# 日本人英語学習者のナラティブにおける指示表現の運用ストラテジー ——指示対象の導入，継続，及び再導入について——

# Referential Strategies in Narratives by Japanese Learners of English: Referent Introduction, Referent Maintenance, and Referent Re-Introduction

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## ABSTRACT

　本研究では，日本人英語学習者が適切な指示表現の運用ストラテジーを用いてまとまりのあるナラティブを構築する能力を検討する。150名の日本人大学生を習熟度別に3つのレベルに分け，簡単な絵に関するナレーション課題を用いてデータを収集した。その結果，日本人英語学習者にとって，英語の指示表現の運用ストラテジーの活用は難易度が高いものであることが明らかになった。特に，指示表現の運用ストラテジーのレパートリーが少ない習熟度の低い学生は，指示対象の導入・継続・再導入において間違った運用ストラテジーを用いる場合が多々見られた。また，定冠詞や不定冠詞の使用など，指示表現に関する誤りはすべての習熟度レベルで散見された。全体的に，指示対象の導入時よりも，指示対象言及の継続時のほうが，より適切な指示表現の運用ストラテジーを活用することができていた。外国語の授業において，文レベルを超えた広範囲の談話スキルの指導も重要である。

This study examines the ability of Japanese learners of English to create cohesive narratives using appropriate referential strategies. Elicited written narratives were collected from 150 Japanese university students of three proficiency levels using a simple picture narration task. The results show that use of English referential strategies can be a challenge for Japanese English language learners; in particular, students with low proficiency levels, with a smaller repertoire of referential strategies, often used ineffective strategies for referent introduction, referent maintenance, and referent re-introduction. Errors regarding referential strategies such as the use of definite and indefinite articles with nouns appeared at all levels. Overall, the narrators were better able to use appropriate referential strategies during referent maintenance as compared to referent introduction. The importance of teaching extended discourse skills beyond the sentence-level in the foreign language classroom will be discussed.

## 1. Introduction

The ability to create a narrative or tell a story is an extended discourse skill which emerges early in childhood. Even small children will eagerly share stories about their personal experiences, as they are socialized and encouraged to create and share narratives in their daily interactions. Throughout the lifespan, storytelling clearly plays a key role in communication, in spoken as well as written discourse. However, when using a second language or a foreign language, this simple task presents new challenges.

One important feature of telling a "good" story involves the use of effective referential strategies. In the process of telling a story, narrators must be able to introduce new characters, maintain character reference, and re-introduce characters. Different languages have different strategies for doing so, and narrators learn to do so gradually in their native language, using language-appropriate strategies.[i] However, mastery of such referential strategies can be challenging for foreign language learners, especially those learning a language with a different referential system.

Studies show that the information status of a referent, that is, whether it is new or given information influences the referential form; for example, whether the referent is appearing for the first time or whether it has been previously mentioned (e.g., Chafe, 1976). When introducing a new referent, speakers tend to use lexical forms such as nouns and noun phrases; on the other hand, when marking given information, speakers use non-lexical forms. For example, in languages such as English and Italian, speakers tend to use pronouns to refer previously-mentioned referents, whereas in languages such as Japanese and Korean, speakers tend to use null forms (e.g., Clancy, 1980; Kang, 2004; Serratrice, 2007). When a referent appears continuously throughout a story, different referential strategies (e.g., definite article + noun; pronoun; ellipsis) may be selected to make the narrative more cohesive, depending on the language.

Researchers have examined referential strategies in both monolingual and bilingual children and adults across a wide range of languages using elicited narrative tasks with the wordless picture book *Frog, where are you?* by Mayer (1969).[ii] Such research includes L1 narratives produced in Japanese (Clancy, 1992; Kurumada & Fujii, 2009; Nakamura, 1993) and English, as well as those produced by Japanese-English bilinguals (e.g., Minami, 2011; Mishina-Mori et al., 2018; Nakamura, 2020). Furthermore, research has also been conducted on referential strategies using the *Frog Story* method with L2 learners learning Japanese (e.g., Nakahama, 2011) and English (Nakamura, 2021a, 2021b).

However, Toratani (2012) and Nakahama (2011) discussed the problems of using the Frog paradigm for L2 research, including task complexity and cognitive burden. Various features of the *Frog Story*, such as the complex plot with its large number of characters, make it challenging for L2 learners to create a "good" cohesive story with successful referencing.

This study examines the ability of Japanese learners of English to create cohesive narratives in English through the appropriate selection of referential strategies, using a simple elicited narrative task.[iii] Task complexity and task difficulty were reduced significantly with the simpler plot and the limited number of characters, making the task more appropriate for learners with limited levels of proficiency.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Participants

Written narratives were elicited from 150 Japanese university students attending several universities in the Tokyo metropolitan area in both English (L2) and Japanese (L1), using the six-frame *Balloon Story,* a wordless picture story (Karmiloff-Smith, 1981). The students were Japanese learners of English divided into three proficiency levels (i.e., elementary, intermediate, and advanced).

### 2.2 Procedure

The story has a simple plot. A boy is walking down a street (Frame 1). Then, the boy encounters a man holding a bunch of balloons. He points to them and asks for one (Frame 2). The balloon man complies and gives him one (Frame 3). The boy continues his walk happily with the balloon in his hand (Frame 4). However, a strong gust of wind blows the balloon away (Frame 5). After losing his balloon, the boy walks home dejectedly with his hands in his pockets (Frame 6).

The participants were asked to look through the six frames first to understand the story. They were then asked to write a story matching the pictures on their own.

### 2.3 Coding and Analysis

The 150 EFL narratives were compared to a corpus of *Balloon Story* written narratives collected from Japanese (N=100) and English (N=100) native speakers (Nakamura, 2021a). The following referential strategies were examined:

1. Referent introduction (first mention): boy (protagonist), balloon man (secondary character).
2. Referent maintenance (second /third/ subsequent mention): boy, balloon man.
3. Referent re-introduction: boy, balloon man, the balloon that flies away.

Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted.

## 3. Results & Discussion

The L1 data showed the use of language-specific referential strategies in Japanese (e.g., NP-*ga*, NP-*wa*, null anaphora) and English (e.g., indefinite article + noun; definite article + noun; pronouns) respectively. Regarding their L2 narratives in English, narrators were expected to use different strategies, such as determiners, noun phrases, and pronouns. In their English stories, the EFL learners used basic English referential strategies such as pronouns (e.g., *he, they*), despite the limited use of pronouns in Japanese (Clancy, 1980). Other referential strategies proved to be more challenging, such as marking definiteness with definite or indefinite articles to indicate givenness (Chafe, 1976) before referent nouns (e.g., *the boy, a man)*.

In such cases, narrators would sometimes select the incorrect article or even use bald nouns as in (1), in which a narrator incorrectly used the definite article for referent introduction on the first mention.

(1) *And he met \*the middle-aged guy who has \*bunch of balloons.*[iv]

In (2), another narrator continued to mark the protagonist with the indefinite article *a* in the second frame:

(2) Frame 1: *A boy was walking.* (first mention)

Frame 2: *\*A boy said, I want a balloon, so may I have one?* (second mention)

In (3), an elementary-level narrator used pronouns consistently, but was not able to use any articles at all, resulting in the use of two bald nouns.

(3) *He find \*balloon. He get \*balloon.*

## 3.1  Referent Introduction

The introduction of a referent requires new information, in most cases, marked by use of *indefinite + NP.* In Table 1, the referent expressions used for the protagonist (the boy), are presented by English proficiency level. The majority of the advanced-level (62.1%) and intermediate-level (62.2%) narrators were able to introduce the boy with an indefinite article + noun (i.e., *a boy)* in the subject position. While a smaller percentage of elementary-level narrators (43.8%) used this strategy, it still was the most common strategy used. Some narrators preferred to refer to the protagonist by name (e.g., *John, Mike),* which is an acceptable strategy; this was most common among the advanced-level narrators. Some students incorrectly used other strategies, such as definite articles + noun (*i.e., the boy*). This tendency appeared more frequently among the elementary-level (37.5%) and intermediate-level (29.7%) students.

In Table 2, the referent expressions used for the secondary character, the balloon vendor, are presented. More narrators used appropriate strategies to refer to the balloon vendor as compared to the boy. Most narrators chose to use indefinite article + noun (e.g., *a man, a balloon man)* regardless of proficiency level: advanced-

**Table 1**

*Referent Introduction: Referential Expressions Used for the Protagonist (the Boy) by English Proficiency Level*

|  | Advanced | Intermediate | Elementary |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Indefinite article + noun** | 62.1% | 62.2% | 43.8% |
| **Definite article + noun\*** | 3.5% | 29.7% | 37.5% |
| **Pronoun\*** | 10.3% | 4.9% | 9.4% |
| **Name** | 24.1% | 10.1% | 6.3% |
| **Other (e.g., null subject)** |  | 1.2% | 3.2% |

\*Indicates a dispreferred referential expression

level (88.5%), intermediate-level (80.0%), and elementary-level (71.7%). The appearance of the balloon man is clearly new information, justifying marking with indefinite article + noun. However, as seen in Table 2, 37.5% of the elementary-level narrators used a definite article with a noun (i.e., *the man*) or a pronoun (9.4%), both of which are inappropriate.

In this manner, referent introduction seemed to be challenging for some narrators, with many elementary-level narrators having difficulty with the indefinite article + noun strategy, instead using definite articles (4), pronouns (5), and ellipsis (6).

(4) *\**The boy* was walking on the road.

(5) One day *\*he* was walking near house.

(6) *\*Walking on the road.*

Most intermediate-level and advanced- level narrators chose to use the indefinite article + noun strategy to introduce their protagonist (7), with some using proper nouns (8). This strategy was even more widely used for the balloon vender, perhaps due to the salience of the cognitive status of the new character (Gundel et al., 1993).

(7) *A boy* left his house to take a walk.

(8) *One day, Mike went outside and enjoyed walking.*

## 3.2 Referent Maintenance

A referent which has previously appeared in the story can be considered as given information, assuming it is still accessible (Chafe, 1976). Continuous mention relies on information that has been provided previously, and can be accomplished with a variety of referential strategies, such as definite article (the) + NP, pronouns, proper names, and demonstratives + NP (e.g., this boy, that man).

Table 3 shows the types of referential expressions used to refer to the protagonist (the boy) during referent maintenance, namely second mention and third mention. Most narrators, regardless of proficiency level, were able to use a pronoun to refer to the boy, as in (9). Other referential strategies were also used, such as definite article + noun (e.g., *the boy*) as in (10) and (11). A handful of narrators incorrectly used the indefinite article + noun (*a boy*) across the proficiency levels.

**Table 2**

*Referent Introduction: Referential Expressions Used for the Secondary Character (the Balloon Vendor) by English Proficiency Level*

|  | Advanced | Intermediate | Elementary |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Indefinite article + noun** | 88.5% | 80.0% | 71.7% |
| **Definite article + noun\*** |  | 15.0% | 37.5% |
| **Pronoun\*** |  | 3.8% | 9.4% |
| **Name** | 7.7% |  | 6.3% |
| **Other (e.g., null subject)** | 3.8% | 1.2% | 3.2% |

*\*Indicates a dispreferred referential expression

**Table 3**

*Referent Maintenance (Second/Third Mention): Referential Expressions Used for the Protagonist (the Boy) by English Proficiency Level*

| | Advanced | | Intermediate | | Elementary | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Second Mention | Third Mention | Second Mention | Third Mention | Second Mention | Third Mention |
| **Indefinite article + noun*** | 3.7% | 7.4% | 1.3% | 0% | 8.2% | 4.8% |
| **Definite article + noun** | 7.4% | 33.3% | 21.8% | 41.3% | 26.2% | 31.7% |
| **Pronoun** | 85.2% | 44.4% | 75.6% | 52.5% | 55.7% | 50.8% |
| **Other (e.g., null subject)** | 3.7% | 14.8% | 1.3% | 7.5% | 9.8% | 12.7% |

*Indicates a dispreferred referential expression

Some examples include the following:

(9) *He met a man with a lot of balloons*. (second mention)

(10) *Then, the boy meets a man who has many balloons.* (second mention)

(11) *And the boy says, "I want it!"* (third mention)

In Table 4, types of referential expressions used for the continuous mention of the protagonist (the boy) are presented. In Frame 4, the boy continues on his way, alone. Being the only referent in the scene, the narrators skillfully used appropriate referential strategies, such as definite article + noun (*the boy*), pronoun (*he*), and name (e.g., *Jim*). Only a few of the elementary-level narrators incorrectly used the indefinite article + noun (*a boy*). Overall, regarding continuous maintenance, narrators used appropriate strategies and were unlikely to make errors, regardless of their level.

**Table 4**

*Referent Re-introduction: Referential Expressions Used for the Re-introduction of the Protagonist (the Boy) by English Proficiency Level*

| | Advanced | Intermediate | Elementary |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Indefinite article + noun*** | | | 6.2% |
| **Definite article + noun** | 41.4% | 43.9% | 41.5% |
| **Pronoun** | 37.9% | 46.3% | 41.5% |
| **Name** | 20.7% | 9.8% | 7.7% |
| **Other (e.g., null subject)** | | | 3.0% |

*Indicates a dispreferred referential expression

Furthermore, narrators, even some with elementary-level proficiency, were able to mark continuous reference using several referential strategies, such as pronouns (13, 14, 15), proper names (15), and definite article *the* + NP (14).

(12) Frame 1: *<u>Jim</u> was walking down the street as the weather was beautiful.*

(13) Frame 2: *Then <u>he</u> meets <u>a guy</u> with a lot of balloons in his hands.*

(14) Frame 3: *Lucky him! <u>The guy</u> was very kind- <u>he</u> gave him one for free.*

(15) Frame 4: *<u>Jim</u> was very happy so <u>he</u> kept on walking.*

However, what was noteworthy was that narrators with lower proficiency levels tended to use the same strategies repeatedly (16):

(16) Frame 1: *<u>A boy</u> was walking the road.*

Frame 2: *<u>He</u> found an old man who had a balloon.*

Frame 3: *<u>He</u> got a balloon from the old man.*

Frame 4: *<u>He</u> started walking with a balloon….*

Frame 6: *<u>He</u> went home crying.*

On the other hand, narrators with higher proficiency levels used a variety of different referential strategies, avoiding repetition (17):

(17) Frame 1: *One day <u>a boy</u> went out for a walk, looking for something fun to do.*

Frame 2: *Then <u>he</u> came across a bearded man who held dozens of balloons in his hand.*

Frame 3: *The bearded man looked troubled with all the balloons so <u>the boy</u> decided to take one with him.*

Frame 4: *Luckily it was his favorite color. <u>He</u> loved how it bounced in the air when <u>he</u> pulled the string.*

Frame 5: *Just as <u>the boy</u> was having fun, the string slipped from his hand and rose high in the sky.*

Frame 6: *When <u>the boy</u> lost sight of the balloon, <u>he</u> walked home crying.*

As reported previously, narrators with limited proficiency tended to use simple sentences that were shorter in length with less content, resulting in use of similar sentence structures. Narrators with higher proficiency levels were more likely to use compound sentences and complex sentences (i.e., with dependent clauses) with more information in more complicated sentence structures.

### 3.3 Referent Re-Introduction

The best example of referent re-introduction in the Balloon Story is the scene in which the balloon is blown away in Frame 5. The marking of the balloon was extremely salient to the narrators, most of whom were able to use an appropriate referential strategy such as definite article *the* + noun, as in (18) and (19). What is interesting about this scene is that some narrators used the possessive pronoun + noun to refer to the balloon, as in *his balloon* in (20), to emphasize that the balloon belonged to the boy.

**Table 5**

*Referent Re-introduction: Referential Expressions Used for the Balloon by English Proficiency Level*

|  | Advanced | Intermediate | Elementary |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Indefinite article + noun*** | 3.6% | 6.3% | 11.3% |
| **Definite article + noun** | 71.4% | 66.3% | 58.1% |
| **Pronoun** | 3.6% | 5.0% | 3.2% |
| **Possessive pronoun +noun (e.g., *his balloon*)** | 14.3% | 16.3% | 14.5% |
| **Null subject** | 7.1% |  | 1.6% |
| **Other** |  | 6.1% | 11.3% |

*Indicates a dispreferred referential expression

(18) *Suddenly, the wind blew and <u>the balloon</u> flew into the sky.*

(19) *While he was walking, a strong wind blew suddenly and <u>the balloon</u> was blown away.*

(20) *Suddenly strong winds happened and <u>his balloon</u> went to the sky.*

The cognitive salience of the balloon in Frame 5, which is a crucial part of the climax, makes it all the more important that the referential status is clear.

## 4. Discussion

Despite the fact that all of the EFL narrators had more than six years of studying English through junior high school and high school, many had difficulty with their referential marking, especially those with low proficiency levels. Even with a simple story plot with only two characters narrators were seen confusing articles (indefinite/ definite) as well as, to a lesser extent, pronouns, influencing the cohesion and flow of the story. In fact, article errors were found even among some of the advanced learners. This reflects the difficulty of mastery of article use for Japanese learners of English.

In general, language-specific aspects of the L1 referential system (Japanese) did not seem to influence reference in the L2 (English) narratives, such as the use of ellipted referents as in (6). Although the use of null forms is common in continuous mention in Japanese, they are mostly ungrammatical in English (Hinds, 1984). Use of null subjects in English was minimal. However, lack of definite/ indefinite articles in Japanese certainly seems to make it a challenge to master in English.

The selection of the Balloon Story to elicit narratives proved to reduce the number of errors regarding referential strategies made by the narrators as compared to the Frog Story (Nakamura, 2021b). With its limited number of characters (one protagonist and one secondary character) and simpler plot (six frames), the Balloon Story had lower task complexity with a lower cognitive burden for the narrators. As discussed by Toratani (2012) and Nakahama (2011), the task complexity and cognitive burden of the Frog Story may create additional challenges for EFL narrators with limited English proficiency.

As was expected, narrators made fewer errors in their Balloon Story narratives, as it was easier for them to keep track of the two characters in the simpler story.

Regarding narrative skills at higher proficiency levels, narrators in this study used more complex sentence structures, and had a larger repertoire of referential strategies, making fewer mistakes. Narrators with lower proficiency levels used shorter and simpler sentence structures, with fewer referential strategies and overall, less cohesion between the different parts of the story. Overall, the narrators were better able to use appropriate referential strategies during referent maintenance as compared to referent introduction.

This study shows that Japanese EFL learners need more guidance in the classroom to effectively achieve successful referencing and discourse cohesion in extended discourse. Selecting the most appropriate referential strategy in each context requires both syntactic knowledge and discourse-pragmatic competence, which may be difficult for language learners. Narrators in elementary-level classes may find themselves focusing on short and simple sentences. In order to become able to engage in extended discourse, students must be provided with opportunities to create longer segments in both conversation and writing in the classroom.

## 5. Conclusion

Considering the importance and centrality of narrative discourse in our daily lives, it is important to realize that referential strategies in narrative, such as referent introduction, referent maintenance, and referent re-introduction, can be challenging for foreign language learners. Learners need to be instructed in the use of such strategies in extended discourse as they are invaluable for smooth communication.

## Acknowledgments

## Notes

i   In languages such as Turkish and Japanese, referent maintenance has been reported to be mastered early by children, while referent introduction takes longer (e.g., Küntay, 2002; Nakamura, 1993). For example, in Japanese, although children used null forms for continuous mention, use of NP+ subject marker *ga* for referent introduction was not used consistently until around age 9 (Nakamura, 1993).
ii  Berman and Slobin (1994) first used the Frog Story method to collect narratives in five languages, namely English, Spanish, Turkish, German, and Hebrew.
iii A preliminary version of this paper was presented at The 22nd Annual Conference of the Japanese Society for Language Sciences on June 5, 2021 (Nakamura, 2021b).
iv  An asterisk (*) indicates a dispreferred referential expression.

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