

# TELLING ENGLISH IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: QUITE ANOTHER STORY

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## Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to examine how first-year Thai undergraduate students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) using referential forms in telling a coherent story in English. Participants were at intermediate level of English proficiency. Using Mayer's wordless picture book "Frog, Where Are You?" (1969) as prompts, the participants were asked to tell the story in English. The narratives were tape-recorded and later analyzed. The data were coded on three criteria: (1) referential forms (2) discourse contexts and (3) grammatical functions. The result of the study demonstrates that Thai EFL learners employ several linguistic expressions to maintain clear reference to the characters in their narratives, one of which is using a full noun phrase when referring to a character first introduced in the story and one already mentioned. A pronoun is used if the referent is the subject of the previous clause. This finding suggests that Thai EFL learners' referential strategies in narratives are similar to those of the native English speakers to a certain extent. Possible factors accounted for their limited linguistic ability to achieve complete discourse cohesion in English storytelling include language transfer, over-explicitness, and topic discontinuity.

**Keywords:** Thai EFL learners, referential forms, discourse contexts, grammatical functions, narratives

## INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, human beings in every culture use stories or narratives as a means of conveying thoughts, providing entertainment, sharing experiences, preserving cultures and instilling moral values. Before the advent of print tradition, telling stories is achieved in an oral form and mastery of such skill involving one's ability to use cohesive devices in making a coherent narrative. To gain mutual intelligibility, men do not speak by putting one word next to another like "beads on a string", but rather in a connected discourse in which every functional unit is combined in a logically connected whole. This is true for any language learner and proves to be quite

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a challenge for those who study a foreign language. When it comes time to tell a story, a narrator adopts different linguistic techniques to get his or her message across. In one's native language, telling a story seems like a simple, everyday routine but to do it in another language is a different story. In addition to internalize its grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, a foreign language learner must develop a communicative competence in using appropriate narrative tools to attain discourse cohesion, enabling his or her audience to grasp the essence of the story without getting confused. Reference is one of the five cohesive devices proposed by Halliday & Hasan (1976) and is employed differently across linguistic communities for the purpose of achieving coherent narratives.

Language learners employ several linguistic expressions to maintain clear reference to the characters in their narratives. Several studies have been conducted on factors that influence preferences in the usage of each referential form. For instance, within the Givenness Hierarchy framework of Gundel, Hedberg, and Zacharski (1993), forms of the lexical items correlate with their information status. Referring forms which address the information already focused in the mind of the addressee tend to have the least phonetic content such as in clitics ('I'm' or 'he'll), unstressed pronouns and zero pronominal . This also resonates with Chafe's explanation (1976) that 'old/given information' is usually conveyed in a 'weaker and more attenuated manner than new information' because the speaker's intended referent is assumed to be present in the mind of the addressee already (19 p.31).

A decision to choose one form over another in introducing or referring to a particular entity is not made randomly but partly determined by contexts in which they occur. Schiffrin (1987) includes in her model of discourse, an information state which indexes utterances to the local contexts in which they are produced and are to be interpreted, thereby contributing to the meaning and coherence of the entire discourse. That is, speakers and listeners are both cognitive entities who need to make a decision on which form to use based on the context of the discourse, the assumed information state in the mind of the addressee. For instance, when a speaker introduces a referent of which the speaker assumes the listener may never hear or be aware, that information is considered 'new' and marked accordingly. On the contrary, information is marked as 'old' or 'given' when the speaker assume that the listener already knows it but may not necessarily be thinking about. Another factor that plays a major role in selecting one form over another is grammatical roles (subject or object) each referent has. Comparing between English and Japanese referential choices in English and Japanese narrative discourse, Clancy (1980) examines that the cognitive and discourse constraint on speakers' choice of appropriate forms for referring to the

characters as the stories unfold. She discovers that both English and Japanese speakers avoid using full noun phrases when talking about the subject of the previous sentence as information in this position is the topic and thus remains in the focus of both the speakers and listeners. In Givón's framework (1980), topic of a sentence tends to remain the topic of the subsequent clause. Information presented in subject position which refers to the given information already mentioned in the previous clauses is thus expressed in a less explicit form such as pronouns or null as the topic is already clear for both parties that mentioning it again in an explicit form might sound redundant and unnecessary.

Although stories are typical elements in our everyday life, these day-to-day interactions are not always limited to those told from first and second person perspectives. Telling a story characterized by an extensive use of third-person therefore requires a language user to constantly make a decision which referential forms are or should be used in order to convey the messages his or her interlocutors. Because ways in which speakers of different language backgrounds tell a story in the third-person narrative mode can vary from one to another, it is interesting to investigate on how Thai English learners used the third-person animate entity as referential forms. The present study thus aims to examine how referential forms are used to refer to a third-person animate entity in telling a coherent story in English and to what extent first-year Thai undergraduate students who learn English as a Foreign Language (EFL) comply with the narrative norms of the native English speakers. Specifically, the study is guided by the following questions:

- (1) How do Thai EFL learners refer to the characters in a story to enable listeners to keep track of who did what?
- (2) What are some linguistic expressions that the learners use to maintain clear reference to the characters in their narratives and how effective are they in helping listeners keep track of who/what they are referring to?
- (3) What is the relationship between referential forms, discourse contexts, and grammatical roles? How and to what extent do Thai EFL learners' narrative strategies in English differ from the ways native English speakers conventionally tell a story?

I start out by describing in the methods section the demographics of the Thai EFL learners participating in the study, the materials used for narrative elicitation, and how the study was carried out. The actual learner language data are then presented along with the analysis in the order of research questions. In the final section, my personal reflections and plausible

pedagogical applications as well as emerging implication for the future study are provided.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Participants were 10 first-year Thai undergraduate students who learned English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in the Faculty of Arts, Chulalongkorn University, in Bangkok, Thailand. Their English proficiency was at intermediate level, indicated by their reported TOEFL scores (CBT 520-599). None of the participants had studied abroad.

### ***Materials***

The wordless picture book, “Frog; Where Are You?” by Mercer Mayer (1969) was used to elicit oral narratives in this study. The story features a young boy and dog on the hunt for their missing pet frog. On their journey into the forest, they encountered various challenges in the form of nature such as animals and insects. Comprising a variety of characters, both human (a boy) and non-human (a dog, a frog, the bees, an owl, a deer, etc.) engaging in changing scenes and actions over a period of time, the book was deemed suitable for the study of the way and how effective the narrators made use of referential strategies in order to tell a story successfully. The stories told by the participants range from 02.27 – 12.41 minutes in length.

### ***Procedures***

The participants were individually asked to record their narratives in a language lab, considering the researcher as the addressee of their stories. Before the recordings, the participants read the story on their own to get the gist of the storyline. The participants then started telling the story in English without the researcher’s presence. When finished, the researcher was called to collect their recordings. The audio taped narratives of the frog story were later transcribed and analyzed.

### ***Transcription and Coding***

The audio data collected from the participants’ narratives in English of Mayer’s wordless picture book were transcribed into clauses as “the clause is the basic information processing unit in human discourse” (Givón, 1983 as cited in Du Bois, 1987). The analysis centered and therefore coded on the following aspects:

### **Forms**

- 1) Lexical
- 2) Pronominal
- 3) Null

### **Discourse contexts**

- 1) New (first mention of the referent)
- 2) Old (referents previously mentioned but not in the intermediately preceding clauses)
- 3) Active (referents previously mentioned in non-subject positions such as object or object of preposition in the immediately preceding clause) and
- 4) Previous Subject (referents in subject position which also function as subject in immediately preceding clause).

### **Grammatical roles**

- 1) S: intransitive subject (Subject of a sentence with an intransitive verb)
- 2) A: transitive subject (Subject of a sentence with a transitive verb)
- 3) O: transitive object (Object of a sentence with a transitive subject)
- 4) Oblique (Object that follows a preposition)

Since the focus of the study is only third-person animate entity, the data excluded from the analysis are first-person entities (I, you, we), inanimate, irrelevant or those resulted from speech error. When verbs such as *try*, *want*, *come* are followed by infinitives or participial clauses, they are coded as a single unit and whether the sentence is intransitive or transitive depends on the second verb that follows. For example, the phrase “try calling” is coded as a transitive clause (call is a transitive verb) while “come to run is intransitive.

## **RESULTS**

At the beginning of task, the learners have to introduce the three characters: the boy (the protagonist), the dog, and the pet frog. The following Table 1 displays the linguistic expressions used by each learner to introduce the characters for the first time and refer to in their second mentions.

**TABLE 1**  
Linguistic expressions used in the first and second mentions of the characters

Learner	1 <sup>st</sup> mention of the boy	2 <sup>nd</sup> mention of the boy	1 <sup>st</sup> mention of the dog	2 <sup>nd</sup> mention of the dog	1 <sup>st</sup> mention of the frog	2 <sup>nd</sup> mention of the frog
1	A boy	The boy	A dog	The dog	A frog	His froggy friend
2	A boy	The boy	A dog	The dog	A frog	The frog
3	A boy	Him	A dog	His dog	A frog	His frog
4	A little boy named Scotty	Scotty	A little dog named Shepherd	Shepherd	A frog	The frog
5	The boy	The boy	A dog	The dog	A frog	The frog
6	A boy	He	A dog	His dog	A frog	The frog
7	The boy	The boy	His dog	His dog	A frog	The frog
8	A boy	Boy	A dog	Dog	A frog	A frog
9	A boy	A boy	A dog	The dog	A frog	The frog
10	A ten-year-old boy named Charlie	He	His dog named Joey	Joey	A frog named Murphy	Murphy

From the data shown in Table 1, 8 out of 10 learners introduced the character of the boy into a story by using an indefinite article ‘a’ plus a noun phrase ‘boy.’ The character of the boy is mentioned again in a form of either definite noun phrase signaled by a definite article ‘the,’ personal pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him,’ or names (Scotty). This pattern of using the indefinite article ‘a’ for character introduction and the definite article ‘the’ for subsequent mentions of the characters also applied to the character of the dog and the frog. In English traditional narratives, it is common to introduce referents with an indefinite article and to use the definite article or a personal pronoun for subsequent mentions of the same referents (Celce-Murcia, 1991, p. 282). Referents need to be identified before pronouns may refer to them. The data demonstrated that Thai EFL learners are aware of this convention and therefore applied their knowledge accordingly.

Nevertheless, not all learners share the same competence regarding the appropriate usage of indefinite and definite articles in referring to new and given information. Learner 5 and Learner 7, for example, used the definite article to introduce the boy while Learner 9 failed to use the definite article to refer to the boy, who he already mentioned. A closer look at the use of personal references throughout the narratives of each learner also reveals inconsistency in the use of referential forms. Table 2 shows linguistic expressions used by Thai EFL learners to maintain reference to the boy, the dog and the frog in the narratives.

**TABLE 2**  
 Linguistics expressions to maintain reference to the entities in the narratives

Entities	Linguistic expressions
<b>A boy</b>	The boy, He, him, a/the little boy, Scotty (name), Charlie (name)
<b>A dog</b>	The dog, he, him, it, his dog , a/the little dog, Shepherd (name), the Scotty's dog, Joey, Joey the dog
<b>A frog</b>	The frog, his froggy friend, his frog, their frog, a little frog, it, him, Murphy, Murphy the frog

According to Halliday & Hasan, the term reference refers to lexical items within a text or discourse which cannot be “interpreted semantically in their own right”, but “make reference to something else” within the same text/discourse, “for their interpretation” (1976, p. 31). To refer to a character in a story, personal references are used in various forms. For example, Learner 2 introduced and referred to the character by using a full lexical form such as an indefinite (a boy, a frog) or a definite noun phrase (the boy):

- (1) Once upon a time, there was a boy and a dog in his house. The boy caged a frog in the bottle (Learner 2, line 1-2).

Personal pronouns, including I, me, mine, my, you, yours, we, us, ours, our, he, him, his, she, her, hers, they, them, theirs, their, can also be used when referring to a character previously mentioned in antecedent clause(s). Here, for example, the character of the boy can be referred to as ‘he’ and ‘him’:

- (2) One night after the boy said "good night" to his froggy friend, **he** went to bed with the dog (Learner 1, line 3-4).

In sentence (2), the pronoun “he” is used to refer to a noun phrase “the boy” in the previous clause. In English, referents need to be identified before pronouns may refer to them. It is also worth mentioning that the pronouns ‘he’ and ‘him’ are also used to refer to non-human characters such as the dog and the frog, a divergence from Thai language norms in which a non-human character will be referred to as man (it) but never as khào (he, him), which is used only for male human:

- (3) The dog help him finding his friend, a frog, and **he** got his head stuck in the bottle (Learner 8, line 17-18).

From the example (3), Learner 8 referred to the dog in the previous clause using 'he.' This seems to suggest that some Thai EFL learners may have adopted a certain characteristics of the English language in which the pronouns he/she can be used when talking about animals, especially pets.

Beside personal pronouns, one can use personal determiners (his dog, his frog), adjectives (a little dog, his froggy friend) and names such as 'Charlie' or 'Murphy' to make reference to the characters. Of all 10 learners, only Learner 4 and Learner 10 referred to the characters by naming them. Table 3 below illustrates the number of times when the characters are being referred to as 'names' in the narratives of Learner 4 and Learner 10.

**TABLE 3**  
number of times when the characters are being referred to as 'names'

<b>Learner 4</b>			
<b>Character</b>	<b>Total mentions</b>	<b>Referred to as names</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>The boy</b>	48	39	81.25
<b>The dog</b>	40	32	80
<b>Learner 10</b>			
<b>Character</b>	<b>Total mentions</b>	<b>Referred to as names</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>The boy</b>	54	20	37.04
<b>The dog</b>	25	14	56
<b>The frog</b>	14	14	100

According to the data shown in Table 3, the number of times when the characters are referred to using 'name' accounts for more than half of the total number of the referents mentioned. This suggests that using names as a referential device may aid learners in the process of maintaining characters' references as it lessens the cognitive burden of having to choose from a variety of referential forms available while producing in a real-time speech. One can simply give the characters a name and keep using it whenever the needs for reference emerge.

In some cases, a referent term can be omitted altogether such as in example (4) where 'he' is dropped in the second clause:

- (4) He climbed up the rock and (...) tried to stand on it.



Referring to Chafe, why the referent ‘he’ is omitted could be explained in terms of the information status. The character of the boy has already been mentioned in the form of a pronoun ‘he’ (which had also been reduced from the full form ‘the boy’) and therefore does not need to be referred in an explicit manner.

The analysis in this section so far seems to have answered the research question 1 and 2, indicating that Thai EFL learners’ ways of introducing and referring to characters in narratives resemble to those of the native English speakers to a certain extent, helping listeners keep track of who/what they are referring to.

The narrator constantly needs to make decisions about whether each character should be explicitly referred to with a full noun phrase or with less explicit form such as pronouns when narrating a story that involves different characters. The following Table 4 and Table 5 present the number and percentage of referential forms categorized according to discourse contexts in the subject and object position, respectively.

**TABLE 4**

Number and percentage of referential forms categorized according to discourse contexts  
in the subject position

Subject (A and S)								
	Lexical		Pronoun		Null		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>New</b>	36	100	0	0	0	0	<b>36</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Old</b>	142	49.46	43	23.12	1	0.54	<b>186</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Active</b>	54	57.97	13	18.84	2	2.9	<b>69</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Previous Subject</b>	35	16.59	107	50.71	69	32.7	<b>211</b>	<b>100</b>

**TABLE 5**

Number and percentage of referential forms categorized according to discourse contexts in  
the object position

Object (O)								
	Lexical		Pronoun		Null		Total	
	N	%	N	%	n	%	n	%
<b>New</b>	22	100	0	0	0	0	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Old</b>	37	84.09	7	15.91	0	0	<b>44</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Active</b>	11	78.57	2	14.29	1	7.14	<b>14</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Previous Subject</b>	10	52.63	8	42.11	1	5.26	<b>19</b>	<b>100</b>

Considering the relationship between referential forms and discourse contexts, Thai EFL learners use lexical forms to introduce a new character both in the subject and object positions and never use other forms such as pronoun or null in New context. In the following example from Learner 1's narrative, 'a boy' as well as 'a dog' and 'a frog', all of which are newly introduced, are in the full noun phrase form.

- (4) There's a boy who owns a dog and a frog (Learner 1, line 2).

Lexical forms are also mostly used by Thai EFL learners to make a reference to the character(s) previously mentioned in earlier clauses (Old and Active contexts) as follows:

- (5) Once upon a time there was a boy and a dog<sub>3</sub> in his house. **0!**  
The boy caged *a frog!* in the bottle. **E<sub>2</sub>** One night *the frog<sub>2</sub>* got away from the bottle **E<sub>3</sub>** (while) the boy and the dog<sub>4</sub> were asleep<sup>E<sub>4</sub></sup> (Learner 2, line 1-4).

In example (6), a lexical form 'the frog<sub>2</sub>' in clause a3 refers to 'a frog<sub>1</sub>' in a non-subject position in the intermediately preceding clause (a2) which is also realized in a full lexical form. Note that a full noun phrase 'the dog<sub>4</sub>' in the last clause is also used to refer to a referent mentioned a while ago in the first clause 'a dog<sub>3</sub>'.

When referring to a referent previously function as a subject in the intermediately preceding clause (Previous subject), Thai EFL learners use pronouns, null and lexical forms, respectively as seen in example (7) where 'he' is used to refer to 'the boy' in the previous sentence:

- (6) The boy went to the forest with his dog. He (then) called the frog (Learner 2, line 17).

When referring to the subject of the current clause which also functions as subject in the antecedent clause (previous subject), Thai EFL learners rely on pronouns the most because grammatical subject is a highly salient and syntactically prominent position. Also, the referent has recently been mentioned and therefore 'fresh' in the mind of the addressee.

To sum up, selection of each referential form depends in part on discourse contexts. For Thai EFL narrators, lexical forms, definite in particular, are used to introduce a new character into the storyline, which corresponds to Chafe's claim (1976) that one usually adopts a lexical form

when referring to a newly introduced entity since it is assumed to be previously unknown to and not in the attention of the addressee at the time of speaking. To have the listener think of the same thing as the speaker, a full form is therefore appropriate for such job.

## **DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR EFL LEARNERS AND TEACHERS**

Referential strategies used by native and non-native speakers to tell a coherent story vary across linguistic communities. To master these oral narrative skills in a foreign language implies that one becomes acquainted with appropriate ways each language conducts itself in a particular sphere. In the case of English, Thai EFL learners must take into account how information status and referential forms interact with each other. Despite being able to conform to almost all the rules when telling a story in English, Thai EFL learners overused a full lexical form when referring, indicating that they have not yet developed a complete awareness of how telling a story in their first language (Thai) may operate differently from doing so in English. Limiting factors observed include language transfer, over-explicitness, and topic discontinuity.

Kang (2004) mentioned in her study of Korean EFL learners' referential strategies in telling a coherent story in English that the inability to produce extended oral narrative discourse in an appropriate manner is due to differences in style between the speakers' native language and the target language. Language transfer is therefore an expected phenomenon. Channawangsa (1986) points out that although Thai and English referential strategies share common characteristics; Thai remains distinct in its use of 'pronominally used nouns'. That is, nouns can function like a pronoun in Thai. Thai pronominally nouns are categorized into five groups: kinship terms, personal names, friendship terms, occupation terms and title terms.

(8) Daughter: wanní: mâe **Hà** klàp kì: mo:n?  
Today mother will return (home)what time

'What time will you (mother) be home?'

In example (8), a noun phrase 'mâe' or mother is a kinship term used as a second person referring to the listener. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that Thai referential strategies that allow noun phrases to be used in a supposedly pronoun position are partly responsible for why Thai EFL learners overuse explicit forms when a pronoun form may be more appropriate.

Over-explicitness could also account for the Thai EFL learners' overuse of explicit forms. In fact, a tendency to over-specify the referents during both early and later stages of second language acquisition is a common phenomenon, observed by Hendricks (2003) who explains that adult learners often resort to nominal forms in their L2 performance because they are aware of ambiguity problems that might occur due to incorrect use of more advanced anaphoric forms, such as pronominals .

The last factor that may affect the way Thai EFL learners use referential forms is the topic discontinuity. Continuity results when information flows smoothly from one point to another. To achieve this natural flow of information when telling a story in any language, one must be sufficiently familiar with the traditions and strategies observed in that particular language. It is quite possible that a wordless picture book used as prompt in the present study may constitute for such discontinuity. Since the book is also used as a tool to study motion verbs in languages (Slobin, 1996), narrators are forced to change topic rather often. Scene shifts and change in narrative styles such as switching between the narrator's point of view and the character's perspective by using quotations can also be held responsible.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that becoming a competent speaker in a language involves more than learning its grammar, imitating pronunciation and memorizing vocabulary. Producing an extended discourse in a foreign language can be potential challenges for L2 learners as they may not have control over such language-specific systems. As stories usually comprise more than one character, learners learning to tell a story in a foreign language often find themselves in a situation where one needs to choose from an array of referential forms which one to use. Several factors including language transfer, over-explicitness and topic discontinuity may account for why Thai EFL learners, beginner level in particular, sometime have difficulty in achieving complete discourse cohesion in English storytelling, despite using almost the same referential strategies as native English speakers. However, this discovery proves beneficial as it urges EFL teachers to better understand certain difficulties EFL learners encounter and accommodate accordingly. More instructions and classroom activities that focus on the oral narrative strategies can be designed and implemented, both in terms of practice and awareness. Since the current study focuses on the oral data of the language learners, it would be very interesting to see how Thai EFL learners might perform differently in written narratives. Additionally, the study studies only 10 participants, 9 of whom are female. In order to better understand learners' insight into referential strategies in telling a coherent story in a foreign language, a greater number and a wider range of participants' gender would be recommended.

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