



# The role of clausal embedding in the argumentative writing of adolescent learners of English



Corinne Maxwell-Reid\*

*The Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong*

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## ABSTRACT

This article investigates the L2 English writing of junior secondary students in Spain by analysing their argumentative texts for clausal embedding in nominal groups, or noun phrases. The ability to pack information into nominal groups has been identified in L1 and ESL contexts as crucial to the development of written English, but it is still relatively neglected in EFL syllabuses. Using understandings from systemic functional linguistics (SFL), the students' argumentative texts were examined for their use of clausal embedding in nominal groups, and for the role these expanded nominal groups play in the texts. Student texts were found to use clausal embedding to facilitate presentation and organisation of ideas, but varied in their ability to exploit the potential of the nominal group expansion. Variety was found in both extent of embedding and in control of relevant language resources. It is suggested that teachers could help their students' writing development by focussing on this generally neglected language area, and some suggestions for such help are given.

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## 1. Introduction

This article analyses the argumentative writing of junior secondary English as a foreign language (EFL) students for their use of expanded nominal groups, or noun phrases as they are called in traditional grammar. Nominal group/noun phrase expansion is not a typical focus for EFL writing, although it has started to receive more attention in tertiary contexts (Liardet, 2013; Parkinson & Musgrave, 2014). However, the ability to pack information into nominal groups has been identified as crucial to the development of adolescent writing in first language (L1) and English as a second language (ESL) contexts such as Australia and the United States, and it may provide insights for this age group in EFL contexts as well.

The role of nominal group expansion is generally discussed in relation to the increasing cognitive demands placed on children as they progress through school. Researchers in the functional tradition, and notably systemic functional linguists such as Frances Christie (Christie, 2002, 2010; Christie & Derewianka, 2008) have investigated how students' English language changes to match these increasing demands. Overall, this change can be generalised as a movement from the linked chains of clauses that typify spoken English, to the denser text characteristic of written English (Christie, 2002, 2010; Halliday, 1987; Myhill, 2008; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 1997; Unsworth, 2005). This density is facilitated through a range of language resources, of which the expansion of the nominal group through embedding has been found to be central (Christie, 2002; Halliday, 1987).

\* Tel.: +852 3943 1117.

E-mail address: [cmaxwellreid@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:cmaxwellreid@cuhk.edu.hk).

1	The advertisement portrays a girl of average weight and her mother shopping without success for a formal dress, thus prompting the girl to suggest that they should both join the Gloria Marshall programme.	Statement of issue
5	The advertisement continues by showing the girl as slim and glamorous in an evening gown, as she greets her formal partner... I can relate to the dilemma of [[being unable to find a dress [[that looks and fits perfectly]] ]]. However, I am greatly	(thesis/opinion)
10	angered by the fact [[that Gloria Marshall is using an average-sized teenager as the basis of her advertisement]].	
	... we are constantly bombarded with the exaggerated and incorrect notion [[that teenagers should all aspire to be size 8 or	Argument 1
15	10 like the models [[filling the pages of fashion magazines]] ]].	
	... the pressure [[placed on teenagers [[to attain the “perfect body”]] ]]] makes her desire [[to lose weight]] understandable.	

Fig. 1. Senior secondary example text from L1 context (source: Christie, 2002, p.63).

In order to extend understanding of the use of nominal group expansion in adolescent L2 writing, the current study analyses writing from Spanish junior secondary school students studying in Madrid, Spain. The students are outside L1/ESL English-speaking environments, and include one group following a typical EFL syllabus, and one group studying 30% of the curriculum through English as part of a Content and Language Integrated Curriculum (CLIL) programme. The inclusion of both CLIL and EFL students enables investigation of expanded nominal group use by students at the same stage of cognitive maturity but with different degrees of exposure to English. A smaller group of L1 English writers are also considered in order to provide a further angle on writing at this age. All the students wrote an argumentative text relating to their view of school uniform (see 2 for the prompt), and their texts were analysed for use of clausal embedding in nominal groups. The findings are then used to make suggestions for classroom work that can help L2 English users improve their writing further.

## 2. Clausal embedding and expository genres

Development in language proficiency has been associated with increased complexity, but spoken and written English do not display the same type of complexity (Biber, Gray, & Poonpon, 2011; Halliday, 1987). The relationship between complexity and proficiency is further complicated since decrease in one area, such as linking between clauses, could be associated with increase in another area, such as embedding of material within nominal groups (Myhill, 2008; Norris & Manchón, 2012; Schleppegrell & Colombi, 1997). Language development is also closely connected to cognitive development, and therefore both student age and language proficiency need to be taken into consideration in choosing language areas to investigate for the writing of any group of students. Christie and Derewianka (2008) consider language development from primary through secondary schooling. Biber et al. (2011) consider similar issues using data from adult, academic writing. This article will work within the systemic functional linguistics (SFL) tradition used by Christie and Derewianka (2008), as their work is more relevant to the secondary students' texts of this study.

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