

Techniques against the Tendency of Students for Verbosity in Written English

The Case Study of Students in the Department of English in the University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed

Larbi Boumeddane

University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed (Algeria)

Abstract: One very common, recurrent, student-made, written mistake is verbosity while higher educators insist by principle on academic writing which cannot be mastered without verbosity-related faults being avoided case by case. Written verbosity, as spotted in the Department of English of the University of Oran 2, occurs in different ways only to affect the quality of student expression by making it unnecessarily long, imprecise, and even tiresome for the reader. This stylistic mistake may be unconsciously made and repeated by students of English but can be avoided for the sake of comfortable reading and understanding without altering targeted ideas. The use of superfluous words is incompatible with language formality which rather calls for conciseness for clearness. Pedagogues in the department tend to explain to learners of the different levels several strategies on how to eliminate or at least reduce written verbosity in respect of English syntax.

Keywords: *written verbosity, conciseness, English, students.*

Introduction

Beginners and non-beginners in foreign-language writing alike are very likely to fall into the unconscious tendency for long redundant expression. They may try to sound important or proudly graceful but only to produce overflowing lines boring to read. Students of English may be in fact criticized for their repetitious style when one single written word bears a particular idea already contained in another juxtaposed or nearby word within one sentence. However, any academic writing has an intended audience which the student, much like any other type of writer, should always keep in his mind by considering and focusing on what it needs to know. Student verbosity, adding no scientific attraction, is often spotted by teachers of English, who therefore see the necessity to deal with it as a serious subject matter within language learning.

Teachers of grammar or written expression in particular in the Department of English of the University of Oran 2 usually explain how to eliminate or reduce written verbosity, preparing as such their BA students for the task of writing essays usually required in literature and civilization modules. While time is too precious for readers to waste on useless material, their whole attention can be effectively absorbed by the necessary words being exclusively mentioned, which is likely to hearten them to keep on reading. It happens even for teachers and examiners to be unable to understand the

ideas that their assessed students try to convey. How can students of English overcome this erroneous tendency? One may assume that there exist specific syntagmatic-paradigmatic solutions for that. The objective of this research paper is to shed light on different techniques to be taught to avoid that flaw at the sentence level for more fluidity. I will try to report and illustrate various students verbosity cases I spotted on assessed writings and suggest guidelines with illustrative rectifications or improvements.

I. Literature Review

It is a commonplace to say that academic writing is not to be done at random as it is necessarily under the paradigmatic-syntagmatic constraint not to assemble any words anyhow. Applied linguistics identifies and investigates written stylistic deficiencies such as verbosity which much critical literature considers as a wrong way to reinforce ideas. Former research on this subject reached theories evidencing that the problem of verbosity can be effectively solved through editing one's draft whatever the discipline or language being dealt with is. The bibliographical documents are theoretical and practical as far as the English language is concerned but with a certain gap that my paper will try to fill. The verbosity examples provided in evaluated books and articles seem to be readily or purposefully made by the authors of these documents, though still relevant. The present research paper, on the other hand, lies on those sources but bears a focus on personal experience in teaching English at university. My examples are relatively more empirical as drawn from my erstwhile students' dissertations. Over long years of teaching English, I have been noticing that similar verbosity mistakes are remade by students; hence, this work will accompany generations of them so that they get more aware of what used to be former students' written mistakes or may still be theirs.

II. Verbosity in Writing

Being verbose is the use of more words than are necessary, which is also referred to as prolixity or wordiness. Language pedagogues may criticize verbosity as putting vagueness and confusion for beginning and non-beginning readers alike while precision and brevity are the hallmarks of good style (Isu Writing Centre, 2016, pp. 1, 2). Indeed, verbosity is regarded as a flaw when lesser words within sentences can suffice to convey meaning in correct grammar (Fordham University Writing Centres, 2015, p. 1). For instance, the word '*although*' has its verbose form in the phrase *in spite of the fact that*. Thus, wordiness increases complexity of expression and may even tire the reader trying to understand the targeted meaning. Academy, as for it, recommends simple and direct expression in all language registers be them literary, technical, or scientific (Academic Skills Centre, 2014, pp. 1-3). This is confirmed by Demir (2019) as follows:

When writers perform writing, their primary aim is to communicate instantly with readers and to achieve this they need to be clear and concise because conciseness provides an upper hand for the writer in disseminating the message. An overwritten text filled with redundant words may distract readers, hence may prompt quit-reading; therefore, academic writers should avoid wordiness. (p. 1)

Pleonasm is the use of unnecessary words to emphasize expressed ideas, making thus repetition. Pleonasm adds nothing to meaning as in the following examples: *walking on foot, a plane flying in the sky, rectangular in shape, to swim in water, to listen with one's ears, fake wigs, building a new house, collaborating together, to follow someone behind him*. The idea of moving *on foot* and that of working *together* are already included in walking and collaborating. (Bled et Bled, 1997, p. 210)

Redundant Style	Irredundant Style
Lucy submitted an application for a social accommodation.	Lucy applied for a social accommodation.
The reason why I came late to the ceremony is that I took several buses that were driven slowly by drivers.	I came late to the ceremony because I took several slow buses.
Jacky lives in New York City, which is a huge American town with many high skyscrapers, and she is used to getting up them.	Jacky lives in the huge American city of New York and is used to getting up its many skyscrapers.
There are many Algerians who live in Paris.	Many Algerians live in Paris.
It is expensive to fly by aircraft from London to Tokyo.	Flying from London to Tokyo is expensive.
It is noticed that juvenile criminality among children is growing in this modern day and era of the twenty-first century.	Juvenile criminality is currently growing.
Women who hold jobs and also keep house found themselves in many problems. These women have little time for leisure and do not have enough sleep.	Women holding jobs and keeping house have many problems including a lack of leisure and sleep.
John got up early in the morning at 06 o'clock. He took a shower and then ate a breakfast. It was about 08:20 when he left for school.	John got up at 06 a.m. He took a shower then a breakfast. He left for school at about 08:20.

The letter to the police was written by someone who omitted both his name and signature.	The letter to the police was anonymous.
In the event that it keeps raining, do not go out without wearing a kind of jacket that does not let water through.	If it keeps raining, do not go out without wearing an impervious jacket.
Why the downfall of British royal absolutism and its replacement by royal constitutionalism in 1688-1689 took place may be put in a few words. British Monarchs who had reigned in England and Scotland and who belonged to the Stuart Dynasty had been too unfair and unjust towards their subjects who finally opposed and overthrew the regime.	The rise of British royal constitutionalism in 1688-1689 was due to Stuart British Monarchs' unfairness towards their subjects who finally overthrew royal absolutism.

III. Methodology

A. Data

This research is largely carried out on samples of different-level licence students being asked to compose short individual dissertations in classroom on civilization and technical English within limited time and with no documentary support being authorized. The choice of these two fields of the English language was on purpose : showing that student verbosity occurs not only in the literary register, but also in the scientific one. It is noteworthy here that many of these students entered the department of English with scientific baccalaureates; thus, they had technical knowledge that could be expressed in English. The use of rough paper was deliberately not mentioned. Tackling this issue from a particular angle, this research is made on the basis of collected data being part of spontaneous or non-spontaneous students written answers on various topics in the module of written expression in 2013. My own students were somehow made passive participants in this research work. After data collection and assessment, it was seen that the answers contained many mistakes related to verbosity.

B. Procedure

Teacher interference came first as a general definition of verbosity with common examples in front of his learners. Then, the teacher spotted his students' wordy lines and asked them to try to make the necessary rectifications. It became quite clear that some of them understood at this level the uselessness of idea repetition while their ideas could be conveyed and understood easily with no need for reinforcement often made by means of pleonasm. They could correct a few mistakes by themselves. Next, the teacher dealt with every verbosity case, suggested corrections, and formulated rules accordingly. This had all been done in one session. The following day, in another session

of the same type, the same students were invited to produce other short individual dissertations in English on other topics still about civilization or technical English. This time, the teacher instructed them to draft several times their writings and consider seriously those rules previously formulated and more fully discussed below. Finally, the teacher's feedback about the second-session submitted writings was comparatively much less negative vis-à-vis verbosity than the previous one as his learners made progress by reducing wordiness rate in their written English.

IV. Results and Discussion

One may assume that it is normal and expectable that any language-student first draft be wordy particularly when he is pedantically emphatic. Language teacher, especially that of written expression, may make his students less prone to this mistake through some guidelines applied on their own writings.

As verbosity seems to be unconsciously repeated, a key activity here is to become able to edit one's writing by leaving out unessential words or phrases in such a way as every mentioned word serves a purpose and contributes for its space (Stott and Avery, 2001, pp. 52, 53)

Students are asked to avoid buzzwords, in other words, empty abstract words and phrases having no substance contribution and to keep a word only if it is necessary for the syntax of the sentence (School of Liberal Arts, 2014, p. 2). In line with this, they may omit useless complements and modifiers such as *in kind, really, truly, basically, definitely, generally, and personally* (Stott and Avery, 2001, p. 52). Moreover, students of English are advised to use one-word element rather than phrases standing either as prepositions, verbs, adverbs, or conjunctions. Any expression with *about, does, now, if, or soon* will be clearer than that containing *with reference with, has the effect of, at this point of time, in the event that, or in the near future* (The UNB Writing Centre, 2012, p. 2).

Verbose Sentences	Concise Sentences
As a definition, chemistry generally studies certain situations that are not emotional in kind, namely matters, their nature, transformation, interaction, and any given substance aspect.	Chemistry studies matters, their nature, transformation, and interaction.
Personally, I think that the Victorian Society is basically conservative and quite mostly prude.	The Victorian Society is conservative and prude.
The British Monarch has definitely the prerogative to dismiss Parliament if the latter is incompetent and cannot work efficiently.	The British Monarch has the prerogative to dismiss Parliament for incompetence.

Students understood that a given idea might not be explicitly stated but implicitly present in a sentence or phrase. They realized that if the British Monarch is said to have such or such constitutional power, there is to be no doubt or extent of trueness about

this fact. Indeed, certainty is already implicit in *The British Monarch has the prerogative to dismiss Parliament*. So, the syntagm *definitely* plays nothing there except emphatic repetition. Likewise, if Parliament cannot work efficiently, this means it is incompetent. So, the expression *and cannot work efficiently* causes unwanted syntactical inflation there.

Students may also learn to void expletive and cleft sentences which can be replaced by shorter clearer sentences; in fact, the patterns *there + be* and *it + be + relative pronoun* are not always needed (Academic Skills Centre, 2014, pp. 1, 2). For instance, it is clearer to write *A gentleman is waiting for you outside the building* than *There is a gentleman outside the building who is waiting for you*. It is also less verbose to say *The Puritans revolutionized the British Monarchy* than *It is the Puritans who revolutionized the British Monarchy*.

Furthermore, students may use one-word verbs rather than using compound verbs or long predicates. (Fordham University Writing Centres, 2015, p. 1) For instance, the sentence *Queen Elizabeth I needed a lot of money to defend her kingdom* is clearer than *Queen Elizabeth I found herself in need of a lot of money to assure the defence of her kingdom*. It is also more suitable to use verb style rather than noun style. (Pat, 2003, p. 1) For example, *King Charles I subverted the State, killed hundreds of his subjects, and imprisoned hundreds others* is less wordy than *King Charles I was responsible for state subversion, the killing of hundreds of his subjects, and the imprisonment of hundreds others*.

Students are equally recommended to use noun compounds instead of longer noun phrases containing articles, pronouns, verbs, or prepositions. Here are some examples.

Verbose Noun Phrases	Noun Compounds
process in which steam is generated	steam generation process
schools teaching languages	languages schools
company specialized in desalination	desalination company
board made of plastic, to be used in classroom	classroom plastic board
ore containing iron	iron ore
habits particular to life in city	city life habits
chamber in which fuel is burned	fuel combustion chamber
church of the State of England under the reign of the Tudors	Tudor England State church
money used as a shield	shield money

The different changes brought on the students' drafts show how much graphic quantity and stylistic quality are related. Verbose patterns may not grammatically be wrong; this is the case of the above tabled noun phrases which present no linguistic defect in academic English apart from being graphic extensions to noun compounds. The latter stand as irreducible alternatives making style slighter. So, one cannot view the use of such noun phrases as a mistake; rather, their substitution by noun compounds is preferable for stylistic improvement.

All above concise reformulation was much liked by students who saw its advantage in somehow facilitating the memorization and remembrance of information more easily than extensive proses.

V. Implications

So as to put these results and recommendations into practice, licence students in the Department of English, Oran 2, still regarded as beginners in learning English, are to get involved in a deeper assignment. The above preventive strategies will make them more likely to work thoroughly on both semantics and grammar. Students may have to become more curious and attentive vis-à-vis the meaning of every word and that of words being combined, caring as such about the avoidance of overstatement caused by semantically-related syntagms occurring in one sentence. In fact, this research paper urges the learners to make the right choice of least enough words by studying both word and larger-units meanings. In this design, students get more committed to rereading, editing, and redrafting to be done before submitting any paper supposed to be in academic English.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, verbosity, an expressive style that uses extra words for no semantic benefit, makes reading uneasy and understanding likely to be not full. Students of the Department of English in the University of Oran 2 are taught techniques to spare this mistake by compressing expression into the least possible words to convey meaning in correct language, in other words, by omitting what the reader can effortlessly infer. The significance of this study is bilateral as it deals with both skills of writing and reading by recommending the right selection and combination of words on the basis of their meanings and targeted ideas, excluding any extra use of language in academic written English so as to make the reader comfortable. From a wider perspective, the research findings may be seen as a help for second-year master students to write properly their graduation memoires and even get prepared for doctorate competitive exams in which academic English is essentially required and highly evaluated. Furthermore, this study as a whole may serve as an interdisciplinary step forward for a similar research to be done within the bounds of another foreign language such as French whereby student verbosity, criticized in the Department of French of the university, is said to be much rife, too.

References

Books

- Bled, O et BLED, É. (1997). *Orthographe Guide Pratique*. Alger: Casbah Editions.
Stott, R and AVERY, S. (2001). *Writing with Style*. Harlow: Longman.

Journal Articles

- Bernhardt, W. (2013). *11 Steps to Superior Legal Writing*. (New York State Bar Centre) *William Bernhardt Writing Programs*, 15(6), pp. 150-224. Albany.
Hansson, S. (2015). *Calculated Overcommunication: Strategic Uses of Prolivity, Irrelevance, and Repetition in Administrative Language*. (Elsevier) *Journal of Pragmatics*, 84(5), pp. 172-188, Lancaster.
Juhel, D. (1999). *Prolixité et qualité des traductions*. (Les presses de l'Université de Montréal) *Meta*. 44(2), pp. 238-249. Montréal.

Webography

- Al-Marsumi, N. (2017). *The Use of Tautology in "The Thorn" by William Wordsworth: A Stylistic Study*, researchgate.net/publication/319949483.
- Academic Skills Centre. (2014). *Wordiness*. creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/
- Demir, C. (2019). *Writing Intelligible English Prose : Conciseness vs. Verbosity*, dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/911083
- Fordham University Writing Centres. (2015). *Wordiness*, [www.fordham.edu › downloads › w...](http://www.fordham.edu/downloads/w...)
- Hussein, F. (2014). *Eliminating Wordiness*. [www.sjsu.edu › docs › handouts › E...](http://www.sjsu.edu/docs/handouts/E...)
- Isu Writing Centre. (2016). *Avoiding Wordiness*. [www.isu.edu › editing-and-mechanics](http://www.isu.edu/editing-and-mechanics).
- Pat. R. (2003), *Eliminating Wordiness*, [www.gocolumbia.edu › aac › Elimi...](http://www.gocolumbia.edu/aac/Elimi...)
- School of Liberal Arts, Indiana University, (2014), *Editing for Wordiness*, [liberalarts.iupui.edu › documents](http://liberalarts.iupui.edu/documents)
- The UNB Writing Centre, (2012), *Seven Rules for Avoiding Wordiness*, [www.unb.ca › _resources › pdfs › wss](http://www.unb.ca/_resources/pdfs/wss)