Nominalisation Transcripts

Nominalisation is the process of turning verbs into nouns. This section provides a number of transcripts to assist teachers in the classroom with nominalisation.

Transcript 1: Spoken language

From Derewianka, B (1990)

The teacher and class had been brainstorming ideas about shoplifting for a text they were going to write together. The teacher asked one of the students to summarise the discussion:

> Um . . . ah . . . whenever people steal things . . . ah
> you go to . . .
> just say somebody steals something from K-Mart
> and they find out
> but they didn't catch you
> and they increase all the prices
> because if they steal something two or three hundred dollars
> you have to pay for that
> 'cause the prices increase.

Questions

1. Name the key points the student is making about shoplifting.
2. Note the features of spoken language that are evident in the transcript:
    - It is made up of lots of clauses that add on information using linking words (conjunctions) such as 'and', 'but' and 'because'
    - Each clause has been written on a new line together with the conjunction that links it to the rest of the text.
3. How would you scaffold the students from such spoken language towards producing a more written form?

Transcript 2: A long noun group

Derewianka, B (1990)

To help the class move towards written language, the teacher provided scaffolding by distilling key points from the above transcript and writing them on the board in point form. The teacher then asked the students to develop the key points into a written text.

> Every day shops lose thousands of dollars worth of valuable items.
> This affects us all because prices increase and we have to pay extra.

Questions

1. Is this text reliant on immediate context or does it 'stand alone'?
2. How complex are the noun groups?

This text does 'stand alone' and the meanings have been compressed more than in the first text (the transcript of the spoken language). In particular, there is one long noun group: 'thousands of dollars worth of valuable items'.

Despite this one long noun group, the text is still not very dense or compressed.

Transcript 3: Nominalisation

If we were to condense the meanings further, this is the text that may be produced:

> The daily loss of thousands of dollars worth of valuable stock ultimately affects us all through an increase in prices.

Note the two long and compressed noun groups in Transcript 3: 'The daily loss of thousands of dollars worth of valuable stock' and 'an increase in prices.'

Analysis

There is also something else happening in the language choices of this text that are vital to students' literacy development. To understand this, we need to compare and contrast key phrases from Transcript 2 and Transcript 3.

> Transcript 2: Every day shops **lose** thousands of dollars worth of valuable items.
> Transcript 3: The daily **loss** of thousands of dollars worth of valuable stock…

In Transcript 2, the word 'lose' is a verb. This verb conveys an action or event, something going on, something happening to concrete things or nouns: 'shops'. The second noun, a long noun group – thousands of dollars worth of valuable items – also represents something concrete.

In Transcript 3, the verb 'lose' changes grammatical form and becomes a noun or a thing: 'loss'. When we consider the meaning of loss, we can still imagine a series of actions involved in 'stealing' taking place.

So in the more written version, nouns are used to represent actions. Why? When we turn an action into a noun or thing, we still retain a sense of the action. But as a noun we can now point to it, describe its physical qualities, classify it and qualify it. So by turning a verb into a noun we can pack more meanings or content into our text. Such compression is crucial in making

written language more dense where most clauses contain one verb (or one verbal group) but several nouns.

We call the process of turning verbs into nouns nominalisation.

However, notice that when we turn one part of speech into a noun through nominalisation, some of the information may be lost. In Transcript 2, for example, 'shops' lose money whereas in transcript 3 the 'shops' have disappeared. They could have been included as part of the qualifier of the noun group: 'the daily loss of thousands of dollars worth of valuable stock by shops' but the writer chose not to. This is probably because written, literate language tends to focus on abstract rather than concrete things: 'the loss' rather than 'the shops'.

There is another example of nominalisation in transcript 3. The verb 'to increase' in Transcript 2 has been changed into the noun, 'an increase' in Transcript 3:

> Transcript 2: This affects us all because prices **increase.**
> Transcript 3: ultimately affects us all through **an increase** in prices.

As Transcript 3 shows, once the verb 'to increase' becomes the noun 'an increase' we can add more information to it: 'an increase **in prices**'. Clearly there is the potential to add even more information if the writer wanted. For example, personal and attitudinal appraisals of the increase can be added such as: 'an outrageous increase in prices' or 'unjust increases in prices'.

The writer could also have included information about the types of items that would increase in price such as 'an increase in prices of all commodities' and so forth.

Once a verb becomes a noun the potential for compressing information and packing in a lot of content opens up many options for the writer, which they may or may not chose to take up.