

An Exploration of Strategies to Enhance EFL Students' Academic Writing Capabilities From a Nominalization Perspective

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English majors in China currently encounter numerous challenges when it comes to academic writing, primarily because of the limitations imposed by the differences in English and Chinese thought processes as well as their limited proficiency with the English language. This study, which begins with the theory of grammatical metaphor of Nominalization, discovers that Nominalization serves a variety of purposes in the construction of discourse, including improving the rigor of the introduction, logical coherence, and the discourse's objectivity and fairness, all of which are demanded by academic writing. Based on this, this study puts forward the idea that EFL students should strengthen their learning of Nominalization and improve their ability to use Nominalization, which will help them develop their English academic writing ability. The study also gives implementation strategies in terms of both enhanced input and effective output.

Keywords: grammatical metaphors, nominalization, discourse function, academic English writing, English major students

Theoretical Foundations

Grammatical Metaphor Theory and the Concept of Nominalization

Halliday first introduced the concept of grammatical metaphor in his book *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. According to the core idea of Halliday (1985), grammatical metaphor is not simply substituting one word or phrase for another, but rather expressing the same meaning through the use of different grammatical categories or grammatical structures. Each of these two grammatical categories represents two modes of expressive variation in a given meaning. Congruent form is a mode of linguistic expression that conveys meaning directly. Metaphor form is opposed to congruent form, which to some extent experiences a “transitive” mode of expression. In congruent form, verbs usually denote behaviour or action, nouns usually denote entities or participants, and adjectives are used to describe features or attributes. However, in the practical use of the English language, we often find that this relationship changes, as people transform verbs or adjectives into nouns, and sentences into noun phrases. This change is called grammatical metaphor, and the process of transforming verbs and adjectives into noun lexemes is called Nominalization.

Halliday has given two successive definitions of Nominalization: “Any structure in which a single constituent or a group of constituents functions as a noun phrase in a sentence is a Nominalization”; and

“Nominalization is considered to be the most effective method of creating grammatical metaphors, which is achieved by transforming verbs and adjectives in the unanimated tense into metaphorical nouns, that is, transforming the processes and properties of the original clause into core words in a noun phrase” (1985, p. 729). For example:

1a. He *failed to* complete the task because his lack of effort.

1b. *His failure to complete the task* was due to his lack of effort.

In the above example sentences, 1a is a congruent form in which the noun *he* denotes the participant and *failed* is a verb denoting a process, but in 1b the sentence is transformed into noun phrase *His failure to complete the task*.

The Value of Nominalization in English Academic Writing

Numerous domestic and international researches demonstrate the widespread occurrence of nominalization in English academic speech. The most noticeable characteristic of academic discourse, according to Hyland (2006), is its high degree of formality, which is mostly attained by impersonal structures, a high number of nominalized expressions, and high semantic density. In academic discourse, nominalization is the most effective method for creating conceptual grammatical metaphors. It is frequently used to mark genres, increase lexical density, condense semantics, and organize discourse information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Dong & Zhang, 2017).

English academic writing requires impersonal and objective expression, and its language needs to conform to the characteristics of conciseness, objectivity, coherence, and logic, in which Nominalization happens to play an important role with its own characteristics. In this paper, the function of Nominalization will be analyzed in detail from the discourse level.

Enhancement of concise and accuracy of discourse. English academic writing is a high level summary of the research's substance, methodology, and findings. According to Lorés-Sanz (2016), Nominalization is the most effective technique for condensing the material and making the abstract more concise. Dense nouns and terminology are frequently used in academic writing, lending academic publications a polished, authoritative feel. Additionally, the article has a higher semantic density due to the abundance of noun phrases employed in academic discourse, which allows for the communication of more information in a smaller amount of space.

Halliday compares the process of Nominalization to “packing”, where verbs denoting processes and adjectives denoting properties are nominalized. Simple clauses are “packaged” into noun phrases, and two or three clauses are “packaged” into a single clause. As a result of this “packaging”, conceptual meanings that used to be expressed in a single clause now need to be expressed in a single phrase, and meanings that used to be expressed in several clauses can now be replaced by a single clause. This shift to Nominalization reduces the number of words and clauses in the discourse, thus increasing the lexical density and information content of the discourse and making it more concise and general. For example:

2a. *I failed to* pass the exam and that disappointed my parents.

2b. *My failure to* pass the exam disappointed my parents.

These two examples contain the same amount of information, but according to the *lexical density = number of real words/number of clauses* (where real words include nouns, predicate verbs, adverbs, and adjectives; and virtual words include prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, and pronouns), it can be found that the two sentences are different in terms of sentence length and lexical density. Example 2a contains two clauses and five

real words, with a lexical density of 2.5; Example 2b contains one clause and five real words, with a lexical density of five. Admittedly, by Nominalization, more information is conveyed in fewer words, and the structure of the discourse is more compact. Admittedly, through Nominalization, the lexical density of Example 2b is increased, more information is expressed in fewer words, the semantic expression is more concise, and the discourse structure is more compact.

Enhancement of logical coherence of discourse. Based on Halliday's theory, there are four ways to achieve coherence in English: Nominalization, ellipsis, lexical articulation, and lexical coherence. Nominalization belongs to lexical coherence, and its coherent function is realized through the form of Theme-Rheme Articulation.

Systemic Functional Linguistics considers a sentence to be composed of a primary position and a declarative position. A pronominal is the starting point of a piece of information, which usually expresses known information, and beyond that, the remainder of the sentence is a declarative. The declarative position is a description of the primary position and is used to convey new information. By nominalizing the verb embodying the process in the previous sentence's declarative position so that it acts as the subject position of the following sentence, it has become the main means of achieving discourse coherence. Hu Zhuanglin (1994) proposed three basic patterns of subject-aspect articulation: the repetition of the subject in the previous sentence, i.e., T1-T2; the development of a new subject from something in the previous sentence's referent, i.e., R1-T2; and the creation of a new subject from the subject and the referent in the previous sentence together, i.e., T1+R1-T2.

Fan Wenfang (1999) pointed out that the main way to realize the "subject-descriptor" articulation is to establish the second "subject-descriptor" articulation pattern proposed above through the Nominalization metaphor, i.e., "R1 - T2". When we want to develop the verb-containing content of the previous clause into a new subject, the grammar often needs to compress the verb-containing structure, i.e., to nominalize the verb, in order to compress the verb-containing content and make it the subject of the next clause. For examples:

3. The study showed how orangutans *responded to* human aggression during the experiment. This *response* process is different from human behaviour.

In the above example sentence, the verb *responded*, which embodies the process in the previous sentence's declarative position, has been nominalized to appear in the subject position of the subsequent sentence, thus making the discourse coherent and fluent. Nominalization ties the two sentences together and allows the reader to easily understand the logical connection between the two sentences.

Enhancement of objectivity and impartiality of discourse. The formal and scientific nature of academic papers dictates that their language must be objective, stating the purpose of the research, the methodology, the findings and recommendations objectively and avoiding subjective expressions as much as possible. Through the use of Nominalization, participants in the original action can be removed, weakened, or hidden as modifiers of Nominalization, while Nominalization is usually non-restrictive and is not limited by tense and tone. In other words, nominalized grammatical metaphors can try to get rid of the influence of action performers and environmental components on the process, making the discourse more realistic and objective (Qiu, 2008). For example:

4a. An *examination* of marketing behaviour has shown that more and more customers are trading down on luxury goods.

4b. Systematical *analysis* was performed on questionnaire data of 105 English educators' teaching behaviour assessment activities.

In the above example, the author skillfully employs the noun form of examine and the noun form of analyse to diminish the participants in the process so that they present only the facts. The focus of the sentence shifts from the participants in the study to the content of the study itself. Moreover, Nominalization can be described in any situation and is not restricted by tone or tense. It is true that the Nominalization reduces the subjective element considerably while increasing the objectivity and impartiality of the fact being described.

Academic Writing Dilemma of EFL Students

Chinese EFL students currently encounter numerous challenges when writing academically in English. Some studies have showed that Chinese English learners lack proper accuracy, coherence, and logic in word formation, sentence construction, and plotting; instead, they use an excessive amount of Chinese phrases or simple language while writing.

The reason for this is that, on the one hand, the difference between Chinese and English ways of thinking is an important factor affecting Chinese students' English academic writing. Students often adopt rigid Chinese sentence structures and apply existing writing templates, apply Chinese thinking to English writing, and are weak in thinking in the English language, resulting in obvious traces of Chinese English in English writing. On the other hand, there are also many constraints in English language foundation and writing skills, such as insufficient vocabulary and grammatical knowledge, difficulties in sentence variation and line coherence (Liang, 2015).

English is a language that favours static, mostly using nouns to represent action concepts, while Chinese uses verbs directly (Wu, 1992). Therefore, for native Chinese speakers, learning knowledge related to Nominalization is a necessary way to improve English academic writing ability. Li Sheng and Liu Jia (2014) found that the higher the percentage of Nominalization usage, the better the composition; and the frequency of Nominalization usage in English compositions of Chinese college students is much lower than that of native English speakers. In addition to this, Shuai Jiangyun (2018) found that college students' writing scores improved significantly after the study of grammatical metaphors and practical application training.

Therefore, the key to solving the academic writing dilemma of EFL students lies in improving the ability of Nominalization. As mentioned earlier, Nominalization has various functions in discourse construction, which can enhance the conciseness, coherence, objectivity, and so on. In the learning process of English academic writing, students need to learn the relevant concepts of Nominalization and its functions and apply them to their own academic writing through effective training, in order to meet the requirements of more concise, coherent, objective, accurate and vivid academic papers.

Strategies for Improving the Ability to Utilize Nominalization

For English major learners who are native speakers of Chinese, this paper puts forward two feasible suggestions to enhance the use of Nominalization, forming a closed loop of learning from input to output. Firstly, strengthen the training of Nominalization of each language unit to achieve effective input. The study of Nominalization should be carried out in the progressive order of "vocabulary-phrase-sentence-discourse", and this process can enable English majors to fully understand the characteristics of Nominalization and its rules of use at different language levels. Secondly, strengthen peer communication and mutual evaluation to achieve effective output. In the output section, students should analyze and imitate the relevant materials or other valuable references provided by the teacher and continue to practice it, so as to finally achieve the goal of proficient output of nominalization.

Nominalization Training for Each Language Unit

“The hierarchical system formed by symbolic construction consists of linguistic units such as words, phrases, sentences and discourse” (Peng, 2015, p. 12). Corresponding to different hierarchical systems, Nominalization learning should follow the sequence progression of “vocabulary-phrase-sentence-phrases-sentences-parts of speech”. When cultivating the output ability of Nominalization at the discourse level, it should be based on the output ability of Nominalization at the vocabulary, phrase, and sentence levels, and only by consolidating the foundation of the first three links can we ensure the smooth progress of the output activities at the discourse level (Chen, 2022). Therefore, in the learning process of Nominalization, students should strengthen the practice of Nominalization at all language levels in a suitable order.

First, vocabulary level learning focuses on noun suffixes. In the process of academic writing, it is often involved in the phenomenon of transforming verbs and adjectives into nouns, which requires students to be proficient in the laws of transformation between various types of words. In the process of English learning, we should consciously summarise common noun suffixes, such as “-ness”, “-ment”, “-tion”, to form our own noun Suffix list, including three pieces of information: suffixes, meanings, and vocabulary examples. At the same time, you should set up regular tests for yourself to consolidate and deepen the effect.

Second, the focus at the phraseological level is on the fixed collocations of various words. New vocabulary formed by the Nominalization of adjectives and verbs is often combined with other verbs or prepositions, e.g., placed after a verb or preposition to form phrases such as “draw a conclusion”, “in support of”, and “in the way”. Therefore, it is crucial to master the collocations between different words, which requires students to accumulate and apply them in practice. Through a lot of reading and writing practice, they can gradually master the usage of these fixed collocations and be able to use them accurately in their expressions. This will not only improve their language expression, but also help them better understand and apply various language structures, and ultimately achieve the goal of output Nominalization.

Third, sentence-level learning focuses on reinforcing the intertransformation between the clause and the nominalized structure. Analyzed from a cognitive-linguistic point of view, linking verbs form a complete syntactic system, the clause complex, by combining them with other types of action verbs, while in the process of Nominalization, each clause in the clause complex is reconstructed and transformed into a new noun phrase. As a whole, there are semantic, pragmatic, and syntactic differences between clauses, and in the process of Nominalization, the relational elements connecting the clauses, i.e., the connectives, become “non-existent” as they lose their grammatical meaning. At the same time, the constituents of the sentence undergo a significant reordering, which makes the links between the clauses tight and provides a certain degree of semantic coherence within the clauses. For example, in the sentence “If the carpenter constantly assists Jones, he will get more technical support to make a wooden desk”, the underlined clause is nominalized so that it becomes “The constant assistance of the carpenter provides more technical support for Jones to make a wooden desk”. Obviously, the modified sentence is more compact and semantically coherent. Therefore, at the sentence level, students need to strengthen the practice of transforming between clauses and nominalized structures, e.g., transforming “the enemy was defeated” into “the enemy’s defeat”, so that they can understand and apply the noun transformation at the sentence level more deeply.

Fourth, learning at the discourse level focuses on reading more and using more. Students should establish the consciousness of imitation, analyse the phenomenon of Nominalization by reading papers in authoritative

academic journals and articles by native English speakers, and form their own knowledge base by doing a good job of accumulation. At the same time, strengthen the awareness of application. Students can make use of the form of filling in the blanks of the discourse to fill in the gaps of the article with the nominalized phrases and complete the writing task with the target nominalized phrases. Examples of fill-in-the-blank exercises are as follows:

Firstly, there are some singers or actresses taking part in international programmes for the aim of exploiting without enthusiasm. Instead of raising funds *and supporting strongly* (筹集资金并支援), they use these world organizations to attain their goals which enhance their reputations. Secondly, when the celebrities participate in the establishment of these world organizations (建立这些世界组织), people would tend to concentrate on them much more than the objection of plans.

Strengthening Output Communication and Evaluation

The ultimate goal of the study of Nominalization learning is output Nominalization. Therefore, targeting and scaffolding one's learning in the output process helps to achieve the goal of moving from understanding to output. During the learning process, students should proactively apply their learning to new writing tasks, starting with small essays and focusing on evaluation and refinement.

In the evaluation of learning sessions, the combination of teacher evaluation and peer assessment should be adopted. Teacher evaluation has the characteristics of high accuracy and strong guidance. When reviewing, the teacher should make timely evaluation for the problems such as inappropriate use of target Nominalization and errors in students' essays, such as circling the points of correctness and errors in the process of Nominalization and transformation, which should be thought and revised by the students themselves, and then handed over to the teacher for criticism, and so on, until the students can correctly use the method of Nominalization and transformation. At the same time, teachers should also provide reference model texts or example sentences to provide students with effective learning samples. For example, teachers can collate excellent texts written by second foreign learners, native English speakers and English teachers and show them to students together, guiding them to compare the quantitative differences in the use of Nominalization in different texts and to analyse the quality of their use. This is not only conducive to students' accumulation of writing experience and finding out their deficiencies in nouning output ability, but also targeting at improving their own nouning use ability and gradually realising changes in English thinking.

Secondly, peer mutual evaluation is also quite an important part. Through group discussion, mutual assessment and revision, and other links, students can test their mastery of the characteristics and usage of Nominalization in the process of interaction, and also learn that the same students, in the process of interaction, are also able to learn the writing styles and skills of different peers and expand their own horizons. In peer assessment, students can discuss the use of Nominalization together, inspire each other, and learn from each other, so as to improve the application of Nominalization. Through exchanges with their peers, they can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the role and meaning of Nominalization, further deepen their understanding of this linguistic phenomenon, and promote their writing to be more accurate and vivid. This kind of peer assessment not only enhances the students' ability to co-operate, but also provides strong support for the improvement of their English writing ability. The excellent examples of the companions help them adjust and learn effectively, and gradually improve their ability to apply Nominalization.

Summary

As an important skill for EFL students' language output, English academic writing is affected by multiple factors, and the ability of grammatical metaphor of Nominalization is one of the key factors. At present, students are not yet able to use Nominalization flexibly in their writing, which requires them to adopt various ways to strengthen the learning of Nominalization, through the sequence of "vocabulary-phrase-sentence-discourse", to strengthen the training of Nominalization at each language level; and to adopt a combination of teacher's assessment and peer assessment in the evaluation process, so as to make targeted improvements.

It should be reminded that although the discourse function of Nominalization has a positive effect on the learning of writing, the excessive use of Nominalization can easily lead to obscure discourse. This requires students to grasp the "degree" of Nominalization in the discourse. In addition, the application of Nominalization in writing learning needs to be improved in learning practice, so as to provide more empirical research and experimental data to support the further promotion of this method.

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