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# ENHANCING ESL LEARNERS' IDENTITY LEXICO-GRAMMATICALLY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING HISTORIES WRITING

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### *Abstract*

The cognitive transition of ESL learner's role from a passive recipient to an active participant has posed a great challenge for ESL teachers to rediscover learner identity. The study of ESL learner's identity through narratives has been far from enough. A learner identity through the self-focused reflective language learning histories (LLHs) written by ESL learners could probably well represent the learner's experience. In this study, ESL learner identity revealed in LLHs was explored to discover how learners use personal reference and strategy of identity construction to establish the relationship with their learner group. A corpus-based quantitative approach was adopted. The corpus was composed of 36 LLHs written respectively by Japanese, Finnish and Chinese undergraduates of various disciplines. Quantitatively, the frequency of first-person pronouns "I, me, my, we, us, and our" was examined and analysed. The data shows that the ratio of singular first-person pronoun in LLH texts to sentence of LLH texts is far greater than that of plural first-person pronoun use to sentence numbers. The use of first personal references in LLHs are unanimous, regardless of their various disciplines or their social background of studying. The findings indicate that the ESL learners use specific lexico-grammatical forms such as singular first-person pronouns in LLH writing and this personal reference and strategy of identity construction enhance the learners' identity in their university language learning community.

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**Keywords:** Language learning histories, identity, personal reference, learning community.



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## 1. Introduction

A language learning history (henceforth LLH in this paper) refers to a piece of writing through which the student tells the history of his/her experiences in learning a second or foreign language. Language learning histories (LLHs) can also be regarded as language learning diaries or journals referring to their experiences instead of the present. Oxford (1995) states that LLHs are students' writings of language learning self-report, which are aimed to make a self-examining research of their language learning experience (p. 582). Oxford's definition of LLHs is focused on the personal, reflective nature of language learning records. As a form of self-focused learning narrative, LLHs give accounts of learners' language learning methods, strategies, learning story, either the accomplishments of or the hardships the individuals experienced with the language both inside and outside of the classroom. LLHs written by ESL learners could provide reliable accounts of individual experiences of second language learning.

Understanding the diverse English learning experience of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners is gaining more and more attention from scholars and English teachers. Based on a Confucian view, teachers teach best if they use such teaching methods as are best adapted to the students, that is, knowing students and teaching them accordingly. Therefore, it is important for ESL learners to become more aware of their personal learning preferences, and also necessary for both teachers and learners to be more sensitive to the individualized and contextualized characteristics of language learning (Oxford, 1995) inside and outside the ESL classroom, so as to achieve better ESL teaching and learning outcomes.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Language Learning History

Nunan (2000) states that listening to learners' stories is a primary job for the teachers. Being one of the genuine sources of learner's information (Oxford, 1995), LLHs have been investigated exploring issues including learners' motivation, (auto)biography and learner diversity, beliefs, learner experience, context of learning, construction of identities, emotion processes, learner autonomy and language learning awareness, control of learning process, as represented in a collection of learners' stories research articles (Benson & Nunan, 2005). Studies have also been devoted to examining the connection between writing LLHs and learners' language accomplishments and identifying the uses of language learning strategy in different ways (Rao, 2006). In analysing language learning histories by ESL learners from two universities in China, Gao (2005) holds that the learners' choice of language learning approaches depends on both the learners' willingness and teachers' supervision, and learners' choice of ESL approaches is under great impact of their identities of being English majors in university. Most studies mentioned above take learners as people with unique perspective on self-focused learning practice rather than passive study subjects (Doman, 2015). This further identifies the transition of learner's role from merely a passive recipient of knowledge information to an active participant in the process of gaining knowledge.

Benson includes studies with a variety of research methods involved in language learners' stories or histories, such as (auto)biographical approach, interview approach, statistical approach, experimental approach (Benson & Nunan, 2005).

As the nature of LLHs shows that, writing LLHs is recording one's language learning stories. Professor Martha Cummings (2005) highlights the importance of writing LLHs in facilitating a solid understanding of the teachers as well as the students and the classroom teaching. In the context of university ESL learning community, LLH writing and sharing are considered as the primary means of English-for-general-academic-purpose (EGAP) writing practice. The LLH writing and sharing among ESL learner groups could be helpful for better understanding of students' learning practices. The self-focused reflective language learning histories (LLHs) written by ESL learners are reliable source of personal language learning records.

## **2.2. Learner identity**

Identity in writing was defined as the representation and self-representation of the writers themselves through rhetorical means (Hyland, 2002). According to Ivanič (1998), Ivanič and Weldon (1999) as cited by Hyland (2002), the identities of writers are classified into 'autobiographical self', 'discoursal self', and 'authorial self', with the first self being reflected through writing life history, the second self being concerned about the persona in a text, and the third self being responsible for the content of writing (Hyland, 2002). Writing LLHs is not only a way of accounting for one's experience as a language learner, but also a means of authentic communication between learner groups of the language. The content, as well as the learner identity a specific LLH carries could be perceived by readers.

One can establish his or her social network and identify himself or herself as a member of that community through representing his/her social experience and the world by the same cultural perspective (Hyland, 2002). A learner identity can represent the learner's experience oneself and can probably associate the learner with the social network as well. As Hyland (2002) put it, one could establish his or her social network and identify himself or herself as a member of that community through representing his/her social experience and the world by the same cultural perspective.

## **2.3. Systemic Functional Linguistics and personal reference**

The theory of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) was first developed in work on Chinese grammar by Halliday and later promoted by Halliday himself and many other linguists including James Robert Martin and Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen. It has been widely applied to studies of discourses in many different contexts. Several discourse analyses of different genres have been carried out and systemic functional linguistics has been proved to be an effective means of studying discourses. SFL is taking a resource perspective rather than a rule perspective towards language, and it is looking for the function of language rather than the forms of language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

There are three general social functions of language in the systemic-functional model of SFL theory: i) interpersonal; ii) ideational; and iii) textual. These are known as the three metafunctions of language in social activity. The interpersonal metafunction is about how language establishes interpersonal relations between speaker and hearer or writer and reader, that is, how we use language to communicate and build relationships with people around us. The ideational metafunction is about the language we use for organizing our experience of the world, including both natural world and the worlds in our own mind. The textual metafunction is concerned with the text, or the language itself, that is, the way we organize our

language to convey our message in spoken or written manner in a certain social context. The three metafunctions are coexisting systemically and structurally, that is, they are simultaneous within the system network and the structure of the language we use (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; 2013).

To sum up, SFL considers language as a functional social phenomenon, and it considers the overall organization of the grammar of a language as a system of information (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004).

From the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, reference is one of the major cohesive devices which hold different sentences, paragraphs or any pieces of text together to make the content coherent. Reference includes personal reference, demonstrative reference and comparative reference. And personal reference is one of the most important cohesive devices between clause complexes or sentences for indicating the relations between the messages in both the specific and general context (Thompson, 2000). The first personal references are realized through first-person pronouns and the third personal references through third-person pronouns. Authority as a writer is possibly well claimed by the explicit reference to authorial self through the singular or plural first-person pronoun and expressions such as ‘the author’ or ‘this author’. First-person pronouns can be widely recognized in LLHs to illustrate how learners use and perceive self-references.

As an international language, English has a significant influence on the formation of the identity of its users, especially for ESL learners. Through the studies reviewed above, we can see that there is a relationship between the discourse of a speaker or writer and his/her identity construction in narratives. In exploring the ESL learners' identity, it is important to examine the discourses of the ESL learners which contribute to the construction of their identities, and to understand how their identities are revealed in their narratives. Yet, the study of ESL learner's identity through narratives has been far from enough.

### **3. Problem Statement**

The SLA studies now have evolved from regarding the ESL learner as a passive recipient of knowledge information to repositioning the learner as an active participant in the process of learning (Coffey & Street, 2008). Learning is active, meaningful, constructive and creative rather than passive, receptive, and knowledge consuming. This cognitive transition of learner's role imposes a big challenge for educators inside and outside the ESL classroom. The most urgent thing for language educators to do is to place stronger awareness of the diverse learner identities in curricula design (Doman, 2015), and for ESL teachers, the urgent need is to develop a deeper understanding of the ESL learner identities and their diversities when teaching strategies are employed. Within this trend, ESL learner identities as revealed in the language learning histories are worthy to be explored.

### **4. Research Questions**

Since academic writings are commonly characterized by lexico-grammatical features such as passive voice and third-person pronouns for impersonality and objectivity as the norms, especially in academic writing of natural sciences while LLHs are much personal and autobiographical. The study significantly investigates the following research questions: (1) How do ESL learners identify themselves

through LLH writing? (2) What are the lexico-grammatical features of first-person pronoun use in LLH writing by ESL learners?

## **5. Purpose of the Study**

The study explores ESL learner identity revealed in LLHs to discover how learners use personal reference and strategy of identity construction for establishing their relationship with their learner group.

## **6. Research Methods**

### **6.1. Research design**

In order to capture the reflective narrative of ESL learner experiences and make them accessible for analysis and reflection, a corpus-based quantitative approach is adopted in this research of LLHs. This approach is suitable for quantifying the occurrence frequency of the linguistic items on a linear scale. The occurrence frequency of first-person pronouns has been examined and explained through the corpus search and the analysis of the LLH texts. Each instance of first-person pronoun use has been included. The common lexico-grammatical features of the first-person pronoun usage in LLHs by different groups of language users have been generalized so that the linguistic and cognitive pattern (Hyland, 2002) of different ESL learner groups is revealed.

### **6.2. Corpus of the study**

The study is based on an analysis of parallel corpora (collections of authentic language text) which were retrieved from online sources. Firstly, 13 LLHs made up of 7,136 words, or 449 sentences by 13 ESL learners in Japan were retrieved from (<http://c-faculty.chuo-u.ac.jp/~mikenix1/tlr/work/llh/#shortelhe>) on 15 March 2019. Then, 21 LLHs made up of 10,278 words, or 603 sentences by 21 ESL learners in Finland were retrieved from ([http://www.veramenezes.com/narrativas\\_finlandia.htm](http://www.veramenezes.com/narrativas_finlandia.htm)) on 15 March 2019. Lastly, 2 LLHs made up of 1,333 words, or 102 sentences by 2 ESL learners in China were retrieved from “A Tale of Two Mainland Chinese English Learners” (Gao, 2005) on 20 March 2019. Altogether the corpus was composed of 36 LLHs written respectively by Japanese, Finnish and Chinese undergraduates, totally making up of 18,747 words, or 1154 sentences.

The LLHs have been compiled into text documents and made into three parallel corpora. Corpus one is composed of 13 LLHs written by 13 Japanese undergraduates (including 9 first year non-English majors from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 2 first year Law students from Chuo University, and 2 second year Law students from Chuo University). Corpus two is composed of 21 LLHs written by 21 students of various disciplines from Language Centre of Helsinki University. The students are from various disciplines, such as Social Sciences, Agriculture and Forestry, Behavioral Sciences, Science, Art & Design/Photography, Textile Art and Design, Fashion design. Corpus three is composed of 2 LLHs written by 2 third-year mainland Chinese undergraduates of English major at a tertiary vocational college. The Japanese LLHs were part of students writing practice. Learners at Helsinki University were asked to reflect on their previous language learning experiences and histories and to write about that, building up their learner profile, before they started the Autonomous Language Learning Modules. The Chinese LLHs were

result of a course project which aimed at gaining understanding of the learners through their reflection on the English learning experience. All the LLHs were written by non-English native speakers of undergraduate level. The corpora have been compiled according to the learner’s social background of studying rather than age, sex or grade. The lengths of LLHs are between 450 and 800 words. The corpora represent a broad range of disciplines.

**6.3. Variables**

The first-person pronouns “I”, “me”, “my”, “we”, “us”, and “our” are adopted as the variables. The occurrence of these variables is high in frequency, and could be easily quantified on a linear scale.

**6.4. Research instrument**

A concordancer is a computer program or software tool used to search, examine and index language items from a text corpus, and display a concordance showing the relationship between a given grammatical or lexical item and the text in which it appears. Laurence Anthony’s AntConc (Version 3.5.8 for Windows) is the corpus analysis tool chosen for concordancing and text analysis in this research. It enables the user to browse and detect the occurrences of particular words or phrases used in the given texts.

**7. Findings**

In this chapter, the corpus has been processed with AntConc and the data has been collected accordingly. A functional analysis of the data has been carried out, and the results of analysis have been collected by a statistical approach.

The general picture of the corpus is given in Table 01, focusing on the ratio of first-person pronouns to sentences and the frequency of first-person pronouns per 1000 words. As the Table indicates that, the ratio of first-person pronouns to sentences in LLHs texts among the three different ESL learner groups are similar, with the characteristic pattern of using 1.4 to 1.8 first-person pronouns per single sentence in LLH writing. We can also see that, the frequency of first-person pronouns per 1000 words in the individual LLHs corpus is much the same in permille, accounting for around 112%, meaning that the ESL learners of different social backgrounds of studying use first-person pronouns in their LLHs with great similarity in frequency.

**Table 01.** First-person pronouns in LLHs texts

<b>ESL learner</b>	<b>First-person pronouns</b>	<b>Sentences in LLHs</b>	<b>Ratio</b>	<b>Words in LLHs</b>	<b>Items per 1000 words</b>
Japanese university	816	449	1.817:1	7136	114.35%
Finnish university	1128	603	1.870:1	10278	109.75%
Chinese university	150	102	1.470:1	1333	112.53%

Based on the general understanding of the ESL learners’ personal reference in LLHs, the author moved on with the examination of the specific first-person pronoun usage in LLHs, so that the particular

lexico-grammatical features of first-person pronoun use in LLH writing by ESL learners could be revealed. The data collected from the LLHs texts is shown in the tables below.

In Table 02, we can see that firstly, among all the first-person pronouns used in LLHs corpus, that the sequential order of first-person pronoun choice by three different ESL learner groups follow the similar pattern, with “I”>“my”>“me”>“we”>“us”>“our” from highest permille to lowest permille. Secondly, the personal reference in LLH writing by the three different ESL learner groups is embodied commonly by singular first-person pronouns “I” and “my”, with high frequency ranging from Chinese 81%, Finnish 99%, to Japanese 104%, much higher than the frequency of plural first-person pronouns “we”, “us” and “our”, being Chinese 24.75%, Finnish 2.63% and Japanese 4.20% respectively.

After discussion of the general landscape of first-person pronoun use in LLHs written by three different ESL learner groups, the prominent and non-prominent personal reference characteristics have become obvious. Singular first-person pronouns have been extensively employed to represent the learners’ personal identity and establish social relations with the language learning community. The hidden mechanism of this learner choice is worth exploring and the learner strategy of identity construction can further be identified through closer examination of the data.

**Table 02.** Frequency of each first-person pronouns in LLHs corpus

First-person pronouns	Japanese university		Finnish university		Chinese university	
	Items	Items per 1000 words	Items	Items per 1000 words	Items	Items per 1000 words
I	570	79.88‰	803	78.13‰	84	63.02‰
Me	42	5.89‰	81	7.88‰	9	6.75‰
My	174	24.38‰	217	21.11‰	24	18.01‰
We	22	3.08‰	20	1.95‰	18	13.50‰
Us	4	0.56‰	5	0.49‰	10	7.50‰
Our	4	0.56‰	2	0.19‰	5	3.75‰
Overall	816	114.35‰	1128	109.75‰	150	112.53‰

In Table 03, the ratio of singular first-person pronouns to sentences in LLHs texts between the Japanese and Finnish ESL learner groups are similar, with the characteristic pattern of using 1.7 to 1.8 singular first-person pronouns per single sentence in LLH writing. And the Chinese ESL learner group uses 1.1 per single sentence in LLH writing, which is a little less than that of the other two learner groups. The singular first-person pronouns per 1000 words in the individual LLHs corpus is following the similar pattern, with the frequency of 110‰ and 107‰ for the Japanese and Finnish ESL learner groups respectively, higher than that of 87.78‰ for the Chinese ESL learner groups. The difference in use of singular first-person pronouns “I”, “me”, “my” between Chinese ESL learners and other two groups is not statistically significant.

Also, revealed in Table 03, the ratio of plural first-person pronouns to sentences in LLHs texts between the Japanese and Finnish ESL learner groups are similar, being 0.066 and 0.044 plural first-person pronouns to one single sentence. However, the difference in use of plural first-person pronouns between Chinese ESL learners and other two groups are rather significant. Chinese ESL learners prefer to use plural first-person pronouns “we”, “us”, “our” more than Japanese and Finnish ESL learners do, with frequency of

24.75%, being four to eight times higher than Japanese 4.20% and Finnish 2.63%. Chinese ESL learners display a high tendency of using this self-inclusive reference in their LLH writing. The analysis above shows that, aside from giving a highly acknowledged reference of the writer him/herself in personal LLH writing, Chinese learners still give reasonable recognition to “group” or a larger learning collective. This can be explained with the unique Chinese characteristic notion and belief of collectivism rather than individualism.

From Table 03, the ratio of singular first-person pronoun in LLHs texts to sentence of LLHs texts is far greater than that of plural first-person pronoun use to sentence numbers, despite of their various disciplines or their social background of studying.

**Table 03.** Singular & plural first-person pronouns in LLHs texts

First-person pronouns	Japanese university			Finnish university			Chinese university		
	Items	Ratio	Items per 1000 words	Items	Ratio	Items per 1000 words	Items	Ratio	Items per 1000 words
Singular	786	1.750:1	110.15‰	1101	1.825:1	107.12‰	117	1.147:1	87.78‰
Plural	30	0.066:1	4.20‰	27	0.044:1	2.63‰	33	0.323:1	24.75‰

Tables and relevant analysis show that the first personal reference in three corpora of ESL learner’s LLHs texts have approximately the same high frequency of occurrence. This indicates that the strategy of identity construction employed by the three different ESL learner groups is unanimous.

## 8. Conclusion

In this research, close examination of the LLHs texts written by ESL students ranging from English majors to non-English majors of various disciplines, and the investigation of each circumstance of first-person pronoun use in LLHs corpus have been done before the analysis of the occurrence frequency of the linguistic items of first-person pronouns is made. Meanwhile, a statistical approach has been used to examine the occurrence frequency for each of the linguistic features.

The common lexico-grammatical features of the first-person pronoun usage in LLHs has been found that, firstly, first-person pronouns have great density in LLHs; secondly, the major personal reference is commonly represented by the use of singular first-person pronouns “I”, “me” and “my” in all the three groups of ESL learners from different social backgrounds of studying; thirdly, the frequency of singular first-person pronouns “I”, “me” and “my” is much higher than that of plural first-person pronouns “we”, “us” and “our”; fourthly, ESL learners tend to use unanimous strategy of identity construction to establish their relationship with their learner group and enhance their learner identity in the university language learning community they belong to.

These findings have two implications for ESL classroom teaching. First, these would help ESL teachers deepen their understanding the diversities of both ESL learner identities and English learning experience; and facilitate a better concept of suitability between teaching contents and students for better teaching results. Second, ESL teachers would base their classroom teaching design of methods and

strategies on their recognition of students' diversities in learning motivations and learning patterns. Knowing learners well could empower teaching efficiency and sustainability.

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