

# **Nouns and Their Patterns in L2 Student Writing – Implications for the Teaching of English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP)**

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This paper proposes a corpus analysis of the nominalization patterns in L2 student writing, focusing on semantic and cognitive functions such as characterization, encapsulation or reification. The findings have important implications for ESAP writing instruction, not only suggesting discipline-specific noun frequencies and uses, but also pedagogical corpus applications in the sense of Seidlhofer's (2002) learning-driven data. Previous research on nominalizations in academic English has predominantly focused on frequencies (Biber *et al.*, 1999) and the discourse functions of 'signalling nouns' (Flowerdew, 2003) or 'shell nouns' (Schmid, 2000). The meaning of these nouns derives from the lexicalization in the immediate linguistic context (Hunston & Francis, 2000) while their frequency and use vary significantly between L1 to L2 writing (Aktas & Cortes, 2008).

Shifting noun frequencies and uses cannot, however, be accounted for by the native vs. non-native variable alone, but largely depend on discipline-specific writing conventions. A case in point is the prevalence of nominalizations in the hard sciences vs. the soft sciences in which they tend to be underused (Swales, 1998). Therefore Jordan's (1997) distinction between English for general academic purposes (EGAP) and ESAP is vital for the analysis of nouns as a major class of vocabulary. Taking Coxhead & Nation's (2001) important categorization of vocabulary as its point of departure, the study at hand investigates the semantic prosody of nouns in a specialized corpus, addressing the interface between academic vocabulary and technical vocabulary. Drawing on two analytical perspectives, the methodology comprises the corpus-driven analysis of key words as indicators of recurrent patterns (Scott & Tribble, 2006) while the in-depth study of semantic and cognitive functions necessitates the integration of tools typically used in corpus-based discourse analysis.

The database of the study is made up of a specialized ESAP corpus of c. 200,000 words, which was compiled to serve the localized needs of the ESP learning environment of a business school. It was also classified as an ESAP setting on account of the students' use of English as an additional language and the subject-specific use of academic English. In order to test for several variables such as L1 vs. L2 or EGAP vs. ESAP uses of nouns, data extracted from Nesi and Thompson's British Written Academic corpus (BAWE) serve as a reference corpus.

While the playing field of pedagogical corpus applications permits a range of direct and indirect uses of corpora in language teaching (Römer, 2008: 113ff.), specialized corpora such as the ESAP corpus at hand particularly lend themselves to fruitful applications. Except for the privileged role of 'compiler-cum-analyst' (Flowerdew, 2005: 329), specialized corpora also grant easy access to contextual information necessary for an in-depth analysis of the

nouns' semantic and cognitive functions. This way, students can be sensitized to the technical vocabulary which is part and parcel of the expert knowledge that typifies this particular discipline-specific discourse. The present corpus can therefore truly be argued to reflect the localized needs of users of this particular type of academic English in a setting, in which the distinction between EGAP and ESAP writing instruction (Flowerdew, 2010) is meaningful.

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