

Academic Literacy in English: A Pedagogical Proposal for the Teaching of Nominalization in an Undergraduate Program

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Abstract

The classroom account described in this article proposes a pedagogical sequence for raising undergraduate students' awareness of nominalization as a powerful resource to enhance their academic reading and writing skills. Academic literacy requires that students familiarize themselves with ways of expressing meanings which are particularly frequent in academic texts, but which are not often present in everyday language. Nominalization is one of the features that poses a challenge for university students both for reading and for writing science-related texts. The sequence activities were organized into stages, which gradually guide students from reading a science-popularization article to notice the presence of nominalized forms, to finally using this linguistic resource in guided writing activities. It is expected that those teaching EFL at the university level will find these activities applicable and relevant to scaffold academic literacy development.

Key words: academic literacy, nominalization, pedagogical innovation, English

Resumen

El relato áulico descrito en este artículo propone una secuencia didáctica para concientizar a estudiantes universitarios sobre la nominalización como un recurso poderoso para mejorar sus habilidades académicas de lectura y escritura. La alfabetización académica requiere que los estudiantes se familiaricen con formas de expresar significados que son particularmente frecuentes en los textos académicos, pero que no suelen estar presentes en el lenguaje cotidiano. La nominalización es una de las características que plantea un desafío para los estudiantes universitarios tanto en la lectura como en la escritura de textos relacionados con las ciencias. Las actividades de la secuencia fueron organizadas en etapas, que gradualmente guían a los estudiantes desde la lectura de un artículo de divulgación científica a notar la presencia de formas nominalizadas, hasta finalmente utilizar este recurso lingüístico en actividades de escritura guiada. Se espera que quienes enseñan inglés como lengua extranjera en el nivel universitario encuentren estas

actividades aplicables y relevantes para andamiar el desarrollo de la alfabetización académica.

Palabras claves: alfabetización académica, nominalización, innovación pedagógica, inglés

Introduction

This paper presents a classroom account with activities aimed at enhancing students' academic literacy in the context of a teaching training program. Academic literacy requires, in part, that students familiarize themselves with recurrent linguistic expressions to which they have not often been exposed explicitly in a systematic manner (Carlino, 2003; 2005; 2013). These linguistic expressions usually result in high lexical density, which mainly arises from the quantity of information that is condensed in nominal groups (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). Nominal groups which present nominalized forms of verbs or adjectives may cause difficulties in reading and writing academic texts (Banks, 2005; Baratta, 2010; Bello, 2016; Byrnes, 2009; Colombi, 2006; Hao & Humphrey, 2019; Holtz, 2011; Jalilifar et al., 2017; Liardét, 2016a; 2016b; Livnat, 2010; Ryshina-Pankova, 2010, 2015; Susinskiene, 2012). Nominalization constitutes, then, a challenge for university students both for reading (Halliday, 1993) and for writing (Ventola, 1996) science-related texts. Teaching this linguistic resource has, therefore, central relevance for the development of academic literacy at university, in particular for students of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The classroom activities described in this paper propose a pedagogical sequence for raising students' awareness of nominalization as a powerful resource to enhance their academic reading and writing skills. These activities are derived from a research project that analyzes the use of nominalization in academic texts in English at the National University of Rio Cuarto (Picchio et al., 2023). One of the purposes of the project is related to potential pedagogical applications focusing on the teaching of the resource to contribute to academic literacy at undergraduate level.

These classroom activities have been designed to be implemented in the compulsory course English Language IV, which is lectured in the second semester of the second year of the EFL teacher training program. In the language courses in this program, English is the medium of instruction and, at the same time, the object of study. Students need to become proficient in English to study disciplinary courses, to communicate effectively in the academic context, and ultimately to teach the language at different levels. The language courses are devoted to the teaching and learning of the four macro skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. In the course English Language IV, students are expected to reach an advanced level of English competence, which includes mastering linguistic resources needed for academic reading and writing. One of these resources is nominalization as a device for creating grammatical metaphors (Halliday 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The pedagogical sequence presented here intends to help students identify and interpret nominalization in reading and foster its use in academic writing. To contribute to an understanding of the rationale behind the proposal, a brief theoretical account of nominalization and grammatical metaphor will be provided.

Nominalization as Grammatical Metaphor

During their academic years, learners are expected to read and write texts which become increasingly more complex as they move to advanced levels in the educational system, as pointed out by Derewianka (2011). Indeed, this author proposes that the language present in texts typically used in higher education tends to be compacted in the shift from spoken to written, most of its packing resulting from a shift towards noun

groups or *nominalization*. Nominalization has been defined as the use of a nominal form to express meanings that are typically realized through a verb (process) or an adjective (quality/property) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Heyvaert, 2003; Thompson, 2013).

Nominalization and grammatical metaphor are two concepts which are inextricably intertwined, as stated by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). These authors propose that nominalizing is the single most powerful resource for creating grammatical metaphors. By this device, processes (congruently worded as verbs) and properties (congruently worded as adjectives) are reworded metaphorically as nouns; instead of functioning in the clause, as Process or Attribute, they function as Thing in the nominal group (p. 656).

Reconstruing processes and properties into nouns causes a reconfiguration of the clause, since the meanings congruently expressed by verbs and adjectives are compacted into nouns, condensing more information and creating lexical density. This reconfiguration, according to Martin (1993), allows for the creation of abstraction and technicality in the text. In addition, nominalizations contribute to the flow of information since meanings can be anticipated or recapitulated through this phenomenon (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Martin & Rose, 2007). These features can be illustrated in examples 1 and 2 below, in which nominalizations are used to reconstrue ideas in non-congruent forms.

1. Despite similarities in the “holes” identified by pairs from both groups, uptake rates were different. The reasons for this difference seem to be related to the scope of the children’s noticing (Hanaoka, 2007).¹
2. The present study differs in two aspects from the earlier study which examined the effects of the digital game, English Extras In Business with A, An, and The on the acquisition of proper English article usages by students (Reynolds & Kao, 2019). The first major difference lies in the treatments received by the participants.

In these examples, both the quality “*different*” and the process “*differs*”, used in the immediate previous clause, are reconstrued as “*this difference*/*this major difference*”, creating abstraction and contributing to the text information flow. However, the presence of both congruent and non-congruent forms in the same context, as in Examples 1 and 2, may not always be the case since, sometimes, only the metaphorical variant (non-congruent nominalized form of a verb or adjective) is used, as illustrated in Example 3 below.

3. Thus, not only do LGEs, as pointed out previously, show a preference for causal conjunctions over verbs but Conjunction tends to be realized somewhat informally. Perhaps the most obvious difference between LGEs and HGEs in the selection of different realizations, however, can be seen in the Abstract Causality and Causal Assessment categories.

The previous example also illustrates the potential for the creation of meanings that the transformation of a verb or adjective into a noun has, since nouns can be pre and post modified in ways which are not possible for adjectives and verbs, as underlined in the example (Halliday, 2004). This potential, which allows for a great amount of information to be condensed in nominal groups, can make a text dense and difficult to read (Derewianka, 2011; Halliday, 2004). Derewianka (2011) argues that learners’ ability to read and write highly nominalized texts cannot be taken for granted and needs to be dealt with explicitly. Learners need to develop knowledge about the process of unpacking grammatical metaphor (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) in order to be able to make sense

¹ Examples (1), (2) and (3) have been extracted from the Corpus RAAL. Picchio, et al. (2023).

of the abstraction present in the texts they need to read at university level. In addition, university students need to learn how to pack information in order to create abstraction when writing academic texts.

Therefore, in the context of EFL education at university, learners' exposure to the use of grammatical metaphor realized by nominalization is of utmost importance for the development of academic literacy. The pedagogical proposal presented here aims to address this need by describing activities to explicitly teach the use of this resource for reading and writing academic texts.

Reading material and rationale behind its selection

The proposal is centered on the reading of an article about multilingualism published in 2022 in the online version of *The Guardian*, a well-known British daily newspaper. The text is entitled *Britain's multilingual children: 'We speak whatever language gets the job done'*. Its main topic is language learning, an issue of interest for students in the context in which the proposal is meant to be implemented. The article intends to communicate research findings about Britain's multilingual children to a non-specialist audience and can be considered an exemplar of science popularization (Myers, 2003; Nwogu, 1991), a genre which aims at "the communication of scientific knowledge to the general public" (Calsamiglia, 2003, p. 139). Popularization articles are typically published in newspapers and magazines, are written by journalists for a lay audience, and relate findings to readers' daily lives (Calsamiglia, 2003; Ciapuscio, 1997). The choice of a science popularization article for the present pedagogical proposal is related to two main factors. On the one hand, this type of article is frequently presented as reading material in advanced EFL coursebooks. On the other hand, this article presents instances of both colloquial and academic language, which makes it especially suitable to raise awareness of the use of nominalization as a typical resource of academic language, particularly in relation to the uses of congruent and non-congruent linguistic choices.

Proposal of classroom activities

The science popularization article chosen provided the linguistic input and the contextual framework for the pedagogical sequence. The classroom activities were designed to be developed in four stages, gradually moving from reading comprehension and awareness of the language topic to guided written production.

Stage 1: Reading and Awareness Raising

The aim of this stage is to raise students' awareness of the use of formal and informal language in this genre. For this purpose, Activity 1 explores the paratextual features of the text and engages students in global reading. This activity is accompanied by a discussion using questions such as *Is the title expressed in colloquial or formal language? Can you connect this choice of wording with the source of the text and the audience to which it is addressed? Can you identify examples of formal and informal language in these voices? What language choices do you associate with each voice?* Activity 2 proposes a more detailed reading of the text focusing on specific linguistic choices associated with formality and informality. Some of the questions that guide the discussion are: *What do you notice about the use of language by families who are describing their experiences? What do you notice about the use of specialized vocabulary on the part of specialists/researchers when discussing the different approaches to language learning?*

1. Read the text *Britain's multilingual children: [‘We speak whatever language gets the job done’](#)* and answer the following questions:
 - a. What does the title mean? Explain the quote in the title ‘We speak whatever language gets the job done’ in relation to the main idea in the text.
 - b. Look at the pictures in the text, read the captions, and identify the connection between the pictures and the title of the text.
 - c. Read the text quickly and answer: Who speaks in the text? Identify different voices (specialists, lay people, etc.) that contribute to developing the argument. Underline concrete examples in the text.

2. Read closely and discuss in pairs:
 - a. Find examples of how multilingual families manage everyday communication. Retell two of these examples from the text.
 - b. Explain the difference between the **OPOL approach** and a **plurilinguistic approach** to language learning.

Stage 2: Noticing the use of nominalization

This stage gradually moves from noticing the use of everyday colloquial language and specialized academic language (Activity 3) to the analysis of elements premodifying and postmodifying nominalizations (Activity 4.a). Then, the impact of the use of nominalized forms is analyzed in terms of the amount of information given (Activity 4.b). Finally, Activity 5 aims to raise awareness of the use of nominalization as opposed to congruent expressions. This sequence of activities aims at guiding students to notice how contextual information serves as a basis for understanding the choice of particular grammatical constructions and its impact on the text.

3. Compare the three paragraphs taken from the text provided and answer the following questions:
 - a. Which paragraph/s use everyday, colloquial language/specialized vocabulary?
 - b. Which paragraph/s describe specific personal experiences/discuss the topic in academic formal terms?

PARAGRAPH A

Bart, three, who lives in London, happily juggles Italian, Dutch and English in his household, with a smattering of Spanish too, thanks to his nursery career. His dad, Riccardo Attanasio, is the son of Italian immigrants and his mum, Gwen Jansen, moved to the UK from the Netherlands 10 years ago. They are able to switch between different languages in a fluid, organic way. “We have busy, hectic lives,” says Attanasio. “When toys are being thrown around while you’re trying to cook dinner, or doing bedtime, you speak whatever language gets the job done.”

PARAGRAPH B

Although Niloufar and Saam’s father has always spoken Farsi with them, reading them Farsi books and playing Iranian music since they were babies, their mother has also learned enough to “get by”. Over the years, they all began to speak what they call “Finglish”. There are certain words that just sound better to them in Farsi. One is *gooz*: Farsi for fart. “We’ve shared that one far and wide with our friends,” she says. They both laugh. “It was quite funny when I learned the word gooseberry,” he says.

PARAGRAPH C

“*Plurilingualism takes a dynamic view of language practices,*” says Marina Antony-Newman, a doctoral student at the UCL Institute of Education who is developing the concept of plurilingual parenting. “There is an *acceptance of partial proficiency* in languages, with an emphasis on the *use of languages in different contexts*, rather than on the ‘ideal’ *proficiency of a native speaker*. The *approach focuses more on the interconnectedness of language and culture in a fluid and complex system.*” She explains that *plurilingualism* is less about the number of languages spoken than “the ways they are spoken”.

4. Read Paragraph C again, observe the nominalizations in italics and discuss:
 - a. Are there elements pre-modifying/post-modifying the nominalizations? Which ones?
 - b. What is the impact of the use of nominalized forms in the amount of information given in each sentence?
5. Compare the following paragraphs. Pay special attention to the information provided about each of the speakers. Can you identify sections where similar ideas are conveyed using different linguistic choices? Highlight these similar sections in the quotes using the same color. Can you relate the use of language and the role of the speaker in each excerpt?

Speaker: Riccardo Attanasio, is the son of Italian immigrants married to Gwen Jansen, who moved to the UK from the Netherlands 10 years ago. Riccardo describes how their child uses different languages to communicate (Italian, Dutch, English, and Spanish)	Speaker: Marina Antony-Newman, a doctoral student discusses the concept of plurilingual parenting.
“Even if I speak to Bart only in Dutch, he’ll mostly reply in English, and we go with that,” says Jansen. “He understands me, but Ricc and I speak to each other in English and he’s picking up a lot at nursery.” (...) “Bart likes the word stout , which means naughty or silly in Dutch, so we all use it,” she says (...) “He has a Spanish carer at nursery and, the other night, I was doing numbers with him and he just carried on the sequence in Spanish,” says Attanasio. “It was very cute, but I also thought: it’s incredible what you can already do.”	“ <i>Plurilingualism takes a dynamic view of language practices,</i> ” “ <i>There is an acceptance of partial proficiency in languages, with an emphasis on the use of languages in different contexts, rather than on the ‘ideal’ proficiency of a native speaker. The approach focuses more on the interconnectedness of language and culture in a fluid and complex system.</i> ”

Stage 3: From reading to writing

In this stage students are given sentences containing congruent expressions and are prompted to identify their nominalized equivalents in the text (Activity 6). For instance, students will be guided to identify in the text sentences such as “Parents raising their children in different languages keep parts of their own identity alive and give their

children a tangible connection to their heritage” (paragraph 22) as expressing similar meanings to sentence (a) “When raised in different languages, children connect more directly to their parents’ origin”. This activity will be followed by an explicit discussion of how similar meanings can be expressed in different ways and the impact that this has in linguistic realizations (a tangible connection to their heritage / children connect more directly to their parents’ origin). Then, in Activity 7 students are given sentences extracted from the text containing nominalized expressions and are expected to write a congruent equivalent.

Finally, Activity 8 triggers students’ use of nominalized forms to express the meanings of sentences taken from the text by using more formal language. This last step represents the ultimate aim of the whole proposal, i.e., that students are able to use nominalization in order to write appropriate academic texts characterized by abstraction and lexical density.

6. *The following sentences express ideas developed in the text, from paragraph 20 to paragraph 26. Find a sentence presenting the same information and compare the language used in each case.*
 - a. *When raised in different languages, children connect more directly to their parents’ origin.*
 - b. *Each parent tries to speak their first language to their children, but sometimes they switch spontaneously.*
 - c. *Allowing just one common language at school may at first show that all children are being integrated. However, that may also show that children of certain origins are, as always, segregated.*

7. *Find the following ideas in the text. Imagine you have to explain the idea presented in the sentence to someone who has not read the complete text and does not have any particular knowledge about language learning. Rewrite the sentences replacing the highlighted terms using the words in parentheses.*
 - a. *Certain **beliefs** around language-learning may create **tension** within families. (believe - tense)*
 - b. *For example, the idea that two or more languages spoken to a child might delay language **development**, or impact their academic **ability**, is particularly sticky. (develop - able)*
 - c. *However, with an **appreciation** of linguistic variation in superdiverse societies, many language experts advocate a new, more democratic **approach** to language learning: plurilingualism. (appreciate - approach)*

8. *Suppose you have been asked to submit an academic essay about multilingualism. You carried out some interviews with multilingual parents and want to report your findings in your essay. Re-write the meanings expressed in people’s quotations using the words suggested in parentheses.*
 - a. *“Immigrants were stigmatised; seen as lower-class, taking up low-paid jobs,” he says. “In the US, for example, immigrants would mostly come from Europe”. (stigmatization)*
 - b. *‘Don’t speak Italian at home. Your kids won’t assimilate properly. Or, they’ll speak with an accent and the wrong grammar, which won’t be good enough for work.’” (Prohibition)*
 - c. *“Raising the girls in three languages feels like a big gift we can give them,” says d’Amato. “For me, being a parent is all about nurturing someone, seeing them flourish and passing knowledge on.” (education - parenting)*

- d. "The teachers showed us some work and, after just one year, new pupils were able to write in English. It is amazing to see." (demonstration - ability)

Final Words

The present paper has aimed to share classroom activities with a focus on the teaching of nominalization as grammatical metaphor to enhance university EFL students' reading and writing skills. As stated in previous sections, this linguistic resource is central to academic literacy and it has been reported to cause difficulties for EFL students. Therefore, the explicit teaching of nominalization in this proposal is of utmost relevance in the previously described educational context. Contextual needs were also considered in the choice of the genre used in the design of the activities, that is, a science popularization article. On the one hand, this genre provides valuable input regarding academic and colloquial uses of the language, including authentic examples of meanings realized by metaphorical (nominalized) versus congruent forms. In addition, students' exposure to academic language through the science popularization genre may be useful for preparing them to read and/or write other genres such as handbooks and research articles, which typically express abstract and technical meanings. Hopefully, those teaching EFL at the university level will find these activities applicable and relevant to scaffold academic literacy development.

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