Young Chinese EFL Learners' Referential Strategies in Written Chinese and English Narratives

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Abstract

A good command of referential skills has been seen as an effective indicator that reveals learners' discourse-related competence. However, in the realm of second language learning, a scant of attention has been paid to investigate L2 learners' referential skills in narratives. Therefore, the present study aims to address the gap through examining young Chinese EFL learners' abilities in using referential forms in English narratives. Three Chinese EFL fourth graders in Taiwan were asked to produce English and Chinese written narratives, elicited through a wordless picture book *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer, 1969). The results showed that the participants made few mistakes and achieved high level of appropriateness in the use of referential expressions in English narratives. It was also found that they used similar referential strategies across different discourse contexts in both English and Chinese narratives. It was suggested that their near-proficient performance regarding the referential skills may be attributed to the positive transfer from L1 to L2. However, the analysis of some mistakes by the participants also demonstrated that L2 overgeneralization played a role that hinders the participants' performance. Finally, implications for pedagogy and suggestions for future research are made.

Keywords: *EFL, Young Language Learner, Writing Skill, Narrative, Referential Strategy*

Introduction

As a common discourse form, narrative is acquired early in life and can be found in almost all cultures (McClure, Mir, & Cadiernoet, 1993). Due to its prevalence, children have had the concepts of what narratives mean and are able to produce narratives in early age. Therefore, in early education, narrative serves as an important pedagogical tool through which educators teach educational contents and examine the children's performance, such as reading and writing abilities (Peterson, 1994). Narrative ability is of importance because it is a useful index that reveals children's development of different cognitive abilities. For example, a number of

research has shown that good narrative skills can predict successful school achievement, literacy, and socialization abilities, to name but a few (McCabe, 1996; Peterson, 1994; Snow & Dickinson, 1990). In the field of second language learning, narrative has also been used to examine learners' L2 speaking and writing proficiency. Producing a well-formed spoken or written L2 narrative, however, is a challenging task for narrative is an extended discourse unit and requires learners to have communicative competence to integrate different levels of linguistic components, such as grammatical, discoursal, and sociocultural elements to achieve meaningful communicative function.

To examine whether a narrative is well-formed, different textual elements have been identified. Halliday and Hasan (1976), for instance, introduced the concept of cohesion—a textual property that creates the connectedness of the sentences and is achieved through the use of various cohesive device. Five main types of cohesive devices have been identified, including (1) references, (2) connectives, (3) substitution, (4) ellipsis, and (5) lexical cohesion. Among which, references (e.g., pronouns, proper nouns, and demonstratives) are used to identify different nominal entities in a context to achieve specific purposes (Yoshida, 2011). That is to say, the use of reference allows the readers or the listeners to identify the main characters in the narratives. To help the receivers understand clearly the characters' ongoing and changing relationship to the plot, the narrator needs be equipped with relevant pragmatic knowledge to take into consideration the listeners' or readers' needs and the pragmatic functions of each referential device before utilizing the references in narratives (Kang, 2004).

Numerous cross-linguistic studies regarding referential strategies have discovered that the use of references vary in languages. Clancy's (1980) study on the referential choice in English and Japanese narrative discourse found that when compared to American English speakers who adopted significantly more third-person pronouns in their narratives, the Japanese counterparts, on a sharp contrast, did not use any third-person pronouns. Clancy explained that the difference may be caused because the third-person pronouns "have a special status not corresponding to the role of pronouns in English" (Clancy, 1980, p. 131). In the context of second language learning, such differences between the referential expressions between the learners' L1 and target language can easily become the source of difficulty that interferes L2 learners' learning. For example, various studies have revealed that L2 beginners have a tendency to resort to their existing knowledge in L1 references and applied it directly into L2 and therefore created opportunities for mistakes. For instance, when investigating the young Chinese EFL learners' referential strategies used in Chinese and English narratives, Sung and Chang (2013) found that several cases of references mistakes made by the Chinese EFL children in English narratives resulted from the negative effect of L1 transfer.

To date, although more and more cross-linguistic studies have investigated L2 learners' referential skills in narrative discourse, yet little research that focuses on L1 Chinese learners' narrative skill in English has been carried out. Additionally, most L2 studies related to the examination of learners' different narrative skills paid attention to oral narratives, and there exists a scarcity of studies focusing on written narratives (Kang, 2004). Therefore, to address this lacuna, the present study was conducted to investigate young Taiwanese EFL learners' referential strategies used in Chinese and English written narratives, with a particular attention paid to examine whether the differences between the two languages would cause the learners' difficulty in writing English narratives. In doing so, it is expected that the present study can

provide valuable information about the young EFL learners' narrative competence as well as useful pedagogical strategies for English written narrative instruction in the EFL context.

Literature Review

Narrative

As one of the most basic literary genres, a narrative is "a naturally bounded unit of discourse with a regular internal structure and is found in all cultures" (McClure et al., 1993, p. 209). A narrative is normally composed of characters who engage in a series of actions within a time frame, and it usually ends with an evaluative comment that presents the meaning or the narrator's perspective to the story. Because of its ubiquity, a narrative as a form of discourse is acquired early in life, and as Ochs and Capps (1997) put, through narratives "we come to define ourselves as we grapple with our own and others' ambiguous emotions and events" (p. 88). Seen in this light, narratives serve as an essential communicative tool through which we make sense of different layers of human experience.

In the realm of second language learning, narrative ability has been considered an effective tool to evaluate a learner's communicative competence, widely recognized as the ultimate goal of second language learning. According to Reilly, Losh, Bellugi, and Wulfeck (2004), to compose a narrative, one must be proficient in different distinct but intimately related components. First, on a linguistic level, it requires one to use morphosyntactic knowledge correctly to organize the sequence of the events and to provide necessary information about the characters. Second, on a cognitive level, one must provide the motivation of the characters' action and also give evaluative comments that endow the story with significance. Lastly, on a pragmatic level, telling a story is regarded as a social activity in which the narrator interacts with the listener in an attempt to draw and maintain the listeners' attention. In sum, to produce a coherent and well-formed narrative that achieves communicative functions, one must take into account different levels of linguistic components.

In fact, a number of studies have shown that good narrative discourse ability can be an effective predictor to other abilities, such as cognitive, literacy, and socialization abilities (McCabe, 1996). Moreover, it even has strong implication to successful academic performance (Snow & Dickinson, 1990). For example, it was found that children with better narrative competence are more likely to outperform in writing and reading when compared with their peers who are less able in producing coherent narratives (Richard & Snow, 1990; Snow & Dickinson, 1991). A similar result can be found in another larger scale study. Miller, Heilmann, Nockerts, Iglesias, Fabiano, and Francis (2006) examined 1,531 Spanish-speaking children's oral narrative ability by asking the children to tell a wordless storybook. One of their results showed that there was correlation between the children's narrative ability and reading proficiency. A recent longitudinal study further confirms the unique relations between narrative skills and reading ability. Babayigit, Roulstone, and Wren (2021) examined the role of linguistic comprehension and narrative skills on children and found that the children's narrative skills, along with linguistic comprehension, play an important role and had direct contributions to children's later reading comprehension development as well as reading achievement.

Coherence, Cohesion and Referential Strategies

To say a narrative is produced successfully generally means it achieves coherence and cohesion. According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), coherence refers to the macro structure of the text. It

concerns about the relevance among the sentences, and to achieve the coherence in a text, the narrator and the reader must have shared background and general knowledge. While coherence deals with global structure of the text, cohesion, on the other hand, is related to the micro structure of the text and "does not concern what a text means; it concerns "how the text is constructed as a semantic edifice" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 26). That is, cohesion is related to the relationship between gramatical and lexical usages within and across the sentences. In a narrtative, cohesion is achieved when certain linguistic devices are connected correctly.

So far, many cohesive devices have been proposed, including reference, lexical ties, conjunction, ellipsis, and substitution. Among which, references refer to "the information to be retrieved is the [. . .] identity of the particular thing or class of things that is being referred to" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p.31). Three types of references are classified, including personal, demonstrative, and comparative references. The examination of the use of personal references is the main focus of the study, and they are realized through pronominal entities used to refer to people, objects and events.

The use of references varies in different languages (Clancy, 1980). For example, according to Chafe (1979), in English, the referent that is mentioned the first time tends to be presented in an indefinite nominal form, and when the same referent occurs again in the subsequent sentence or utterance, it normally is shown in a pronominal form. On the other hand, in Chinese, the referent appearing the first time in the discourse is usually realized through bare nominal in post verbal position and is not preceded by any definite or indefinite article. When the same subject referent is mentioned in the following sentences, it is either realized though a zero form or a pronoun. What is more, in switched subject context where the subject referent is different from the one in the previous clause, bare nominals and nouns normally preceded by other linguistic devices like demonstrative, classifiers, and possessives are utilized (Sung, 2004).

Numerous cross-linguistic studies have demonstrated how the particular use of referential expression in each language influences its language users in terms of speaking and writing. Jin (1994) for example found that before reaching a certain level of proficiency, English native speakers who learned Chinese as a second language would transfer English subject-prominent features to Chinese, a topic-prominent language. In addition, Hickmann, Hendriks, Roland, and Liang (1996) investigated the use of nominal determiners and utterance structure to introduce new referents by analyzing narratives in English, French, German, and Chinese elicited from children across different age groups. One of their findings showed that nominal determiners were used less frequently for the main third-person protagonist in French, but were used more prominently in Chinese and in English. Similarly, Kang's (2004) study examined Korean EFL learners' narrative ability in terms of their use of referential strategies. She found that compared to the native English speakers, the Korean EFL learners' oral English narratives were less coherent and cohesive. The reason, Kang explained, may attribute to the fact that the Korean EFL learners were affected by the referential system in Korean which prefers the use of nominals to other referential devices. Moreover, in a recent study that investigated Chinese EFL college learners' selections of referential expression in oral narratives, Qin and Zhang (2022) discovered that the effect of L1 transfer could be one of the reasons that the Chinese participants employed more explicit referential expressions than native English-speaking speakers when referring the characters in the narratives. The convergent result from the above-mentioned studies reveals the cross-linguistic differences and suggests that during the process

of acquiring a L2 language, L2 learners would go through the phenomenon of language transfer in which their use of L2 referential form differs from that of the target language speakers' because they were influenced by their own native language system. Lastly, although their focus is not on cross-linguistic comparison, Mora, Coyle, and Becerra's (2021) study provided some insights on EFL children's correct and incorrect use of lexical, referential, conjunctive, and temporal cohesion in their written narratives. Specifically, with regards to referential cohesion, they found that although students with lower- and higher-proficiency level performed very differently on the deployment of reference cohesion, definite articles, among all the cohesive devices, are used most frequently but also used most incorrectly by both groups.

To date, although a small but growing body of cross-linguistic research has investigated the transfer of narrative skill across languages, yet little research that focuses on young Chinese EFL learners' narrative skill has been carried out. Sung and Chang's (2013) study remains an exception. They examined and compared thirty-six-grade Mandarin Chinese-speaking children's abilities in utilizing referential strategies in both English and Chinese narratives. A wordless picture book was used to elicit the participants' English and Chinese spoken narratives. The result indicated that after three to four years of English learning, the participants, who were comparatively more proficient in English than most of their peers, still had difficulty using referential forms correctly in their English narratives. For instance, one of the errors is that when using nominal entities to introduce new characters in the story, most participants made the same grammatical mistake by incorrectly omitting the indefinite article. The researcher explained that the mistake was made because the children were affected by their Chinese linguistic system where the use of bare nominal in the context of referent introduction is common. Sung and Chang's study yielded useful insights into the use of referential skills between children's L1 and L2. However, as they suggested in the study, still more effort should be made to further understand L2 learners' referential strategies in L2 narrative. Therefore, to address the gap, the present study followed Sung and Chang's study to investigate young Taiwanese EFL learners' Chinese and English referential strategies. However, the present study differs from the prior study by investigating the learners' referential strategies in written instead of spoken narratives. It has long been established that spoken and written languages are different in various aspects, particularly in contextualization and in communicative strategies. Examining written narratives can thereby help identify the use of cohesion devices like referential forms in a more contextualized discourse context (Kang, 2004). In line with this thought, the research questions for the present study are as follows:

RQ₁: What are the characteristics of the participants' use of Chinese and English referential strategies across different discourse contexts in their written narratives?
RQ₂: What are the similarities and differences between the participants' use of Chinese and English referential strategies? And to what extent is their use of referential strategies influenced by their L1 knowledge?

Methodology
Participants
The participants in this study were three fourth graders in a public elementary school located in Taipei city. These students, two girls—Penny and Lisa—and one boy—Kevin—were all

native speakers of Chinese. Before the study began, they had at least received formal and informal English learning lessons for about six years, with an approximate six hours of learning per week. The researcher of the current study was also their private English tutor and had been teaching them for one and a half year before the study began. In her class, the children made English sentences regularly and were capable of producing written narratives in English.

Materials and Data Collection Procedure

A 24-page wordless picture book *Frog, Where Are You*? by Mercer Mayer (1969) was used as writing prompts for the students to compose the narratives. The story is about a boy and his dog that go through a series of adventure to find their missing frog. It has been commonly and extensively used as a research tool to investigate students' narrative abilities (e.g., Cameron & Wang, 1999; Berman & Slobin, 1994; Kang, 2004; Sung & Chang, 2013) and was regarded as an appropriate and useful tool in eliciting children's narratives.

The researcher followed Berman and Slobin's (1994) proposed protocol of instruction to instruct the participants to narrate the story. At first, the participants were instructed to read through all the pages on the book before writing the story. Afterwards, they started to write the story in Chinese first, and to minimize the possibility of language transfer and influence across tasks, the children were asked to write down the story in English in the following week. Each writing task lasted from twenty to thirty minutes. In the end, a sample of six narratives, three in Chinese and three in English was analyzed.

Measures and Coding

To ensure a systematical data analysis process, Sung's (2004) study that provided a detailed coding scheme and procedure was adopted to code and analyze the data. After the narratives were collected, both the English and Chinese narratives were transcribed into syntactically defined narrative clause. A clause contains a single verbal element that "expresses a single situation (activity, event, or state), including finite and non-finite verbs as well as predicate adjective" (p. 657). The narrative clauses were analyzed based on Sung's (2004) referential coding system, which is composed of three dimensions: Chinese and English referential strategies coding, discourse context coding, and reference appropriateness coding (see Appendix A for the summary of the coding scheme):

1. Chinese and English referential strategies: for the Chinese and English referential coding schemes, there are six nominal referential categories. Table 1 summarizes the referential categories of nominal forms (Sung, 2004, p. 43-47).

Table 1

Summary of Chinese and English Referential Coding Scheme

Types of Nominal Forms	Chinese	English
Bare nominals	Proper names or noun phrases that are not preceded by determiners or quantifiers	Proper nouns or only noun phrases
Indefinite nominals	Noun phrases preceded by numerals and classifiers. The existential verb 'you3' (有) is also included	Indefinite articles/ numerals + noun phrases
Determinate nominals	Noun phrases with demonstrative markers such as zhe (這) 'this' and na (那) 'that'. Demonstrative markers followed by classifiers/ quantifier and noun phrase are also included	Definite articles/ demonstrative+ noun phrases

Personal nominals	Third person pronouns appeared in the narrative data, including third-person singular (他 'he' / 她 'she'/ 它/牠 'it') and plural (他們/ 她們/ 它們 'they') prouns	Third person pronouns
Possessive nominals	Noun phrases with possessive pronouns preceding them	Possessive pronouns+ noun phrases
Zero anaphors (Ellipses)	A linguistic device not explicitly realized in discourse and requires reference to linguistic context for correction interpretation	Ellipsis

2. Discourse context coding: Three discourse contexts including introduction, maintenance, and switching were classified and analyzed (Clancy, 1992, cited in Sung, 2004, p. 48):

(1) Introduction refers to the mentioning of the animate referents for the first time.

(2) Maintenance refers to the subsequent mention of the same animate referent that has appeared in the main clause previously.

(3) Switching refers to "reference back to an entity that has been mentioned but not in the immediately preceding clause" (Sung, 2004, p. 48).

3. Reference appropriateness coding: three criterions, including appropriateness, inappropriateness, and incorrectness were further identified to examine whether the children's use of nominal forms for animated referents were appropriate and correct.

Data Analysis

Since the study only focuses on the animated noun phrases, that is, the story characters (e.g., the boy, the frog, the dog, and the animals), only the references used to refer to these characters were analyzed. After coding the data in terms of referential strategies, discourse contexts, and reference appropriateness, descriptive statistics such as the raw frequencies of each participant's use of all nominal forms across different contexts were measured. Finally, qualitative analysis was employed to further examine the participants' performance.

Results

Overall Use of Chinese and English Referential Strategies

The appropriateness of the use of the referential strategies and distribution of different types of nominal forms are used to examine the children's overall use of Chinese and English referential strategies. Table 2 shows the raw frequency and the percentage of the overall distribution of Chinese and English referential strategies. It can be seen that the three participants performed well and showed little difficulty in employing references correctly and appropriately in both Chinese and English narratives. They achieved equally high percentage in using appropriate and correct referential devices in both Chinese and English narratives. Yet, there is still a slight but noticeable difference in the situations where the referential strategies were not used appropriately. First, there were more cases of inappropriate use of referential strategies in Chinese narratives than in English ones. Besides, in both Chinese and English narratives, there were also cases where references were used ambiguously. Finally, the percentage of the reference incorrectness was higher in English narratives than in Chinese ones.

Table 2

Distribution of Children's use of Chinese and English Referential Strategies

	Chinese Narrative	English Narrative
Appropriateness	243 (95%)	179 (95 %)
Inappropriateness	8 (3%)	0 (0%)
Incorrectness	1 (0%)	6 (3%)
Ambiguity	4 (2%)	3 (2%)
Total	256	189

A closer look on the participants' individual performance shows that Kevin contributed most cases of inappropriate use of Chinese referential strategies and incorrect use of English referential strategies. Penny and Lisa, on the other hand, each made few mistakes in both Chinese and English referential strategies use (see Table 3 and 4).

Table 3

Distribution of Individual Use of Chinese Referential Strategies (Raw Frequency)

	Kevin	Penny	Lisa
Appropriateness	80	92	71
Inappropriateness	5	0	3
Incorrectness	1	0	0
Ambiguity	1	1	1
Total	87	93	75

Table 4

Distribution of Children's Use of English Referential Strategies (Raw Frequency)

	Kevin	Penny	Lisa
Appropriateness	61	51	67
Inappropriateness	0	0	0
Incorrectness	5	0	1
Ambiguity	1	1	1
Total	67	52	69

Distribution of Different Types of Nominal Forms

All the participants were able to employ various types of nominal forms in referencing in both Chinese and English narratives. The participants performed quite similarly in the use of different referential strategies. For instance, in both Chinese and English narratives, the participants frequently and predominantly used bare nominals to achieve their referencing purpose (54% in Chinese; 56%in English). In addition, the second most used strategy in both narratives is personal nominals (19% in Chinese; 19% in English). On the other hand, possessive nominals strategy is among the least employed method (5% in Chinese; 2% in English).

Comparisons between Chinese and English Referential Strategies in Different Discourse Contexts

In the referent introduction context, which means when introducing the nominal entities for the first time, the participants could use the references highly correctly and appropriately, and indefinite nominals were used most frequently in both Chinese and English narratives. However, as mentioned previously, despite achieving high percentage of correctness, the

participants still made some mistakes. For example, excerpt 1 shows that when Kevin introduced the bees in the beehive in the Chinese narrative, he used a definite nominal "那個 (that)" to introduce the bee appearing in the story for the first time. To use it correctly, an indefinite noun phrase "a bee" should be employed instead.

1. 這時呆瓜正看著那個蜜蜂 At the moment Daigua (the boy) was looking at that bee[1]

On the other hand, in the English narratives, Kevin and Lisa both made few mistakes when the references were introduced for the first time. The following excerpts show that they misused the determiners "the" to introduce the characters.

1. The mouse came out
2. The owl came out from the tree hole
3. The deer stand up
4. Terrible (the boy) and Horrible (the dog) look at the frog

On the other hand, in the referent maintenance context, the participants achieved similarly high frequency of appropriateness in both Chinese and English narratives. The following excerpts demonstrate some examples about the participants' correct use of personal nominals, zero anaphora, and determinate nominals in both Chinese and English narratives.

In excerpt 1 from Penny's Chinese narrative, after "James (the boy)" was mentioned in clause 1, Penny used a third person singular pronoun "他" (he) to refer back the referent "James" in the following clause.

(1) Personal pronouns in Penny's Chinese narrative

1. 詹姆士(小男孩)還是不放棄 James (the boy) still didn't give up

2. 他要找到青蛙才可以 he had to find the frog

In the use of zero anaphora, excerpt 2 shows that Lisa successfully used an ellipted third person singular pronoun "he" in clause 2 to maintain the same reference "he (the boy)" back in clause 1.

(2) Zero anaphora in Lisa's English narrative

1. He stand on the rock
2. and [__] says "History! (the frog)"

As for the example of correct use of determinate nominals in English narratives, excerpt 3 shows that Penny used the definite article noun phrase "that deer" in clause 2 to refer to the character "deer" introduced in clause 1.

(3) Determinate nominals in Penny's English narratives

1. At that moment a deer came out of the rock.
2. That deer went to the river.

After the demonstration of the correct use of the referents in the context of referent maintenance, more focus will now be put on the cases where the referents were used inappropriately. In the cases where Chinese referents were used inappropriately, Kevin and Lisa tended to repeat the same proper noun to refer back to the same character that has just been

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[1] All the three participants gave the main characters—the boy, the dog, and the frog—different names. To maintain the authenticity of their narratives, the names they gave are not replaced, but are given additional notes for the readers' convenience. Also, since the study focuses on the referents use, other types of grammatical or spelling mistakes in the participants' narratives are ignored.

mentioned. According to the literature, in Chinese discourse, it is considered more appropriate to use pronominal or zero anaphora, instead of repeating the same nominal phrase, to refer the character in the successive mention of the same subject context (Li & Thompson, 1981). Excerpt 4 presents the case in point when Lisa used the referent inappropriately:

(4)

1. 亨利(小男孩)很生氣

亨利決定不管餅乾 (小狗)了

Henry (the boy) was angry/ Henry decided to ignore Cookie (the dog)

Regarding the English narrative, Kevin was the only one who made mistakes. One mistake is caused by the incorrect use of pronoun omission, as shown in the excerpt 5 below:

(5)

1. One night, a boy named Fat Pig and his frog named Fat Cow and his frog named Stupid,

2. Before [＿＿＿] went to bed

Clause 2 in excerpt 5 is incorrect because English is a subject prominent language in which the use of subject is required. Therefore, a personal nominal instead of a zero anaphora in clause 2 should be used to derive a correct sentence.

Finally, in the referent switching context—the context in which the referents are used to mark shifts in referring back to a referent that has been mentioned previously—the participants performed equally well in both Chinese and English narratives, and achieved high percentage of appropriateness (97% in Chinese; 99% in English). In fact, among all the three contexts (introduction, successive mention, and referent switching), referent switching is the context where the participants achieved the highest percentage of the appropriateness. This result suggests that compared to the other two contexts, the switch-subject context is possibly the least challenging one for the participants to choose the most appropriate referential strategies in both Chinese and English narratives. The following excerpts demonstrate how the participants used these nominals correctly in their narratives. Excerpt 1 first shows that in the Chinese narrative, Kevin used the third person plural pronoun "他們 (they)" in clause 5 and 6 to shift the attention from "呆瓜 (the dog)" in clause 4.

(1) Personal nominals in Kevin's Chinese narrative

1.   傻瓜(男孩)和呆瓜(小狗)從床上跳下來

       Shagua (the boy) and Daigua (the dog) jumped out of the bed

2.   他們一直再找肥牛(青蛙) They kept looking for Faynew (the frog)

3.   傻瓜從巷子裡找 Shagua searched it in the alley

4.   呆瓜從罐子裡找 Daigua searched it in the jar

5.   但他們都沒有找到 but they found nothing

6.   他們從窗戶往下左右看 they looked out the window

On the other hand, in English discourse, the use of more explicit referents such as determinate nominals, possessive nominals and bare nominals are considered appropriate to be used in the switch-subject context. In this study, the participants primarily used more bare nominals in this context. In excerpt 2, for instance, Lisa used the proper noun "Terrible (the boy)" in clause 4 to shift the attention from "Terrible and Horrible (the dog)"in clause 3, and used "Terrible" again in clause 6 and 7 to shift attention from "History (the frog)" in clause 5.

(2) Bare nominals in Lisa's English narrative

1. Terrible is a boy.
2. ------------------
3. Terrible and Horrible look at the frog,
4. <u>Terrible</u> want the frog called History
5. In the night, History hopps to the outside
6. <u>Terrible</u> doesn't know History hopps to outside.
7. <u>Terrible</u> looks into his shoe

Turning back to the cases where the participants made mistakes. In Chinese narratives, it was found that every participant equally made one ambiguity mistake. For example, in excerpt 3, the third person plural pronoun "他們 (they)" in clause 5 causes ambiguity because "他們 (they)" here may refer to "Shagua (the boy)", "Daigua (the dog)", and the deer that were all going to fall off, yet based on the picture illustrated in the book, only "Shagua (the boy)" and "Daigua (the dog)" without the deer fell off. Therefore, to make it less ambiguous, Kevin should use bare nominals "Shagua and Daigua" instead of the personal nominal "they".

(3) Ambiguity mistake in Kevin's Chinese narrative

1. 突然有一隻鹿用他的鹿角把傻瓜頂了起來

    Suddenly a deer used its antlers to raise Shagua
2. 而這頭鹿衝下懸崖 this deer rushed down the cliff
3. 呆瓜往前跑 Daigua ran forward
4. 想要擋住那頭鹿 wanted to stop that deer
5. <u>他們</u>要掉下去了! <u>They</u> were going to fall off!

Discussion

The findings indicate that the three Chinese EFL learners achieved satisfying performance on the use of referential strategies in both English and Chinese narratives and were able to apply different referential expressions to introduce, maintain and switch references to the characters mentioned before. Nevertheless, some mistakes were still observed, and it was found that Kevin was the one who made the most mistakes, showing that he still had some difficulty in certain use of referential forms.

To begin with, the results showed that the children adopted similar referential strategies in Chinese and English narratives across different contexts. In the referent introduction context, the children applied the most indefinite nominals and bare nominals. In the reference maintenance context, they applied the most zero anaphora and personal nominals and lastly, in the reference switching context, the most used strategies are personal nominals and bare nominals in both English and Chinese narratives. This result is in line with Sung and Chang's (2013) study in which the grade six Chinese EFL children in their study showed little difficulty using Chinese and English referential strategies in different contexts and had also adopted similar referential strategies in both Chinese and English narratives. For example, the children in their study, similar to the participants in current study, applied the most indefinite nominals for referent introduction in both Chinese and English narratives. Additionally, their participants also applied the most personal nominals for reference maintenance and the most explicit nominals for reference switching just as the participants did in this study.

As Sung and Chang (2013) argued, the reason that the participants' Chinese and English referential strategies are applied similarly in different contexts may result from the fact that the use of referential strategies in Chinese in many ways are similar to that in English. That is to say, the shared similar linguistic rules between the L1 and L2 may play a role facilitating the participants' L2 performance. For example, in both Mandarin Chinese and English, indefinite nominals and bare nominals are considered appropriate forms to be used in the reference introduction context. Additionally, another similar use of referential expression between Chinese and English is that to maintain the same reference in the same subject context, zero anaphora and personal nominals are deemed appropriate to be adopted in both languages. Finally, as mentioned briefly in the Result section, to reintroduce the referent correctly in the switching subject context, more explicit nominal forms of reference, such as determinate nominals, possessive nominals and bare nominals are regarded the most suitable referential strategies to be applied in both Chinese and English. Once again, in this context the participants showed little difficulty and made the least mistakes among the three contexts.

As touched upon in the literature review, there is a robust of evidence that cross-linguistic differences can greatly influence L2 acquisition, and similarities between the L1 and L2 can sometimes lead to positive transfer that facilitates the learners' L2 learning (see Ellis, 2008). As the case in point, it may be fair to say that the participants' mastery in English referential strategies may result from the similarities between the use of Chinese and English referential norms. That is, the cross-linguistic similarities in this regard provide greater possibilities for positive transfer which helps to reduce the burden of cognitive resources for learning the linguistic structure in the target language (Odlin, 2003) and therefore results in better acquisition. It is important to note that, however, different from Sung's participants who orally produced the narratives, the participants in this study produced the narratives in written forms. As it is known, unlike the speaking tasks that are usually less formal and require more spontaneous responses, the writing tasks give students more time to produce the contents and intrinsically require the adherence to more formal writing conventions. Due to this editable nature, the writing narrative may therefore enable the learners to give better performance. In other words, the participants made less mistakes and performed better in general may be because they had more time and longer thinking process that allowed them to plan, check, and revise their written narratives. In addition, as mentioned in the Methodology section, all the participants have at least learned English for six years. Therefore, their comparatively satisfactory performance in English referential expressions may have much to do with their on-going English learning efforts devoted in both formal and informal learning contexts.

Although the participants had produced impressive performance in terms of the use of referential strategies, some mistakes were also identified, and it was found that Kevin was the participant who made the most mistakes of the three. In particular, based on the finding, Kevin made the most mistakes in introducing the referents in the English narrative. The following excerpt shows the four mistakes found in the context of referent introduction:

1. The mouse came out
2. The owl came out from the tree hole
3. The deer stand up

As can be seen from the above example, Kevin used the definite article "the" when first introducing the characters "mouse", "deer" and "owl". To introduce the first-mentioned

characters correctly, Kevin was supposed to use bare nominal or indefinite noun phrases, instead of definite ones. The result of Kevin's incorrect use of determinate nominals to introduce the referent may be accounted for the phenomenon of overgeneralization. Along with language transfer, overgeneralization is one of the most common systematic language production errors (see Selinker & Rutherford, 2013). In the process of SLA, overgeneralization is a phenomenon of intralingual transfer, and it refers to "a process in which a learner over-extends one rule to another instance and violates its restrictions in the target language" (Takashima, 1992, p. 97). The use of overgeneralization shows "evidence of acquisition of a language as a system and of a language learner's ability to extract regularities and apply them" (McKercher, 2008, p. 1). According to Li and Thompson (1981), it is not obligatory to add determiners "a/an" or "the" in Chinese before the nominals. However, in English the use of determiners is obligatory, and the omission of determiners would be considered incorrect. Therefore, for Kevin, who had learned English for at least six years, may have applied this specific target language rule with the intention to avoid the error of determiner omission. In fact, this finding finds resonance in Taylor's (1975) study, in which Taylor found that students with very beginning L2 proficiency made more interlingual transfer errors, whereas intermediate students produced more overgeneralization errors. Taylor thus proposed that as the learners' proficiency increases, they will tend to decrease their reliance on their L1 knowledge to transfer the linguistic norms; instead, they are more likely to rely on "what he already knows about the target language and on overgeneralization strategy" (p. 147).

Finally, corresponding to Mora et al.'s (2021) study in which definite articles were used most incorrectly by both lower- and higher-proficiency students, Kevin's misuse of the definite article "the" once again highlights English learners' common difficulty in their use of the determiners. That is, the inherent complexity of the use of the determiners makes acquiring the skill of using them challenging. It has long been established that the input frequency itself cannot determine acquisition. Therefore, although the determiners "the" and "a" are two of the most commonly used and heard words in English, they are however acquired comparatively late by L1 English children (O'Grady & Archibald, 2004). Similarly, the acquisition of the determiners has also proved to be highly difficult for L2 learners, especially for those whose L1s do not contain article system such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. It has been reported that even after years of learning, many advanced learners still show difficulty using the determiners correctly and consistently (Cho, 2017; Snape, 2008). The reason, as Mora et al. (2021) suggested, "may be due to the greater difficulty learners experience in gaining control of the indefinite article in comparison to the definite article or personal pronouns, neither of which are affected by count/mass distinctions" (p. 168).

In summary, the analysis of the Chinese EFL children's use of referential strategies in Chinese and English narratives shows evidence of both L1 transfer and L2 interlanguage developmental problem. One on hand, it was observed that the similarities between the English and Chinese referential rules may lead to positive transfer and allow the participants to apply most referential expressions appropriately across different discourse contexts. On the other hand, the examination on Kevin's mistakes evidenced EFL learners' difficulty in mastering the use of English determiners and revealed the phenomenon of overgeneralization as he overused the definite nominal phrases in the referent introduction to avoid making the mistake of determiner omission of the noun phrases. This intralingual error helps to indicate the specific

linguistic property that Kevin needs to master to function at the next higher level of L2 in producing written narratives that meet the target language discourse norms.

Conclusion

This study examined three Chinese EFL children's use of Chinese and English referential strategies across different discourse contexts in written narratives. The results revealed that the participants utilized similar referential forms across contexts in both English and Chinese narratives and achieved high level of appropriateness. In the referent introduction context, the participants utilized the most indefinite nominals in both Chinese and English narratives. Additionally, in the reference maintenance context, they used the most personal nominals and zero anaphora in both narratives. Lastly, in the reference switching context, they used bare nominals in both Chinese and English narratives. It was suggested that their near-proficient performance regarding the referential skills may be attributed to the positive transfer from L1 to L2. Also, although the participants were still grade forth children and were learning in the EFL environment, the fact that all of them had received at least six years of simultaneous formal and informal English instructions may account for their good command of references use across different contexts in English. However, the examination on the mistakes also demonstrated that they still possessed certain difficulties in the use of referential expression. Kevin's mistakes, for instance, showed the influence of L2 overgeneralization which made Kevin overused the definite noun phrases in English narratives to introduce the referents mentioned the first time. In light of the results, pedagogical implications can be made. Acquiring the target language's specific discourse style is vital yet challenging for most second language learners. Although in this study, L1 transfer plays a more positive role in helping the students utilize referential strategies correctly in the target language, yet it may also become the source of difficulties for students. In addition, as shown in the result section, Kevin still made mistakes due to the L2 overgeneralization. Therefore, to help elementary Chinese EFL learners to master the use of English referential strategies, language teachers should be aware of the similarities and differences between the uses of references in Chinese and English and design the teaching activities that can help raise the students' awareness on the referential skills in both their L1 and L2 via implicit and explicit instructions. For example, the teacher can provide some Chinese storybooks containing different characters and later require students to work in groups and try to induce the Chinese reference rules in different contexts. Once they have raised the awareness of how references are used in their mother tongue, the teacher can subsequently show the students the English storybooks and ask them to repeat the preceding steps to find out the rule of the references use in English narratives. Finally, the teacher can ask the students to write down the similarities and differences that the students find into a chart to show a clearer comparison between the uses of the two languages. At this stage, the teacher can also facilitate the students by giving them more explicit and deductive explanation on the L1 and L2 reference rules that may have not been identified by the students. For the extended activities, the teacher can ask the students to produce an English narrative by using a wordless picture book like *Frog, Where Are You?* to see whether the students can put what they have learned into correct use. With the use of both implicit and explicit instructions delivered through various communicative activities, the students are more likely to master in the L2 referential skills.

In conclusion, this study investigated the Chinese EFL learners' referential skills and

brought forth insights and implications into the acquisition of referential skills in the foreign language learning context. Nevertheless, the study is not without limitation. First, the researcher of the study only used the picture book to elicit and examine the learners' referential skills. As suggested by Sung and Chang (2013), learners' referential strategies used in different types of narrative forms, such as the narration of personal experience about past events or narratives elicited from a less controlled and more natural setting are also worth exploring to gain a broader picture on the cross-linguistic influences on the L2 learners' referential skills. Finally, it should be noted that due to the modest sample size, the current study allows for limited generalizations only. Further research is suggested to include a greater number of participants to better testify the findings derived from this paper.

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Appendix A. The Summary of the Coding Scheme (Adapted from Sung, 2004)

Referential coding	Chinese referential strategies	1. Bare nominals 2. Indefinite nominals 3. Determinate nominals 4. Personal nominals 5. Posessive nominals 6. Zero anaphora
	English referential strategies	1. Bare nominals 2. Indefinite nominals 3. Determinate nominals 4. Personal nominals 5. Posessive nominals 6. Zero anaphora
	Discourse contexts	1. Introduction 2. Maintenance 3. Switching
	Reference appropriateness	1. Appropriatness 2. Inapropriatness 3. Incorectness 4. Ambiguity