Chapter Five

Conclusion

5.1 Concluding remarks

In the study presented here, advanced EFL learners' referential forms in written narratives have been surveyed from different perspectives. The examination of the written data provided by our subjects suggests that the convention of English referring behavior is followed by the EFL learners on the whole. In each learner's text, they produced referential forms of various accessibility degrees to help receivers recognize the intended referents in their written narratives. Based on the data that our subjects provided, the five referring expressions in our framework are: Zero, Pronoun, Definite NP, Name, and Name + modifier.

In terms of the distributional pattern, Name is the most widespread form across the texts. Its prevalence is closely related to the fast-paced scenes and confrontations in the film. The other extensively used form is Pronoun. Due to the agreement of number and gender with its antecedent, the ambiguity of Pronoun can be minimized. But a Pronoun is more likely to cause ambiguity in its meaning. The majority of problematic form in learners' data is pronominal form, which often cause ambiguous interpretation for learners. As for Zero form, its higher frequency of occurrence in learners' data than in genuine English texts can be attributed to the L1 interference,

for in Chinese topic chain, a series of continuous topics are often realized by Zero

forms. The high flexibility of Zero in Chinese may affect learners in their production

of English Zero forms.

Definite NP is low in its frequency of occurrence. Once an entity in the narrative

is established, the use of Definite NP to refer to it is not recommended, because the

readers already know who the entity is and what attribute it contains. Many

inappropriate forms of Definite NPs arise from the false concept hypothesized toward

definiteness. Without a good understanding of Definite NP's performance in English,

some learners have produced unnecessary tokens of this kind in their narratives. The

least frequent referential form is Name + modifier. It is usually produced when the

narrator intends to provide more information about the participant. The use of Name +

modifier can be accounted for by narrator's empathy and plot centrality. Telling the

story from the major participant's point of view, the narrator would have to assign

more relevant information to the minor participants. The improper use of Name +

modifier, on the other hand, may be related to learners' ignorance of rule restriction.

Take apposition as an example. After the identity of a participant is established, the

subsequent mention of it by using apposition becomes redundant. Apparently, some

learners are not aware of this convention, because they have produced appositions

which contain unnecessary information of an activated referent.

We also investigated the discourse functions that each subject topic performs in the written text. It is found that the most informative forms are restricted to the Introduction function, because more information is expected when a referent is introduced into the story. In terms of Maintenance function, the less informative forms Zero and Pronoun are preferred. Both of them are more continuous and can sustain the same topic in successive mentions of the same referent. Name is also frequently used to maintain topics, because sometimes many participants are involved in a single scene. Without using Name, the readers would be confused with the intended referent. As for the Reintroduction function, Name is the most convenient form because it always allows readers' immediate retrieval of any participant in the film. Besides, Name can also mark episode boundaries, which are prevalent in the film. As for Zero form, sometimes it can be produced to reintroduce a previously mentioned topic, because there are syntactic constraints which can help readers interpret the intended referent of it.

In the third section of Chapter Four, we focus on the issue of distance values. A comparison of the referential distance values (look-back) between learners' written texts and genuine English texts suggests that the distance values of referential forms in learners' data are unanimously lower than those in genuine English texts. But overall the distance values comply with the cognitive need of discourse processing for

readers. The more informative forms are capable of retrieving their antecedents at a

distance and therefore display high referential distance values, whereas the less

informative forms can only trace back their antecedents within few clauses and

display low distance values.

As far as the appropriateness is concerned, only a small number of referential

forms were identified by native speakers as inappropriate. Most referential forms do

not cause ambiguity to them, except for Pronoun. However, mere grammatical

correctness does not guarantee the referential forms will be acceptable at the

pragmatic and discourse level. In view of this, it is recommended that learners should

be aware of the discourse aspect of referential forms when producing them.

5.2 Pedagogical implications

The present study has investigated advanced EFL learners' reference

management in their written narratives. In this section, we integrate our findings with

discourse-based pedagogy in teaching reference management in English composition.

After many years of learning, EFL learners still have some problems in

producing referring expressions in written narratives. For readers, the use of

referential forms in advanced EFL learners' texts is not satisfactory. According to the

English native reviewers, EFL learners either produce too many Names or produce

too many Pronouns. As we can see, the reference management is a complex process

and should be tackled beyond the sentential level. Not only grammatical correctness,

the pragmatic and discourse aspects have to be carefully considered. By doing so, a

better understanding of the discourse function of referential forms can be achieved.

Nevertheless, it is a pity that many grammar books for EFL learners merely

provide definition for a referential form but say little about its status in discoursal

level. Take Hurford's (1994) defining remarks on pronoun as an example.

"A pronoun is typically a little word that stands in place of a noun phrase. There
are various ways in which this can happen, and correspondingly various different
types of pronoun. (p. 202)"

As can be seen above, much emphasis is placed on the grammatical aspects such

as the variants of a pronoun. But being provided with such definition, learners learn

little about the discourse function of a pronominal form. The lack of discoursal

knowledge, as a result, leads to several inappropriate pronominal forms in learners'

written narratives. To improve the problematic management of reference, it is

recommended that the discourse aspect of referential form be considered. For example,

when producing Pronoun, at least EFL learners can be reminded that if there is any

preceding interference of a same-gender referent, or if there is an episode boundary

where actually a Name would be required.

A discourse-oriented definition toward Pronoun, in fact, can still be found in

some communicative grammar books. Take Alexander's (1988) work as an example.

The author suggests that a subject pronoun almost always occurs in pre-verbal

position. Further, only when both speaker and listener realize who or what is being

referred to will the use of a subject pronoun be permitted. Bearing such

discourse-based definition in mind, EFL learners will be more conscious of the

contextual status of the referring expression, and can thus have a better command of

its usage in discourse context.

5.3 Limitations of the present study and suggestions for future research

There are some limitations for the present study. Firstly, the language productive

skills include both written and spoken output. In our research, we only focus on

written form. Reference management in spoken narratives, by the same token, is

worth further investigation. Secondly, in inspecting the discourse functions that

referential forms serve, we only focus on subject topics. Referential forms in

non-subject position can also be taken into consideration in discourse functions, since

their interaction with subject topics cannot be negligible. Both of the directions

mentioned above await further investigation in the future.