Problems and Solutions in Teaching ESL Students to Write Concisely

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Overview

• Definition
• Rationale
• Target students
• Summary of problems and solutions
• Examples for identifying and revising inconcise writing
• Guiding strategy
• Concluding remarks
A. Definition

- Conciseness: using as few words as possible to express ideas clearly and correctly
- Synonyms: brief, economical
- Antonyms: repetitive, wordy, redundant, unnecessary, and inconcise
B. Rationale

• Wordiness: a common problem in ESL academic writing
• To help students achieve conciseness and advance language skills, we need to raise their awareness and show them how to identify and revise wordy language
What academic writing style requires

• clear meaning
• accurate expressions
• coherent text
• concise language
• Formal/neutral style
• varied words and sentence structures
• correct grammar and mechanics
C. Target Students

Advanced ESL students
(and some NES students)
D. Common Problems Affecting Conciseness
Table: Summary of Problems and Solutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>PROBLEMS</th>
<th>SOLUTIONS</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Literal repetition</td>
<td>Delete, combine, or use a pro-form</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Semantic repetition</td>
<td>Delete</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Omnibus words (n., v., adj., and adv.)</td>
<td>Delete and/or rephrase</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Overuse of phrases</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Overuse of noun forms of verbs</td>
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<td>Unnecessary or too obvious info</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Overuse of the passive voice</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Choppy sentences</td>
<td>Combine and/or rephrase</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Unnecessary finite clauses</td>
<td>Replace with words, phrases or non-finite/reduced clauses</td>
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# Marking Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>chop</td>
<td>choppy sentences</td>
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<tr>
<td>cl</td>
<td>overuse of finite clauses</td>
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<tr>
<td>lit rep</td>
<td>literal repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mv</td>
<td>multi-word verbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>noun</td>
<td>overuse of the noun (nominalization) form of a verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>omni</td>
<td>omnibus words having only general or vague meanings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pass</td>
<td>overuse of the passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>red</td>
<td>redundant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sem rep</td>
<td>semantic repetition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there-be</td>
<td>overuse of the weak structure “there-be”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unn</td>
<td>unnecessary information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w</td>
<td>wordy</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
E. Examples for Identifying and Revising Inconcise Writing
1. Literal repetition

- 1a. The translations do not meet the needs of our colleges and universities. The translations are too general and not specific enough. [lit rep, sem rep]

- 1b. The translations do not meet the needs of our colleges and universities as they are too general.
1. Literal repetition

- 2a. Furthermore, people will not visit their kin or friends on the third day [of the Chinese New Year] because most of the older people believe that if they go to visit their kin or friends, they will quarrel with them. [lit rep, red]

- 2b. Furthermore, people will not visit their kin or friends on the third day [of the Chinese New Year] because most of the older people believe that if they do, they will quarrel.
2. Semantic repetition

3a. Since there is a sign language, we are able to understand what the deaf and mute people want to say. If the sign language does not exist, the deaf and mute people can not interact with normal people. [sem rep]

3b. Since there is a sign language, we are able to understand what the deaf and mute people want to say.
2. Semantic repetition

4a. One reason that caused the ethnic groups to have different languages and cultures was because of the geography.

4b. One factor for the ethnic groups to have different languages and cultures was the geography.
3. **Omnibus words**

- 5a. Lastly, appearance is **the biggest matter of primary concern** for students. [omni]

- 5b. Lastly, appearance is **the primary concern** for students.
3. **Omnibus words**

- 6a. His falling asleep at the dinner table is a **good** indication of how tired he is. [omni]
- 6b. His falling asleep at the dinner table is an indication of how tired he is. (Or: His falling asleep at the dinner table indicates his fatigue.)
4. Overuse of phrases

- 7a. Because of the fact that almost everyone needs new clothes for the holiday, the streets are crowded and filled by the sellers and the buyers. [w, sem rep]
- 7b. Because (or Since) almost everyone needs new clothes for the holiday, the streets are crowded with the sellers and buyers.
4. Overuse of phrases

- 8a. This essay *talks about* presents in different countries and the difficulty of *puzzling out* different gift-giving customs. [mv]

- 8b. This essay *discusses* presents in different countries and the difficulty of *understanding* different gift-giving customs.
5. Circumlocution

- 9a. I have come to realize that university education and assistance from professors are just the right keys to unlock the doors filled with questions on my mind. [sem rep, w]

- 9b. I have come to realize that university education is the key to knowledge.
5. Circumlocution

- 10a. Thinking for some solution to the problem in context [campus parking] would bring into mind making a proper multi-level parking lot. [w]

- 10b. One solution to the problem would be a proper multi-level parking lot.
6. **Overuse of noun forms** (nominalization) **of verbs**

- 11a. His falling asleep at the dinner table is a good indication of how tired he is.
- 11b. His falling asleep at the dinner table indicates his fatigue.
6. Overuse of noun forms (nominalization) of verbs

12a. For instance, a five year plan for economic development called the “SaeMaEul Movement” was the most successful agent of change. That movement caused the creation of public transportation systems, the development of industry and the development of agriculture. It also caused an increase in foreign trade causing a rise in the number of exports, and brought a self supply of food in South Korea. [noun, lit rep]
6. Overuse of noun forms (nominalization) of verbs

12b. For instance, a five-year plan for economic development called the “SaeMaEul Movement” was the most successful agent of change. The movement created the public transportation systems and developed the industry and agriculture. It also increased foreign trade and brought a self-supply of food in South Korea.
7. **Unnecessary or too obvious information**

- 13a. In the International Mathematics Olympiad and International Physics Olympiad, **people can often hear** Chinese students won the prizes. [unn]

- 13b. In the International Mathematics and Physics Olympiads, Chinese students often **won the prizes**.
8. Overuse of the passive voice

14a. Before a traditional Chinese wedding took place, there were many things which had to be prepared by the bride’s and groom’s families. [omni v, there-be, pass]

14b. Before a traditional Chinese wedding, the bride’s and groom’s families had to prepare many things.
9. Choppy sentences

15a. However, the Canadian society does not consider this problem [discrimination at the workplace] important. Even when reports are filed, the police do not treat them seriously. The police feel it difficult to communicate with victims. The police have to work with a translator. [lit rep, chop]
9. Choppy sentences

15b. However, the Canadian society does not consider this problem important. Even when reports are filed, the police do not treat them seriously as they feel it difficult to communicate with victims through a translator.
10. Unnecessary finite clauses

16a. Yue Qing, which is a small town, belongs to Wenzhou city. There are over seventy percent of its people who are living and doing business out of town; therefore, most Chinese consider that they are good at business. [cl]

16b. Yue Qing, a small town, belongs to Wenzhou City. Over seventy percent of its people live and do business out of town; therefore, most Chinese consider them good at business.
F. A Guiding Strategy to Achieve Conciseness

• If you can use a word, do not use a phrase.
• If you can use a phrase, do not use a clause.
• If you can use a non-finite/reduced clause, do not use a finite one.
• If you can use a clause, including a complicated one, do not use a sentence.
• If you can use one sentence, including a complicated one, do not use two or more sentences.
G. Concluding Remarks

• The problems and solutions: exemplary rather than exhaustive.
• How concise the writing should be depends on the context.
• No context, no text.
Thank you!

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