

Nominalization and the Discourse of Disempowerment in Human Rights Education

Abdelhak BZIOUI

Ministry of National Education, Morocco

Abstract

This paper aims at throwing light upon the possible impact of over-nominalized classroom discourse on human rights education (HRE) for social empowerment. A key human rights principle as accountability is impaired when whole man-engendered processes are nominalized; that is, deagentialized and reduced to rootless things, events, or states of being. What gives this study a rationale is that when objectified and decontextualized, processes are distanced from their agents in a startling mismatch to the core objectives of HRE which primarily endeavors to empower children by bringing the world closer to them and by teaching them how to take informed action in it for the well-being of its citizens. The study uses classroom observation for data collection and critical discourse analysis for data analysis. Nominalized language by the teacher or textbook instructions tends to breed similarly nominalized responses by the learners. However, non-nominalized language by the teacher or the textbook helps curb the nominalization tendency in the learners. As a result, this would train them to produce agency-sensitive discourse that in turn would affect the way they perceive the network of roles, rights and responsibilities around them; that is, the set-up of responsibility and causality in the world. The findings suggest that de-nominalizing classroom discourse can help bridge the gap between words and deeds. In this breath, de-nominalization might help with the aim of changing the world through the word as Freire and Macedo (1987) advocate; a first step towards HRE for social empowerment.

Key words: agency, empowerment, HRE, nominalization

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Introduction

While observing Moroccan teachers' and learners' discourse behaviour in classrooms where Islamic education is taught, an attention-grabbing linguistic feature of students' and teachers' discourses was their tendency towards nominalization. This paper is based on data collected from three different classrooms where Islamic education is taught. The aim is to examine how nominalization in teachers' discourse can be disempowering to the learners in a school subject that is considered, alongside French, Arabic, history and geography, and philosophy, to be human rights bearing according to the National Program for Human Rights Education (NPHRE) launched in 2001. Human rights are required to be highly considered in this subject matter alongside other "human rights-bearing" subjects. First, this paper studies the impact of nominalization on the deagentialization of processes; that is, effacing the agent and portraying the nominalized process as if it has occurred by its own will. Moreover, the study investigates the role of nominalization in the impersonalization of action. It looks into how nominalized discourse can foster stagnation and passivity at a time when human rights education (HRE) is supposed to enhance action, reflection, and change.

1.1. The impact of nominalization in disempowering the learners

Nominalization according to Johnstone (2008) means using as nouns words that can also be used as verbs, adjectives, or adverbs, either with or without the addition of noun markers. Users of language choose whether to represent a word as an event (by making it a noun) or as an action (by making it a verb). Leech (2006) defines nominalization as the derivation of a noun phrase from an underlying clause. As an example of nominalization, he uses the phrase "the destruction of the city", where the noun "destruction" corresponds to the main verb of a clause and the city to its object. Crystal (1980) defines a nominal as a word which differs grammatically from a noun but functions as one. In "the poor are many", the word "poor" is a nominal. It functions as a noun; however, it does not pluralize (p. 242). "Nominalization" is itself a nominalization of the verb "to nominalize". From a critical discourse analysis perspective, nominalizing a verb turns it into an object or an event that can, literally, be viewed objectively. This separates it from people, decreasing emotional attachment and facilitating objective examination. This is one reason why this style is common in formal business and academic reporting. Given its critical role in mystifying agency through the deactivation of actions and the objectification of an otherwise subjective reality, the use of nominalization helps to formalize or create distance. Distance can characterize the relation of individuals to their own discourse, to their own actions, to reality, and so on. HRE for social empowerment cannot tolerate the pertinence of such distance in or through discourse at any educational setting. Whether such distance in discourse is creative or representative of a certain reality, mindset or culture is what this study intends to explore. First of all, the study examines how agency, hence power, is hidden via nominalized discourse in the extracts taken from three different classrooms where T stands for teacher while L stands for learner.

1.1.1. The deagentialization of processes via nominalization in T1's classroom

In this extract, T1 asks her students about how they could preserve their health. The conversation unfolds as follows:

Extract 1/T1

1. T1: ↑kajfa nuħa:fiḍ ʃala ha:dihi ʃʃihħa lzismija walʃaqlija ↑kajfa nuħa:fiḍ ʃalajha

How do we preserve this physical and mental health? How do we preserve it?

2. **L1:** **lwiqa:ja** mən um um
Prevention from um um
3. **T1:** **lwiqa:ja** () na:ʕam ↑kajfa kajfa **lwiqa:ja** mina lʔamra:d
Prevention () yes how how prevention from illnesses?
4. **L2:** **llu:zu:ʔ** ʔila tʔabi:b
Resorting to the doctor
5. **T1:** (*shouting*) lla **lwiqaja** qbel matmʕi lʔbi:b
NO PREVENTION IS BEFORE YOU GO TO THE DOCTOR
6. **L3:** stada stada stada () **yaslu** ljadajn kulla jawm
Teacher teacher teacher (...) washing the hands every day
7. **T1:** na:ʕam **lmuħa:faða** ʕala nnaða:fa
Yes keeping clean
8. **Ls:** la:
No

The noun phrase in turn (4) '*llu:zu:ʔ ʔila tʔabi:b*' (resorting to the doctor) instead of '*X jalzaʔu ʔila tʔabi:b*' (X resorts to the doctor) is an example of a nominalized student response. This nominalization has resulted in dispensing with the agent; that is, who resorts to the doctor to keep healthy. The action '*X jalzaʔu ʔila tʔabi:b*' (X resorts to the doctor) is deactivated through the use of a process noun '*llu:zu:ʔ*' (resorting). The same applies to learner 3's response in turn (6) where '*yaslu ljadajn kulla jawm*' (washing the hands every day) fails to tell who is to wash the hands every day. Nominalization as well as passivization, the use of passive instead of active sentence form, according to Fairclough (1992), may be associated with ideologically significant features of texts such as the systematic mystification of agency. They both allow the agent of a clause to be deleted. It is hard to talk about ideologically motivated discourse of junior high school learners. The latter, however, may have probably been taught or at least exposed to the omission of the agent through nominalization and passivization in teacher, textbook, or other types of discourse. In turns (3), (5), and (7), T1 herself nominalizes, using '*lwiqa:ja*' (prevention) and '*lmuħa:faða ʕala nnaða:fa*' (keeping clean) in agentless clauses.

Nominalizing, hence objectifying, Muslim behaviour by T1 and her students may play a central part in what White & Epston (1990, p. 38) refer to as an externalizing conversation whereby the focus shifts from what people actually do to what should be ideally done. Through nominalization, whereby a noun stands for a process (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002), the speaker becomes 'separated' from the problem. As a consequence, it becomes more difficult for anyone to attribute the negative behaviour as a central part of their identity (for a discussion see Muntigl, 2004a). When nominalized, the state of being pious, the act of worship and obeying God's commands are impersonalized. They are alienated from their doers. They are *deagentialized* (Van Leeuwen, 1993). Actions and reactions can be agentialized or deagentialized. An agentialized action or reaction is represented as caused by agents. A deagentialized action or reaction is represented as produced in ways that are not influenced by a human agent (Van Leeuwen, 1993). The participants as they voice that piety refers to meeting God's commands seem to empty the statement of its potential implications. Essentially, the definition of piety is not – or at least need not be – meant to be learned by rote; rather, it is to be applied in real life and it is for the participants to feel individually and collectively responsible for its implementation. It is a whole-person undertaking, involving the heart, mind, soul, senses, and so on. It is required of all, including the participants in T1's lesson, not of abstract beings – extraterrestrials out there on

Mars. It is not a philosophical issue either to grope around for its abstract and indefinite subtleties of meaning.

1.1.2. Textbook and teacher's instructions enhance nominalization in T2's classroom

T2 leads a class discussion about the pillars sustaining legal marriage in Islam. After that, they move on to the following textbook instruction about the likely drawbacks of family conflicts on children. The background situation of the lesson is the dispute that broke out between the father and the mother and then between Karim, the eldest son, and his father. The whole lesson is subsumed under a textbook unit entitled 'the relation of children to parents in Islam'. Extract 2/T2 presents the teacher-student exchange that unfolds.

Extract 2/ T2

1. **T2:** ?idan ha:da **ʃʃiʒa:r** qad waqaʕ (.) fnaqarkum ↑ma:hija **lʒa:ta:r** ssilbija ʒala lʔuʒra
So this quarrel has happened (.) for you, what are the negative effects on the family?
2. **Ls:** ((hands up calling for turns to speak))
3. **T2:** ((pointing to a male student who has a hand up)) naʒam
Yes
4. **L2:** tuʒbihu **lkurh walbayʒa:ʔ walxawf ttafakkuk lʔusari ʒadam htira:m rraʒj lʔa:xar**
There becomes hate and grudge and fear, family breakdowns, disrespect of different opinions
5. **T2:** naʒam ʒadam htira:m rraʒj lʔa:xar ((pointing to a student with a hand up)) naʒam
Yes disrespect of different opinions, ((pointing to a student with a hand up)) yes
6. **L3:** juʔaddi: **ʒala:q** lwa:lidajn ʔaw **infiʒa:luhuma:** bilʔaħra: fi baʒd lʔaħja:n ʔila:
nhira:f lʔawla:d fi: baʒd lʔaħja:n ʔaw tatazammaʒu ʒindahum ʒoqda nafsija xaʒi:ra
Parents' divorce or rather their separation sometimes leads to children delinquency or a serious psychological complex crops up in them
7. **T2:** (emphatically) **ʒaħi:h** (.) ʒaħi:h ((pointing to another student)) naʒam
True (.) true, ((pointing to another student)) yes
8. **L4:** **lʔa:ta:r** ssilbija ʒala lʔabna:ʔ bi: (.) lʔa:ta:r ssilbija ʒala lʔabna:ʔ bisabab ha:da
ʃʃiʒar ʔalʔihtira:f taʒa:ʒi lmuḡaddira:t=
The negative effects on children (.) the negative effects on children because of this quarrel professionalism, taking drugs=
9. **T2:** =**linhira:f** **linhira:f** maʒi **lihtira:f** (.) **linhira:f**
=delinquency delinquency not professionalism (.) delinquency
10. **L4:** **ʔalinhira:f taʒa:ʒi lmuḡaddira:t ʔattaʒarrud**
Delinquency, using drugs, homelessness
11. **T2:** (confirmingly) naʒam
Yes
12. **L5:** **tarbijat lʔaʒfa:l** ʒəlʒunf
Bringing up children on violence

Extract 2/T2 is conspicuously replete with nominals as the words in bold letters show. Nominalization tends to permeate teacher, student and even textbook discourse. The textbook instruction which frames the discussion reads: 'haddid lʔa:ta:r ssilbija ʒala lʔabna:ʔ bisabab ha:da ʃʃiʒa:r' (determine the negative effects of this dispute on children). The instruction bears three nominals; 'lʔa:ta:r' (the effects), 'bisabab' (because of) and 'ʃʃiʒa:r' (dispute). 'lʔa:ta:r' is derived from the verb 'ʔattara' (to affect). The nominal 'bisabab' is also a derivative of the verb

'*sabbaba*' (to cause) and '*ʃʃiʒa:r*' from '*tafa:zara*' (to quarrel). The teacher in turn (1) '*ʃnaɖarkum ↑ma:hija lʒa:ta:r ssilbija ʒala lʒusra*' (in your opinion what are the negative effects on the family?) keeps almost the same over-nominalized wording as he reformulates the textbook instruction. The learners know that it is the parents who have initially fallen out, instigating the intervention of Karim who quarrels with his father as a consequence. Nonetheless, the textbook as well as the teacher's instruction seems to pin the blame for the family feud on the feud itself. Almost all the negative effects of family quarrels that come out in students' contributions are attributed to the '*ʃʃiʒa:r*' (quarrel) rather than to those who sparked it out at the outset. Almost all the discussion transcribed in extract 2/T2 condemns 'the quarrel' as if it has occurred by its own volition rather than having been caused to happen. The textbook instruction '*ħaddid lʒa:ta:r ssilbijja ʒala lʒabna:ʔ bisabab ha:da ʃʃiʒa:r*' (determine the negative effects of this dispute on children) could have been worded differently. An alternative wording, for instance, could be: '*↑kajfa jumkinu ʔan juʔattira ʃiʒa:ru lʒaba:ʔ salban ʒala lʒabna:ʔ*' (how can parents' quarrels negatively affect children?). In this alternative, the learners are better directed towards the real agents behind the problem, the parents. Knowing and highlighting the real actors or agents behind every action is essential in rights-sensitive education. Rights cannot be enjoyed unless duties are reciprocally accomplished. And duties, in turn, cannot be fully fulfilled if responsibilities are not ingenuously pinned on those who really assume them.

Likewise, the nominals '*lkuh*' (hate), '*lʒayda:ʔ*' (grudge), '*lxawf*' (fear), '*ttafakkuk*' (breakup), '*ʒadam ħtira:m*' (disrespect) are all presented in an objectivated fashion, since the force that has brought them into being is unraveled. On the whole, L2 cites likely drawbacks of family disputes. They, however, can never occur or disappear out of their own will but are dependent on human will and force. The causality link between these states of being and their agents is rather blurred. Bridging the gap between actions or states of being and the firsthand agents behind them is a fundamental step towards building an anti-fatalistic awareness in children, a key step in the direction of empowerment which HRE will have little meaning if it fails to bring about.

According to Johnstone (2008), choices involving the assignment of semantic roles and nominalization can represent people as being out of control of their destinies in the most fundamental ways. To illustrate this, Johnstone (2008, p. 56) quotes a sentence from a newspaper article about AIDS drugs used by Krieger (1997): "About half of our patients will see a long-term, possibly permanent, response to these drugs while the other half may begin to exhibit disease progression again". In her comment, Johnstone (2008) notes that in the first clause, AIDS patients are semantic experiencers who "see responses" to drugs. Here the patients are represented as observers of their bodies. In the second clause, patients "exhibit disease progression." The perspective here is that of the doctor looking at the patient, with the patient represented as the site of "disease progression" (p. 56). The patient is the object of observation. In neither case is the patient involved with his or her body or disease as an agent, someone who could be doing something. "Disease progression," a nominalization, treats the disease as having a goal toward which it "progresses." The perspective here is that of the disease; the patient would be unlikely, after all, to think of "progress" in this context.

It is not being claimed that nominalized discourse in this piece of data is fundamentally ideologically motivated; but the real concern is about the possible long-term epistemological impact of deagentialized discourse on the learners' view of the world they live in socially, politically, economically, and so on. The human rights principle of accountability means highlighting the human hand behind every act or event. Human rights can not only be taught to

be respected and appreciated when fully enjoyed; but also to be retrieved and sought if they are denied or violated. It is in the second endeavor where the question of agency seriously stands out. An illustrative example would be the attribution of the high unemployment rate among university graduates to “the mismatch between their degrees and the job market demands” or holding “the low growth rates” accountable for the government’s inability to build more hospitals and highways. The allocation of causality to such abstract entities would drown us into subsequent analyses and details while ignoring the human force that has made or contributed to that situation where the young have been denied their rights to desirable work, and where “the mismatch” between university education and training on the one hand and the requirements of new job opportunities on the other has ironically been held accountable. Similarly, many people often blame all the present ailments of most third world countries on past “foreign colonialism”, overlooking, in one of the most flagrant historical fallacies, the human hands and minds that brought it about or paved the way for the invaders in the first place, especially those human actors belonging to the colonized countries themselves. It would sound viable to conclude that when it is used to efface or, at best, obscure agency, nominalized discourse often precludes the creation as well as representation of a transparent world through discourse.

1.1.3. The impact of nominalization on the impersonalization of action in T3’s classroom

Extract5/T3 is a transcription of the learners’ suggestions to help Zayd, a wealthy man who squanders his money, to redress his own behavior towards a better management of his money.

Extract3/T3

1. **T3:** qallama stamaʕna libaʕd lqira:ħa:t (.) ʔidan ↑ma:hija liqira:ħa:t llati jumkinu qira:ħuha (.)↑naʕəm ((*pointing to a student who has a hand up*))
Rarely have we heard any suggestions (.) so what are the suggestions that can be made? (.) Yes?
2. **L1:** kazzaka:ti waʔifa:nat lfuqara:ʔ
As giving alms and helping the needy
3. **T3:** ħasan (.) ʔajju:b ((*pointing to a student named Ayoub*))
Good (.) Ayoub
4. **L2:** ttabarruʕ ʔuh ttabarruʕ lilmuħta:zi:n
Donating uh, donating for the needy
5. **T3:** ttabarruʕ lilmuħta:zin
Donating for the needy
6. **L3:** ʔinfa:quhu ()
Spending it ()
7. **Ls:** ((*hands up calling for turns to speak*))
8. **T3:** ((*points to another student*))
9. **L4:** ʔattada:mun mʕa fajʔin zami:l wala: maʕa fajʔin fi:hi tafa:ha
Solidarity with something beautiful and not with something trivial
10. **T3:** naʕam
Yes
11. **L5:** ħusnu tadbi:rihi waʕadamu tabdi:rihi
Managing it well and not wasting it
12. **T3:** waʕadamu tabdi:rihi
And not wasting it

13. L6: **bina:ʔu** muʔassasa:tin xajrija wataʕlimijja
Building charity and educational institutions

14. T3: ḥasan
Good

15. L7: **musa:ʕadat** lmuḥta:zi:n walxajrija:t
Helping people in need and charity institutions

T3 at the outset of this extract puts a ‘what’ question: ‘*ma:hija liqtira:ḥa:t llati: jumkinu qtira:ḥuha*’ (what are the suggestions that can be made?). As noted earlier, such questions can be qualified as nominalization-enhancing. The first answer that T3’s question receives occurs in turn (2) ‘*kazzaka:ti waʔiʕa:nat lfuqara:ʔ*’ (such as giving alms and helping the needy). The process noun ‘*zaka:t*’ (giving alms) is free from any mention of the source nor the destination of such alms. L1 in this response seems to have made a linguistic shortcut to the intended meaning through nominalization. Such a grammatically oversimplified, semantically overgeneralized answer, however, fails to convey direct implications for action. When the inconsideration of *who* must do *what* recurs and permeates discourse, it can gradually translate into common behaviors that favor words to deeds and that are soaked in simply living the world rather than taking part in making it or remaking it. The relation between the school and society can slowly get undermined as a result of the consequential impact of language on thought and thought on behaviour. The same goes for L2’s response where the noun phrase ‘*ttabarruʕ lilmuḥta:zin*’ (donating for the needy) does not unequivocally point to the party with whom the donating operation rests. ‘*ttabarruʕ*’ (donating) is derived from the verb ‘*tabarraʕa*’ (to donate) which is essentially an action verb limited to human undertaking. Moreover, L3 gives a nominalized response as well in ‘*ʔinfa:quhu*’ (spending it) where the action process (spend) is deactivated by trimming it down into an agent-less nominal. The linguistic context where this answer occurs bears no referent to the object pronoun ‘*-hu*’ (it); but from the conversational context, it can be inferred that it refers to money. As is the case with the previous responses, the agents that are supposed to take over the implementation of the suggested ideas are not specified. L4 follows suit and nominalizes her response by suggesting ‘*ʔattaqa:mun mʕa fajʔin zami:l wala: maʕa fajʔin fi:hi tafa:ha*’ (solidarity with something beautiful and not with something trivial). The nominal ‘*ʔattaqa:mun*’ (solidarity) is also loosely used. It is not bound to a given carrier-out of such behavior. Such an answer could perhaps reflect a limped conception by the learner of the ‘*who*’ ‘*how*’ and ‘*with whom*’ solidarity could be brought about. L5 is no exception in using reductive discourse via nominalization as she says ‘*ḥusnu tadbirihi waʕadamu tabdirihi*’ (managing it well and not wasting it). Again, the ‘*-hi*’ (it) here refers to money. The response again is deactivated and impersonalized since it is free of any allusion to those who are supposed to put into effect what the learner suggests. Of course, when T3 called for the students’ suggestions about the best ways to spend money, he had Zayd’s financial misbehavior in mind and wanted the learners to suggest alternative ways of handling surplus money mainly to Zayd. He, however, fails all through extract (3), which is full of suggestions, to anchor the students’ proposals to Zayd, even in the form of a reformulation to a student’s answer. The complete absence of any reference to zayd or (he) in all of the seven suggestions made in extract (3) creates a kind of “semantic loss” (van Leeuwen, 2008).

According to van Leeuwen (2008), syntactic choices of missing actor (agent) and nominalized process verbs may cause semantic losses, which in turn may indicate the ideological preferences of authors/speakers. Furthermore, the representation of social action may determine the way it is interpreted. It would be rather unrealistic to say that students in this study sample

nominalize on the basis of ideological intentions. Their over-nominalized answers could be the result of the nominalized question put by the teacher. They could also imply the existence of a conceptual gap in the way the learners internalize the world around and the possibilities of action on it. L5 suggests *'bina:ʔu muʔassasa:tin xajrija wataʕlimija'* (building charity and educational institutions). The behavior suggested by the learner is impersonalized in that it is not evident whether it is targeting Zayd, wealthy people in general or another party. In the same vein, L7 suggests *'musa:ʕadat lmuhta:zi:n walxajrija:t'* (helping people in need and charity institutions). Nominalized responses such as these seem easier to produce since they save the learners the trouble of thinking about 'who' is to do 'what'. Modern day sociopolitical discourse, particularly in less developed countries, is replete with such nominalized catch phrases as *'taħri:r lmarʔa'* (liberating women), *'muħa:rabat lfasa:d'* (fighting against corruption), and so forth. It is more facile and less involving to talk about similar wishes but it is more demanding and more involving to pinpoint who is actually to do so and how. Is it men, women, society, law makers, or others? It is noteworthy how T3 gets content with nominalized answers with no further involvement of the learners into more thought over the way what they suggest can feasibly take effect. In turns (5) and (12), he reiterates the learners' answers verbatim. In turns (3), (10) and (14), he positively comments with the single word *'ħasan'* (good) or *'naʕam'* (yes), perhaps acting in connivance to the agents due to the constraints of time in an overpopulated classroom (42 students). The teacher's as well as the learners' normalization with nominalized discourse can also be the result of a persistent un-readiness to throw a stone into the stagnant waters of agency, rather deagentialization, which permeates classroom discourse perhaps as a natural extension of the sociopolitical discourse of society at large.

1.2. Discussion

This discussion aims at building more evidence into the argument that over-nominalized classroom discourse runs at cross directions with the purposes of HRE for the social empowerment of the learners. In this sense, it is argued that the more denominalized classroom discourse is, the more linked it is to action, and the more likely it is to bring about real human rights related changes into students' lives.

1.2.1. The negative effect of over-nominalization on HRE for social empowerment

Quite long ago, Korzybski (1933) distinguished between sane and un-sane use of language. He postulated that un-sane use of language leads to un-sane thinking and behavior. He maintained that when we use words and abstractions that are not well-aligned with the underlying reality we are attempting to represent, we end up making less than sane choices and decisions. Soosalu (2010) calls on everyone to fancy how powerful it could be to shift behavior, by reconnecting how anyone is creating their reality and meaning through language, ideas, symbols and words. He asserts that words are the tools we use to construct, explain and promulgate our model of the world, our reality tunnel. And when we shift how someone is "languaging", and connect the tools – the maps that we use – to be more aligned with reality, to be more "sane", we shift the sequence of meaning at a very deep level in the unconscious mind. For the sake of sanity, he calls on the "de-nominalization" of our everyday language. He describes de-nominalizing as the process of taking the nominalized noun form (the sneaky disguised verb) and "re-languaging" it into its true verb form. The import of this is what Korzybski (1933) attempted to explain and share through the deeply insightful field of General Semantics that he created with a view to enhancing human life and well-being.

In the field of brain studies and in a study of subjects with intact brains, the processing of nouns versus verbs was performed using event-related potentials and electro-cortical responses. Nouns and verbs were carefully matched for various variables, including word frequency, length, arousal and valence. The study, however, found that cortical representations of nouns elicit visual associations whereas cortical representations of verbs lead to association of body movements. It follows that nominalized language does not enhance the translation of words into deeds. If that was the case, overuse of nominalized discourse could be considered a serious defect in any HRE program. The latter does not only intend to enrich the learners' repertoires of human rights principles, articles, and the inventory of grand battles fought for the sake of ensuring rights for all humans. Alongside all this, HRE is meant to empower the learners with the legal, strategic, and moral tools to fight their own battles to defend and promote those rights wherever they are. Human rights were agreed upon not solely to be known but applied and strongly present in all the details of the life of individuals and groups. Heavily nominalized language in HRE mentally and psychologically tends to preclude action, which poses a serious threat to the efficacy of HRE for social empowerment. To such an end, the learners need to be guided to identify their needs and find out the human rights problems they live with. Such problem-finding skills need to be complemented with problem-solving skills seeking to enable the learners to take effective action to solve the problems they face in their lives as well as meet the human rights needs they identify.

In his methodological guidelines directed to human rights facilitators, Pierre Claude (1997) stresses that empowerment must be the aim of any HRE program. He describes empowering education as the supply of the means by which people can deal critically and creatively with their reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. To take this goal seriously, HRE facilitators are required to use problem-posing techniques whereby they and their learners are involved in a partnership of mutual cooperation and in which the role of teacher as "know it all" is abandoned (Pierre Claude, 1997). Learners can, therefore, improve their abilities to analyze the constraints and structures of repression that stand in the way of enjoying rights and freedoms. They develop the ability to analyze the causes of human rights violations and to connect their learning with action. They become empowered to undertake remedial actions. They get ready to learn more and acquire new skills using law and human rights as instruments of change, development, and justice. They become empowered to share their learning with others and "to pass on the word," echoing HRE for empowerment to ever wider circles of participants (Pierre Claude, 1997).

1.2.2. Enhancing human rights action through de-nominalization

Soosalu (2010) infers that when we use a mental representation – an abstraction – of an object, our brain applies and ascribes the attributes of an '*object*' automatically and unconsciously to the process being represented. He gives the word "relationship" as an illustrative example. He explains that when we use the verb form, we trigger parts of the brain associated with process, agency and outcomes. However if we use the nominalized form "relationship", then we trigger and represent the action as if it is a noun. Our brain processes the relating as if it is an object. And this is why we end up taking relationships for granted. Because objects have persistence, they are always there, unchanging. Whereas in reality, the process of relating is a verb, it is an action, and requires focus and clarity of outcome and purpose. Soosalu concludes that relating is only as good as the competencies, skills, and, focus that are applied to it.

Another illustrative example that Soosalu (2009) utilizes is the noun “greed”. He critiques the way we talk about it as if it was a noun. We say things like “he has a lot of greed”. In the dictionary “greed” is listed as a noun, referring to “insatiate longing as an attribute of an individual’s character”. Nevertheless, he considers that a very un-sane way of representing it. As indicated by the research above, when words are used as nouns to represent what in reality are processes, we end up unconsciously applying attributes that more appropriately belong to objects and not to processes. And since words organize and shape people’s experience, and the word forms which they use determine the parts of the brain utilized in processing them and directing their decisions, thinking and actions, then they really need to ensure they are using language that is supportive of their outcomes (Soosalu, 2009).

De-nominalization, however, is not applauded across the board. Cheal (2008:2), in his portrayal of the role of the conscious mind, puts the significant question “so what if we have processes and things and things that are really processes?” He admits that sometimes, a nominalization is a useful thing, but at other times (or from other perspectives) it can be unhelpful and confusing. He assumes that the conscious mind likes to work with ‘things’. They are more solid, graspable and fixed. Processes keep moving and so the conscious mind cannot stop the process to analyze it. This would be like trying to analyze a river at a particular point, he assumes. As long as the water is still moving, it is never the same; hence, the old adage that you can never step into the same river twice. Nominalizations are the conscious mind’s attempt at ‘stopping the world’ to have a look at it, to work with it and perhaps to feel a sense of control (Cheal, 2008).

As a next step, and in order to relate to reality, Cheal (2008) argues, we have the need to freeze, frame and dissect. The conscious mind cannot perceive (or conceive of) it all at once. It is in part for this reason that we have developed the notion of ‘time’. Time allows us to put numbers to the process, to measure it, and to take ‘moments’ in time. Even the notion of time, Cheal argues, is a nominalization, an attempt to turn the process of reality into a thing. We live in a present moment, and we ask if the past and future actually exist. This is yet another way that the conscious mind attempts to control its reality, by assuming what is not perceivable at a given moment (as defined by the conscious mind) is not really there. Cheal likens this to counting from one to one hundred and upon reaching a particular number questioning whether all the other numbers actually exist. Just because the conscious mind is not focused there does not mean it is any less in existence. By and large, this study is not arguing for the entire extraction of nominals from speech or writing. This is hardly feasible, and it can very much reduce the quality of human interaction since not all nominalizations would lend themselves to easy de-nominalizations, and not every deagentialized process can readily be agentialized; that is, attributed to the agent(s) that brought it about. This study, however, is underscoring the overreliance of the target students on nominalized discourse and the negative impact that this may have on the way they assimilate and accommodate the network of roles, rights, and responsibilities delineated in the HRE they receive at school and are supposed to live with inside and outside school.

The classroom-retrieved data is full of nominalizations like: *‘ttaqarrub ?ila LLa:h’* (drawing near to God), *‘taqwa LLa:h’* (piety), *‘ffiza:r’* (quarrel), *‘lkorh’* (hate), *‘lba?da:?’* (grudge), *‘tabdir lma:l’* (squandering money), to name but a few. All the italicized words are in essence processes – skills. They are not things – nouns. *‘taqwa’* (piety), *‘ffiza:r’* (quarrel), *‘lkorh’* (hate), *‘tabdir’* (squandering), and the rest, are all verbs. They are something people do; they are doing words. Still, in the classroom, they are ‘normally’ used as nouns. Soosalu (2010) warns that the challenge is that when such abstractions are used as attributes, as

fixed properties of individuals or their characters, then the locus of control is relinquished and made external and people give away their power to change. This end result is exactly the opposite of what HRE intends to bring about. When HRE work fails to ignite the righteous human will as the real catalyst of change, it means that it is not empowering the learners; thus, it needs to reconsider its tools. If '*lkurh*' (hate), for instance, for the process and behavior that it essentially is, and if education intends to support learners to overcome that process, then educators need to think about it and re-language it to the verb form. That way, students' brains would support them in focusing on the power-within, personal agency and their ability to control and change their processing.

All in all, and as Soosalu (2010) maintains, words are powerful. They can be life-enhancing or life depleting. In human rights terms, they can be empowering or disempowering. The ongoing '*reality*' is constructed through the words people use, and the effects those words have on their minds and on the minds of those around them. Soosalu regards it vitally important for every one of us to listen to the words we use to be skilled in enhancing life and in using words sanely and wisely. On a similar wavelength, Bandler and Grinder (1982), the researchers who developed the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), claim that one of the most powerful and life enhancing things you can do to improve your life and your mental well-being is to de-nominalize the words you use each and every day. HRE cannot be socially empowering unless it is associated with human rights practice on the ground. De-nominalizing education discourse in general and HRE discourse in particular is likely to enhance human rights as a behavior and a way of life. Hence, the locus of control over action and states of being is shifted to the learners. Equally, via de-nominalization, the issue of agency would be worked out in favor of better implementation of the key human rights principle of accountability. Notwithstanding, since thorough de-nominalization of our language is almost unfeasible, Cheal (2008) tries to work out a third path synthesizing the best of both nominalization and de-nominalization. He wonders if we could create points of reference (nominalization) whilst maintaining a sense of movement (de-nominalization). He argues that in the sense of using both approaches, once the conscious mind has a label on something, it is then able to take action and move on. For example, in the expression of emotions, it is helpful to be able to acknowledge the emotion (e.g. "I am feeling something"), label it (e.g. "It is annoyance") and then express it (e.g. "I am feeling annoyed"). He calls this the ALE (Acknowledge – Label – Express) technique which is, in itself, a 'meta-process' for expressing a process. Human rights educators, aiming at empowering the learners to take control of their own world enlightened with the rights and fundamental freedoms that humans are worthy of, need to be *aware* of what they are doing and of the ecology of nominalizing or de-nominalizing within the context that they are in. Awareness is the key and it has to be passed on to the learners as well.

Conclusion

This study has examined the linguistic process of nominalization in classroom discourse. It has pinpointed the extent to which nominalization is a significant linguistic, semantic and, discursive process that objectifies and lexicalizes processes and actions and removes the temporal and modal coding from texts (Dunmire, 1997). When objectified and decontextualized, processes are distanced from their agents in a startling mismatch to the core objectives of HRE which endeavors to bring the world closer to the learners and teach them how to take informed action in it for the well-being of its citizens. Generally speaking, the learners who have been observed in the three target classrooms manifest a clear inclination towards nominalized responses, perhaps

owing to the relative ease of producing nominalized responses, their economy, or due to the impact of a ritualized classroom discourse practice that enhances nominalization, or prompted by nominalized teacher or textbook instructions. Nominalized language by the teacher or textbook instructions tends to breed similarly nominalized responses by the learners; whereas non-nominalized language by the teacher or the textbook helps curb the nominalization tendency in the learners with a view to training them to produce agency-sensitive discourse that in turn would affect the way they perceive the set-up of responsibility and causality in the world. HRE is about teaching not only rights but responsibilities as well. Using deagentialization tools such as nominalization and passivization cannot help to such an end. The discussion of the findings of this study has tried to build more evidence into the argument that over-nominalized classroom discourse jeopardizes the aims of HRE for the social empowerment of the learners. It has been maintained that de-nominalizing classroom discourse helps bridge the gap between words and deeds, a first step towards empowerment.

About the author

Dr. Abdelhak Bzioui is a high school teacher of English in Morocco. He got his Master's degree in education sciences from the education college in Rabat, Morocco. He got a PhD degree in human rights education. He has participated in many conferences and workshops about education and English language teaching. He has a number of contributions in these fields.

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For Arabic specific phonetic transcription, the following have been used:

Symbol	Arabic letter
ʕ	ع
ʔ	ء
ʁ	غ
ħ	ح
ʈ	ط
ʂ	ص
d	ض
x	خ
ʒ	ج
j	ي
q	ق
ʃ	ش