

# Nominalization in Korean EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing: A Comparative Study of Distribution and Use

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Yoon, Choongil. Nominalization in Korean EFL Learners' Argumentative Writing: A Comparative Study of Distribution and Use. *The New Studies of English Language & Literature* 69 (2018): 249-274. Nominalization has been identified as a key feature of academic writing for its high frequency and the cohesive and rhetorical functions it serves in text. The present study examined the instances of nominalization and related linguistic features in a corpus of Korean EFL college students' argumentative essays and compared the data with those from a corresponding corpus of native speakers. Results showed that the Korean EFL writers' nominalization use was almost as frequent as that of their NS counterparts. Despite the similar frequency, however, the Korean EFL writers' nominalizations were overall simpler in their syntactic patterns, less elaborated and less effective in terms of cohesive and rhetorical functions than those used by the native speaker university students. The paper concludes by discussing the pedagogical implications of the findings. (Dongguk University Gyeongju Campus)

**Key words:** nominalization, academic writing, Korean EFL learners, argumentative writing, corpus linguistics

## I. Introduction

Recent research has identified the high frequency of nominalizations as one of the major features commonly found across different genres of academic text (Baratta 2010, Biber & Gray 2013, Halliday & Martin 1993). Nominalizations here refer to nouns that are morphologically derived from verbs or adjectives (Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1998) or that carry meanings normally expressed by verbs or adjectives (Halliday &

Martin 1993; Ryshina-Pankova 2015). Researchers attribute the frequent use of nominalizations and broader noun phrases (NPs) in academic writing to the multiple functions they perform at the sentential level and beyond (Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1998; Billig 2008; Liardét 2013; Ryshina-Pankova 2010; Schleppegrell 2004). First and foremost, by packaging a propositional concept into a nominal form, the writer can achieve economy in text formulation. This packaging of information serves as a cohesive device as a nominalization often encapsulates the propositional content expressed in other parts of the text and is further elaborated on in the subsequent discourse. Moreover, the use of nominalizations imparts an impersonal tone to the discourse by removing human agents. Each and all of these functions combined can be employed for rhetorical effect and argumentation in ways preferred in academic prose.

However, simply using more nominalizations does not necessarily lead to greater cohesion or better argumentation in academic prose. Rather, to perform the above-mentioned functions, nominalizations should often be modified and elaborated in appropriate syntactic patterns, requiring abilities to formulate meanings in diverse lexico-configurations according to the intended rhetorical effect (Ryshina-Pankova 2015).

Accordingly, the frequency and patterns of nominalization use in student writing may serve as an important indicator of the student's developmental level and proficiency in academic writing. However, many studies, especially L2 English writing research, has been mainly focusing on measures such as amounts of subordination and T-units to assess the complexity and acquisitional level of student writing while neglecting students' NP use (Biber & Gray 2010; Ryshina-Pankova 2015). Motivated by this gap, this study investigated how nominalizations were used in Korean EFL university students' argumentative writing in terms of frequency and usage and compared the results with those from native

speaker (NS) student writing. The study was conducted with an aim of drawing insights into general and specific help EFL/ESL writers need to effectively use nominalizations to make their academic writing more cohesive and their argumentation more effective.

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1 Nominalization in academic writing

Nominalizations are generally defined as abstract nouns derived from verbs and adjectives by adding suffixes such as *-ment*, *-ness*, *-tion*, and *-ity* (Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1998; Sword 2012) as seen in Example (1) culled from a NS student essay below:

- (1) Under this theory, the people with the power are the reason there are people without homes. The powerful people in society are immensely greedy and take everything for themselves. [...] The results of these *inequities* are poverty, *homelessness*, *discrimination*, and *oppression*. [...] Revolts by the powerless toward the powerful often develop. Some side effects of these *revolutions* are crime, violence, and rebellion. This unequal *distribution* of power is a cause of *homelessness*. (LOCNESS<sup>1</sup>)

These nouns have been found to occur far more frequently in academic prose than in other registers. Two broad reasons are provided in the literature (Biber, Conrad & Reppen 1998; Biber & Gray 2010; Park 2008) for why nominalizations are preferred in academic prose. First, a nominalization can be modified and extended with a variety of grammatical structures, compressing complex propositional content into a single

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<sup>1</sup> The Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays, which is explained in detail in the Method section.

nominal group, which renders the text economical, thereby enabling speedy and efficient reading. For example, the last sentence of Example (1) above begins with the nominalization *distribution* along with its pre- and post-modifiers, which condenses into a single nominal phrase the whole propositional content discussed in the preceding sentences. This does not simply make the text concise but works as an effective device for textual cohesion as the NP here links the preceding and following discourses by serving as the given information that is to be subsequently elaborated on with new information. Second, nominalizations are often used to refer to a generalized process or state, treating actions or properties as abstract objects with no human agents involved as illustrated in the last two sentences in Example (1). This tendency is thanks to the nature of academic writing, which involves generalization and abstraction often done in impersonal and objective tones.

## 2.2 Grammatical metaphor and shell noun

The transforming nature of nominalization noted above has long been identified in Systemic Functional Linguistics as the most productive form of grammatical metaphor (GM) (Ryshina-Pankova 2010). GM refers to a textual phenomenon of a meaning realized in an unusual lexico-grammatical form (Ravelli 2004), that is, an incongruence between a semantic category and its lexico-grammatical realization. For instance, a semantic category of process or action is normally realized by a verb while a quality or property is realized by an adjective. A nominalization, however, turns a process or quality into a static entity as seen in (2) and (3) below extracted from a Google search:

- (2) Crime was *increasing* rapidly across the country, [...] the sudden *increase* in crime was crucial in moving public opinion ...

(Internet)

- (3) the global financial system is increasingly *unstable*, [...] this *instability* may lead to further deterioration of ... (Internet)

Here, the concept of nominalization as GM is not limited to nouns derived from other grammatical categories but includes any nouns realizing this incongruence. In addition to serving the functions noted above, nominalization as GM has been argued as a powerful linguistic resource for modern academic text for the following reason: by reconstruing a dynamic process or quality as a static entity, nominalization presents the proposition expressed as a given fact difficult to dispute while treating it as an object which can be described, analyzed and evaluated. This has been identified as one major tool for argument development and rhetorical effect especially in scientific writing (Halliday & Martin 1993; Liardét 2013; Ryshina-Pankova 2010).

Shell nouns are another linguistic feature worth discussing in connection with nominalization. Going under different names such as signaling nouns (Flowerdew 2003) and carrier nouns (Ivanič 1991), shell nouns refer to a functionally-determined class of abstract nouns that have only general meanings on their own (e.g., *concept*, *issue*, *fact*, and *problem*), but whose concrete meanings should be interpreted together with what it refers to in text (Schmid, 2000). Shell nouns can carry out effective cohesive functions, both anaphoric and cataphoric, by summing up, encapsulating, and signposting detailed information in a nominal form. In addition, by using a label that takes a specific stance to name the proposition in question, a shell noun represents the writer's evaluation towards it (Aktaş & Cortes 2008; Gray 2010; Schmid 2000).

- (4) This usually occurs because courts are so eager to find a scapegoat for violent crimes. The *tendency* is to convict an accused murderer at the first possible chance. (LOCNESS)

An example of a shell noun is provided in (4), where the word *tendency* is used as a conceptual shell containing the propositional detail that follows. The cohesive functions of nominalizations discussed above become particularly salient when used as shell nouns (Gray 2010; Yoon 2017).

### **2.3 Nominalization as an indicator of complexity in L2 writing**

Learners' development in writing skills and especially complexity in the writing they produce have mostly been measured by clause or sentence-based units such as the number of subordinate clauses and T-units (Biber & Gray 2010; Ortega 2012; Ryshina-Pankova 2015). However, given the centrality of the phrase-based discourse style centering on NPs in advanced literacy texts, nominalization and its related language features such as GM and shell nouns have been suggested as valid indicators capturing learners' development in complex meaning making. This is phrasal expressions are more amenable (than verbal expressions) to semantic extension with recursive modifications using a variety of syntactic structures such as prepositional phrases (PPs), relative clauses or appositions (Halliday & Martin 1993; Ryshina-Pankova 2015). The effective use of these features in academic writing presupposes an ability to manipulate a range of grammatical resources to accumulate meanings in an efficient way. Recursive modifications of a nominal group are illustrated in Examples (5a) to (5c) below:

- (5) The students said seriously they wanted more tests.
- (5a) *This serious request* surprised the instructor.
- (5b) *This serious request for more tests* surprised the instructor.
- (5c) *This serious request by the students for more tests* surprised the instructor. (adapted from Swales 2005)

The condensing of the propositional content in (5) into a nominal group with differing semantic details as in (5a) - (5c) entails not just using the nominalization *request* but also converting the adverb *seriously* into its adjective form and choosing the appropriate prepositions for its post modifiers.

## 2.4 Previous studies on L2 writers' nominalization use

Despite the importance of nominalization as a major resource for complex meaning making and as a potential indicator of semantic and syntactic complexity in academic writing, only a few studies have looked into L2 writers' nominalization use, mostly Chinese learners of English. Baratta (2010) followed six Chinese ESL students in the UK and found no noticeable increase in the frequency of nominalization use over the course of their degree completion. Approaching nominalization from the GM perspective, Liardét (2013; 2015) studied Chinese EFL writers at different levels for instances of GM realized via nominalizations. These studies commonly found that although there was a general tendency of increase in the frequency of nominalizations from lower to higher levels of proficiency, the potential of GM as a resource for cohesion and argumentation were largely unrealized even at advanced levels suggesting the need for more explicit instruction on strategic use of nominalization.

Dealing in part with nominalization, other studies examined EFL/ESL learners' uses of shell nouns in general (Aktas & Cortes 2008; Hinkel 2001; Oh 2014) or occurring in demonstrative constructions (Petch-Tyson 2000; Oh 2012) in their academic writing. Most of them being comparative studies, they commonly found that learners, including Korean EFL students (Oh 2012; 2014), used only a limited range of shell nouns and that their uses were often not as effective as those by NS writers in terms of creating cohesion and constructing stance.

## 2.5 The present study

Despite the centrality of nominalization as a major lexico-grammatical resource for academic writing, not much research attention has been paid to nominalization use by Korean EFL writers in tertiary education. Motivated by this gap, the present study investigated the frequency and usage of nominalizations in a corpus of Korean university students' English argumentative writing and compared the results with those from a corresponding corpus of US and British students' argumentative essays. Through the comparison, the study sought to find the areas and extent of similarities and differences, thereby drawing pedagogical insights. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the frequencies and types of nominalizations occurring in a corpus of Korean EFL university students' English argumentative essays and a corresponding NS corpus?
2. What syntactic patterns do nominalizations occur in?
3. How are nominalizations used as cohesive devices?
4. What are the salient patterns of inappropriate nominalization use in the Korean students' essays?

## III. Method

### 3.1 Corpora

For the present study, the argumentative essay component of Neungyule Interlanguage Corpus of Korean Learners of English (NICKLE)<sup>2</sup> was used. NICKLE is a million-word, multi-genre corpus compiled as part of the

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<sup>2</sup> The corpus is freely available upon request. For more information about the corpus, go to <https://uclouvain.be/en/research-institutes/ilc/cecl/learner-corpora-around-the-world.html>.

Neungyule-Longman English-Korean Dictionary project in 2009. The source text data were collected from the first- and second-year undergraduate students at intermediate levels from multiple universities across South Korea. A total of 286 essays (about 150,000 words) were selected from the corpus based on the essay title and genre provided in the meta-data. For a NS reference corpus, the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) was used, which is made up of essays written by British and American university students who were native speakers of English. Only a part of its argumentative essay component was selected for compatibility with the NICKLE subcorpus in terms of genre and size. The vast majority of the essays in both subcorpora were written on popular argumentative topics such as euthanasia, death penalty, and environmental protection. Table 1 below summarizes the details of the two subcorpora of argumentative essays (hereafter referred to as NICKLE and LOCNESS respectively).

TABLE 1  
Corpus profile

Corpus	Word tokens	Number of essays
NICKLE (argumentative)	148127	286
LOCNESS (argumentative)	147777	184

### 3.2 Data Analysis

In the present study, nominalizations were operationalized by combining the formal and functional concepts of the term: 1) nouns that are derived from verbs and adjectives and 2) nouns that realize a grammatical metaphor by turning a process or quality into an entity.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Not all nouns derived from verbs and adjectives realize a grammatical metaphor. Nominal derivatives that do not entail a GM are explained in the exclusion criteria.

As the first step to extract such nominalizations as defined above, all words ending with the following suffixes were retrieved: *-al*, *-age*, *-ance/ence*, *-ment*, *-sion/tion*, which are added to a verb, and *-cy*, *-ity*, *-ness*, added to an adjective. The retrieval of these words was conducted via regular expression queries with AntConc (Version 3.4.3)<sup>4</sup>, a freeware corpus analysis tool. As most of these nouns are uncountable, only the singular forms were extracted. Then, out of all words extracted, ones that were not true instances of nominalization were removed manually according to the following exclusion criteria:

- a. Words that are not nouns or nouns that are not derivatives from verbs or adjectives: e.g., *medical*, *beverage*, *city*, *policy*, *university*.
- b. Nouns that are used as a modifier or as part of an adverbial phrase, proper name, or title: e.g., *entrance fee*, *in addition*, *the First Amendment*.
- c. Nouns that are not an instance of GM:
  - i. Concrete nouns as determined in context<sup>5</sup> or nouns that have much narrower (or far more specific) meanings than their verb/adjective counterparts: e.g., *conference*, *government*, *profession*, *population*, *requirement*.
  - ii. Faded GMs (Ryshina-Pankova 2010), nominalizations that have lost their metaphoric nature as they are frequently used in general and have become typical ways of realizing the meaning: e.g., *education*, *opportunity*, *information*, *marriage*, *recession*, *distance*.

Next, each of the extracted nominalizations along with its co-text

<sup>4</sup> Available from <http://www.laurenceanthony.net/>

<sup>5</sup> The same nouns can be classified as concrete or abstract nouns depending on the specific meanings they carry in context. For example, the noun *government* is a concrete noun when it means a group of people who govern a country, but an abstract noun when it means the process or act of governing.

(usually two sentences before and after the sentence the nominalization occurs in) was manually analyzed and coded for the following variables:

- a. Each nominalization was coded as either *Process as Thing* or *Quality as Thing* depending on the type of GM it realizes in context.
- b. Syntactic patterns surrounding the nominalizations were classified into the two broad categories of pre-modifiers and post-modifiers. Pre-modifiers included nouns, adjectives, possessive pronouns and demonstrative determiners (*this* and *that*) while PPs, *to*-infinitives, relative clauses, *that*-complement clauses, and appositives that follow the nominalizations were coded as post-modifiers. For example, in the last sentence of Example (1), *this unequal distribution of power is a cause for homelessness*, the nominalization *distribution* has a demonstrative determiner (*this*), and adjective (*unequal*) as its pre-modifiers and a PP (*of power*) as its post-modifier.
- c. The extracted nominalizations were checked for their cohesive functions within the text and coded as *Anaphoric*, or *Cataphoric* depending on whether they explicitly referred to information, ideas, or propositions contained in the preceding or following discourse. Those that referred to nothing in particular or whose referents were not clear were coded as *N/A*. Then, shell nouns were identified from these nominalizations coded as *Anaphoric* and *Cataphoric*<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The nominalizations that occurred in the following four lexico-grammatical patterns were coded as shell nouns (Schmid, 2000, p. 22)

Function	Pattern
Cataphoric	Shell noun + postnominal clause ( <i>that</i> -clause, <i>to</i> infinitive clause, <i>wh</i> -clause)
	Shell noun phrase + <i>be</i> + complementing clause ( <i>that</i> -clause, <i>to</i> infinitive clause, <i>wh</i> -clause)
Anaphoric	Demonstrative adjective ( <i>this</i> , <i>that</i> ) + (premodifier) + shell noun Demonstrative pronoun as subject ( <i>this</i> , <i>that</i> ) + <i>be</i> + shell noun

To determine the statistical significance of differences in frequency between the two corpora, log-likelihood (LL)<sup>7</sup> was computed for relevant variables. Finally, in addition to quantitative tallying of instances, qualitative analysis of actual usage of nominalizations was conducted to explore salient patterns of inappropriate use.

## IV. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Frequency of nominalization and GM

The initial AntConc retrieval of nouns ending with the suffixes specified above produced 6126 instances from NICKLE and 5700 from LOCNESS. After the manual clean-up performed according to the exclusion criteria discussed above, the final total of nominalizations came to 1691 for NICKLE, and 1743 for LOCNESS respectively, showing similar frequencies. However, the types of GM realized by the nominalizations were significantly different (see LL values in Table 2). While *Process-as-Thing* metaphors dominated in both corpora, which confirms the findings of previous research (Liardét 2015), the Korean EFL writers used more *Quality-as-Thing* metaphors than their NS counterparts.

TABLE 2  
Frequency counts of nominalizations and types of GM

	NICKLE	LOCNESS	LL	Sig.	+/-
No. of nominalizations	1691	1743	0.92	-	
Process as Thing	1041 (62%)	1236 (71%)	17.18	***	-
Quality as Thing	650 (38%)	507 (29%)	17.38	***	+

Note. LL = log likelihood; sig. = significance (\*: p < 0.05, \*\*: p < 0.01, \*\*\*: p < 0.001); "+" indicates overuse in NICKLE and "-" indicates underuse.

<sup>7</sup> Log-likelihood is often used to determine whether the greater frequency of a linguistic item in one corpus than another is statistically significant (Jones & Waller 2015). It indicates whether and how much the item is statistically overused or underused in one corpus relative to the other.

The overuse of *Quality-as-Thing* metaphors by the Korean students can be seen more clearly in the list of the most frequent 20 nominalizations. There are more nouns derived from adjectives (see italicized nouns in Table 3) than from verbs in its top 20 nominalization list whereas the opposite is true for LOCNESS, which is in line with the overall trend in which *Process-as-Thing* metaphors took up a much larger share.

TABLE 3  
 Top 20 nominalizations

Nominalization (frequency)				
NICKLE	<i>ability</i> (77)	<i>development</i> (47)	<b>motivation</b> (45)	action (35)
	<i>possibility</i> (33)	<i>difference</i> (29)	decision (27)	<i>responsibility</i> (28)
	<i>popularity</i> (22)	<i>importance</i> (20)	<b>judgment</b> (20)	discrimination (19)
	<i>existence</i> (18)	<i>homosexuality</i> (18)	communication (16)	
	<i>prevention</i> (15)	<i>confidence</i> (13)	<i>curiosity</i> (13)	equality (13)
	<i>happiness</i> (13)			
	argument (138)	<b>statement</b> (38)	decision (37)	<b>invention</b> (30)
	discrimination (29)	<i>ability</i> (25)	<b>competition</b> (24)	equality (23)
	development (21)	<i>homelessness</i> (21)	action (19)	<i>difference</i> (19)
LOCNESS	<i>responsibility</i> (18)	communication (13)	<b>movement</b> (12)	
	opposition (12)	acceptance (11)	awareness (11)	creation (11)
	<i>importance</i> (11)			

This difference in GM type may simply reflect differences in the topics discussed in both groups' essays as can be seen from a variety of unique nouns (marked in bold in Table 3) in each top 20 list. However, the LOCNESS list includes, as by far the most frequent members, *argument* and *statement*, which can be deemed topic-neutral and typically used as meta-linguistic labels in argumentative writing (Francis 1994). This suggests the difference in nominalization use between the two groups stem not only from essay topics but also from the purposes for which the different groups of writers used nominalizations, which is discussed in more detail in the later section.

## 4.2 Syntactic patterns of nominalizations

Analysis of the syntactic patterns in which the extracted nominalizations occurred revealed that the Korean EFL writers had a slightly greater tendency to use their nominalizations unmodified than the NS writers did, using fewer pre- and post-modifiers as can be seen in Table 4. The results suggest that the NICKLE essays feature a lower density of meanings clustered around nominalizations than the NS essays.

TABLE 4  
Frequencies and types of modifications around nominalizations

	NICKLE	LOCNESS	LL	Sig.	+/-
No modification	540 (31.9%)	469 (26.9%)	4.83	*	+
Pre-modifiers (total)	676 (37.7%)	756 (41.5%)	4.66	*	-
Possessive	219	226	0.13		-
Adjective and noun	434	428	0.00		+
Demonstrative	23	102	<b>54.12</b>	***	-
Post-modifiers (total)	637 (37.7%)	723 (41.5%)	5.65	*	-
Relative clause	42	55	1.78		-
Prepositional phrase	528	590	3.59		-
to infinitive	48	58	0.97		-
that complement clause	19	20	0.03		-
Pre + post modifiers	136 (8.0%)	185 (10.6%)	7.63	**	-

Note. LL = log likelihood; sig. = significance (\*: p < 0.05, \*\*: p < 0.01, \*\*\*: p < 0.001); "+" indicates overuse in NICKLE and "-" indicates underuse.

The lack of modification was greater with the *Quality-as-Thing* nominalizations, which accounted for almost half of all unmodified nominalizations in NICKLE (as compared to about 35% in LOCNESS). This may be due in large part to the ways in which some adjective-derived nouns were used by the NICKLE writers. For example, some instances of *ability*, the most frequent nominalization in NICKLE, were used unmodified with no explicit elaboration in any neighboring stretches of

the text on what they specifically refer to as illustrated in (6) and (7) below:

- (6) So we have to speak, read and write it often if we want to improve the *ability*. (NICKLE)
- (7) This old paradigm should be changed, with adding just three words: equal opportunity on education "based on *ability*." (NICKLE)

Being a very general word, *ability* usually comes with a modification that adds a specific meaning to it in context. Indeed, the nominalization *ability* occurred 25 times in LOCNESS and every instance of it came with modifications that restrict and specify its meaning as seen in (8):

- (8) Doubts have already been cast on some countries' *ability* to prevent [...] drug trafficking. (LOCNESS)

This suggests the Korean EFL students may have a greater tendency to use nominalizations as labels for general yet vague concepts with no clear links to other parts of text, which may overall weaken the argumentation of the essay. This confirms the findings by Hinkel (2001) that Korean learners of English used lexical classifiers (e.g., *fact*, *problem*) without appropriate elaborations.

Turning to the types of modifiers, while the Korean students did not deviate much from the NS students in most categories, the demonstrative determiners (i.e., *this* and *that*) (marked **in bold** in Table 4) were an exception, which shows a large difference between the two groups with a high LL value. The demonstrative determiner + noun construction has often been identified in the literature as a key cohesive device in academic prose (Gray 2010; Swales 2005) as it draws the reader's attention to what has been discussed in the previous discourse by

summarizing it in a nominal form as illustrated in (9):

- (9) The tendency is to convict an accused murderer at the first possible chance. *This hastiness* makes for a number of investigative, clerical, and judicial errors [...]. (LOCNESS)

Results showed that the Korean EFL writers employed this cohesion device much less than their NS counterparts. As the demonstrative construction is one of the syntactic patterns where shell nouns occur, the underuse of cohesive functions by the Korean writers is further discussed in the next section.

#### 4.3 Nominalization as a device for cohesion

Overall, the Korean EFL writers turned out to have underexploited nominalization as a cohesion device in comparison with the NS writers. Specifically, only 7.9% of the nominalizations used by the Korean university students carried out a cohesive function of referring to a certain part of the text, which is significantly lower than the 16.0% in LOCNESS.

TABLE 5  
Nominalizations with cohesive functions

	NICKLE	LOCNESS	LL	Sig.	+/-
Cohesive (total)	134 (7.9%)	279 (16.0%)	52.35	***	-
Anaphoric	49 (2.9%)	166 (9.5%)	67.53	***	-
Anaphoric shell nouns	26 (1.5%)	115 (6.6%)	60.88	***	-
Cataphoric	85 (5.0%)	113 (6.5%)	4.04	*	-
Cataphoric shell nouns	69 (4.1%)	88 (5.0%)	2.35		-

Note. LL = log likelihood; sig. = significance (\*: p < 0.05, \*\*: p < 0.01, \*\*\*: p < 0.001); "+" indicates overuse in NICKLE and "-" indicates underuse.

Table 5 shows that the Korean students' underuse of nominalization as a cohesive device is particularly noticeable in the category of anaphoric reference. While the nominalizations in NICKLE were in general hardly used for anaphoric reference (mere 2.9% of all nominalizations), the use of shell nouns for anaphoric reference was even more minimal (1.5%) as compared to those in LOCNESS. This can be directly linked to the severe lack of demonstrative constructions in NICKLE discussed earlier, which are where anaphoric shell nouns most frequently occur. The results imply that the Korean EFL writers were not aware of the cohesive function of the demonstrative + shell noun construction or avoided using it in their text for some reasons.

On the other hand, the frequencies of the NS writers' use of nominalization as a cohesive device were relatively high, noticeably higher for anaphoric reference including shell noun use than the Korea university students. This relatively high frequency may be attributable, among others, to one very frequent lexico-grammatical pattern observed in the LOCNESS essays. A close look at the nominalizations from the LOCNESS essays revealed that the writers employed meta-linguistic labels such as *argument* and *statement* as a shell noun frequently in a demonstrative structure as illustrated in (10) below:

- (10) The pro-gun activists, however, argue that firearms actually prevent murders, rapes and burglaries. The problem with this *argument* is that it lacks statistical verification. (LOCNESS)

In this example, the nominalization *argument* encapsulates the proposition expressed in the preceding discourse and serves as a theme in the subsequent proposition. This is a clear example of a nominalization as GM transforming a dynamic process into a static entity as an object for analysis, evaluation, reflection and interpretation, which is identified as

a powerful tool for organizing a text and developing reasoning and argument in academic prose (Oh 2012; Petch-Tyson 2000; Swales 2005). However, this specific pattern of nominalization use rarely occurred in NICKLE.

These results indicate that although the Korean EFL learners used nominalization as often as their NS counterparts, their nominalization use was not as effective as it could be as they did not exploit the potential functions of nominalization as much.

#### **4.4 Inappropriate use of nominalization**

The results discussed above show that nominalization was frequently used in the Korean EFL learners' argumentative writing as would be expected in academic prose. However, a qualitative inspection of their uses in text revealed that many instances were used ineffectively or misused in various ways that have not been discussed in the previous sections. In what follows, some of the most salient patterns of inappropriate use are discussed.

First, although nominalization can be an effective resource for multiple purposes, some NICKLE writers seemed to "overuse" nominalizations in places where a nominal structure would not serve any useful functions (see Examples (11) and (12) below).

- (11) Some parents and teachers, unfortunately, put their all the concentration on the result of test. Therefore, children think that they have to study to get a good grade. (NICKLE)
- (12) There has been no T.V in my house since my mother threw it away six years ago. [...] A few years ago, when I turned the T.V. on after entering the university, I realized the gap of T.V. culture during my *absence* in front of T.V. (NICKLE)

The use of the nouns *concentration* and *absence* does not seem very strategic as a clausal rather than nominal expression would be more natural and typical in these specific contexts (e.g., *some parents and teachers concentrate solely on test results*; and *while I was away from TV*). Given the contexts, the writers do not seem to have intended some rhetorical effect by using an incongruent lexico-grammatical realization of the meaning here. Rather than being motivated by the writers' rhetorical intentions, the use of these nouns seem to be simply habitual, influenced by repeated exposure to nominal forms frequently used in academic registers.

Second, the ways in which some NICKLE writers modified nominalizations revealed their lack of collocational knowledge especially about noun-preposition combinations. There were many instances of a preposition used inappropriately for the intended meaning as illustrated in (13) and (14) below:

- (13) [...] the melatonin *concentration* of the blood stream increases,  
[...] (NICKLE)
- (14) It is also a problem that *popularity* on Korean culture is limited  
to pop culture (NICKLE)

The PP modifier starting with a wrong preposition as seen above can be a reminder that the use of a GM requires knowing not just how to derive a noun from other word classes but also how to manipulate lexico-grammatical configurations appropriately.

Lastly, in the NICKLE essays, not a few instances of morphologically erroneous derivation or atypical suffixation were found, which were hardly observed in LOCNESS. Some of the instances were *prevalenceability*, *ambiguousness*, *comfortness*, *famousness*, and *deepness*. These words suggest the L2 learners' incomplete knowledge of noun derivation and possibly

a lack of exposure to relevant vocabulary. However, this erroneous or unusual noun formation by L2 learners should not be taken simply as evidence of deficiency. Rather, it can also be seen as a positive sign that these learners ventured to experiment with the target language in their attempts to use GMs to develop and organize a text. For example, while the Korean writers tried to employ *Quality-as-Thing* GMs in their texts, they used *-ness*, one of the most productive English suffixes, to nominalize adjectives when they did not have in their linguistic repertoire more typical and lexico-grammatically appropriate noun forms of the adjectives in question (e.g., *ambiguity* vs *ambiguousness*, *depth* vs *deepness*). Thus, it can be argued here that while this type of lexical experiments should be encouraged, increasingly sophisticated instruction on noun formation should be provided, which is discussed in more detail below.

#### 4.5 Pedagogical implications

All these findings point to the need for explicit instruction in the functions of nominalization, GM, and shell noun in creating cohesion and developing arguments and what using them in text entails semantically and syntactically. Such instruction may start from practices in transforming given clausal expressions into nominal phrases and vice versa while providing learners with greater exposure to relevant structures in reading and with more opportunities to use them in their own writing.

Along with that, the following three suggestions can be made based on the results of the study. First, learners may be reminded that they should have a clear idea about what a nominalization/GM they use refers to, encapsulates, or signposts in a given context. It should not be used simply for vague reference or simplistic generalization as seen in the examples above. Rather, nominalizations should often be adequately elaborated on with proper modification and predication to develop a

cohesive text and argumentation. Second, the semantic and syntactic extension of a nominalization via modification requires adequate knowledge about syntagmatic relations between different word classes and between specific lexical items. Learners should therefore be guided to pay greater attention to collocational and colligational contexts in which a specific nominalization occurs. That is, learners can heed what words, for example, what preposition, or verb, usually comes with a specific noun they use. Third, focusing on nominalization itself, vocabulary instruction on noun formation may go beyond introducing a range of noun-formation suffixes and familiarize learners with the specific, often subtle, nuance of meaning each suffix brings with it. Namely, adding a specific noun-formation suffix to an adjective X does not simply make it a noun meaning X but adds or emphasizes a certain abstract quality of being X. For example, *curiousness* and *ableness* differ from *curiosity* and *ability* respectively as the former means the state of having the latter (O'Donnell, 2016). Learners can be reminded, for example, that they should not use a nominalization *deepness*, when they mean to say *depth*, as a NICKLE writer actually did.

Finally, it would be worthwhile to briefly address one thing readers may be wondering about all along. In fact, most writing style manuals recommend the use of active rather than passive verbs, which necessarily discourages the use of abstract nominalizations (Sword 2012)<sup>8</sup>. Critical discourse analysts have gone further to criticize the use of nominalization for its ideological function of deleting agency, thereby concealing critical information (e.g., Fairclough 1992). Then, one may ask how to reconcile this caution and even hostility with the greater

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<sup>8</sup> After investigating one hundred writing style books, Sword (2012) identified the use of active verbs as one of the six most frequently advised/encouraged techniques.

emphasis on nominalization use by L2 writers argued for in this paper. Of course, learners need to be cautioned against “overnominalization”, or unnecessary, habitual use of abstract nouns that add little meaning to the discourse, as seen in the examples above. However, as Halliday and Martin (1993) maintain, nominalization is a necessary feature of modern academic writing which by its nature entails a great deal of abstraction, conceptualization, generalization and theorization by naming experiences as things. Indeed, it is well confirmed in the irony that critical discourse analysts themselves had to make extensive use of nominalizations in their academic criticisms of nominalization (Billig, 2008). Therefore, it is argued in this paper that nominalization needs to be approached as an important, almost inevitable feature that would be extremely difficult not to use in academic writing and that more proactive and progressive guidance should be provided for L2 writers and novice academic writers.

## V. Conclusion

The present study examined the distribution and use of nominalization and some related linguistic features in a corpus of Korean EFL college students' argumentative essays and a corresponding NS corpus. Results showed that the Korean EFL writers' nominalization use was nearly as frequent as that by their NS counterparts. Despite the similar frequency, however, the Korean EFL writers' nominalizations were overall simpler in their syntactic patterns, less elaborated and consequently less effective in terms of cohesive and rhetorical functions than those used by the NS university students. In addition, not a few nominalizations in NICKLE were used unnecessarily in given contexts, or erroneously (or atypically) in terms of suffixation and modification. The findings suggest that Korean EFL learners' nominalization use tended to be habitual rather than

motivated or strategic.

Based on these results, the present study has made some suggestions for helping novice academic writers including EFL/ESL learners. Chief among them are more explicit instruction in and greater exposure to the cohesive and rhetorical functions of nominalizations. Such help would greatly benefit learners by familiarizing them with one of the key resources in modern academic writing and consequently enhancing their abilities to use them in their own writing.

Although this study offers some theoretical and pedagogical insights, it also has some limitations. Among others, nominalization was examined only in terms of morphological derivation with specific suffixes. So the findings identified in this study cannot be extended to other types of nominalization used by Korean EFL learners. Another limitation of the study is that the researcher coded the data alone for time and practical constraints. Despite the researcher's genuine effort to apply the coding criteria consistently, the lack of extra coders might have biased the coding results. Future studies may thus expand the scope and investigate 1) other types of nominalization and 2) the nominalization use by other groups of writers, for example, published researchers, both with greater methodological rigor with multiple coders.

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