Young Chinese EFL learners’ Referential Strategies in Written Chinese and English Narratives

Abstract

References are one of the important linguistic devices that connect the sentences and help create cohesion of the narratives. 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; in particular, it focuses on the comparison between the learners’ referential strategies used in their Chinese and English written narratives to see how the differences or similarities between L1 and L2 influence the learners’ L2 performance. Three Chinese EFL fourth graders in Taiwan were the participants of this case study, and they were asked to produce English and Chinese written narratives, elicited through a wordless picture book “Frog, where are you”. The results show 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 across different discourse contexts in both English and Chinese narratives. For example, the participants utilized the most indefinite nominals in both Chinese and English narratives to introduce the main characters first mentioned in the story and used the most personal nominals and zero anaphora in both narratives in the context where the referent appears in the successive same subject sentence. 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.

Key words: EFL, young language learner, writing skill, narrative, referential strategy