea of ‘Identity Management’, which is defined as any institutionalized or localized effort made to deliberately shape or direct individual or group identities...** The paper shows how governments can use educational curricula as **institutionalized ways in which to regulate and conform the identity of the students in an alignment to dominant policies and ideologies.**”

Further resources

- <http://australianetwork.com/studyenglish/s2825166.htm>
- <http://www.llas.ac.uk/materialsbank/mb063/eap/05/vs70402.htm>
- <http://www.uefap.com/writing/feature/complex.htm>
- <http://sana.tkk.fi/awe/grammar/nounphrase.htm>
- <http://targetenglish.wordpress.com/2011/01/17/recognise-and-use-noun-phrases/>
- <http://unilearning.uow.edu.au/academic/3b.html>
- http://learningcentre.usyd.edu.au/clearer_writing/module2/typ_academic_sentences/academic_sentences_info.html

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Egins, S., P. Wignell & J. R. Martin (1993). The discourse of history: distancing the recoverable past. In Ghadessy, M. (ed.) *Register Analysis: Theory and Practice*. London, Pinter Publishers. (Chap. 5)

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