



INVESTIGATING THE REPRESENTATION OF CHARACTER DISCOURSE IN L2 NARRATIVES WRITTEN BY IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS



 Somayyeh Sabah

Department of English Language, Khorramabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Khorramabad, Iran.
Email: s.sabah@khoiau.ac.ir Tel: +989387051943

(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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The present study examined the discourse representation of characters' voices in narratives written by Iranian L2 learners. The participants of this study were seven sophomore EFL majors (five women and two men) selected from among L2 learners through the convenience sampling method. The participants were assigned both a narrative topic about their story of learning EFL and Singleton's (2001) picture narrative entitled "A Doctor's Appointment." Each of them wrote two narratives, first based on the topic and second on the assigned picture narrative from the first-person point of view. The content of the fourteen narratives was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The statistical results indicated that the participants presented the characters' utterances primarily via direct discourse (DD) that embodies the original speaker's exact words and secondarily employed indirect discourse (ID) that represents an utterer's report of the other speaker's dialogues in her or his own words more willingly than free indirect discourse (FID) that signifies double-voiced utterances. Thus, the dialogical principle of characters' discourse in L2 writings was more DD-focused and less ID-oriented with no FID instance. The qualitative analysis of the narratives showed that the participants' writings demonstrated a heteroglossia of authorial clauses as well as direct and indirect quotations of characters' speeches and thoughts.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on L2 narrative research as it examines how Iranian EFL learners represent characters' speeches and thoughts in their first-person stories with a focus on the representation of the free indirect mode of voicing characters and thus goes beyond binaristic direct versus indirect discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several research studies on communicative competence have analyzed larger narrative discourse units. The analysis of such narratives from different perspectives serves as the focus of those studies. These narrative inquiries have been concerned with oral narratives (e.g., Chafe, 1994; Norrick, 2001; Kang, 2004) written narratives (e.g., Kamimura and Oi, 2001) narratives of personal experience (e.g., Koven, 2002; Labov, 2010) narrative fiction (e.g., Fludernik, 1993; Currie, 1998; Cobly, 2001) and digital narratives (e.g., Gregori-Signes, 2008; Sadik, 2008).

Eggs and Slade (1997) assert that participants engaged in everyday talks construct an assortment of texts and enjoy numerous narrative features. This view indicates that narration, in one form or another, is a feature of everyday life. The importance of studying storytelling as a constructive L2 classroom activity has been also

recognized in various studies in recent years (e.g., Shokouhi *et al.*, 2011; Sabah and Rashtchi, 2016;2017). Thus, L2 teachers should devote part of their syllabus in teaching about the performance of the required skills of storytelling (Koki, 1998; Jianing, 2007).

The tidal wave of debate on signifying the narrative architecture has engulfed the colossal schema of research in various fields of inquiry in the contemporary era. A topic that has attracted attention is the exploration of the portrayal of characters' reported discourse in storylines, whether in the spoken channel or the written milieu (Larson, 1978; Stanzel, 1981; Asaka, 2008). In the same vein, certain studies have attempted to make a distinction between the character and narrator's roles in narrative discourse (Chatman, 2000; Koven, 2002).

The inspection of characters' discourse in L2 narratives has been of significance in narrative inquiries. The present study analyzed how Iranian L2 sophomores deployed reported speech in their narrative writings. Each L2 participant wrote two narratives based on a topic and an assigned picture narrative. This research differs from the previous ones on reported speech since it brings into consideration the choice of a third variant of voicing characters, namely, the free indirect mode of discourse rather than merely revolving around the traditional binary oppositions of direct versus indirect speech reports in L2 narratives. Thus, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

Research question 1: Are there any differences between the relative leading of the three modes of character representation in the L2 narratives written on the given topic and the L2 narratives written on the assigned picture narrative by Iranian EFL sophomores?

Research question 2: What is the dialogical principle of character discourse in L2 narratives written by Iranian EFL sophomores?

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Storytelling involves more than a bald narration of a sequence of events and has its features (e.g., Labov, 1997;2010; Capps and Ochs, 2001). Character, or characterology, to fall back on Toolan's (2001) term, is frequently considered as what most vigorously attracts the addressees' attention to narrative. Rimmon-Kenan (1983) asserts that although the character is a construct within the abstracted story, character-oriented traits may or may not come out as such in texts and thus are inferred from a range of character indicators. There are multivariate modes and proportions of reports of speech and thought by way of which characters are revealed within a given performance on narrative (Frow, 1986; Fludernik, 1993).

2.1. Forms and Functions of Character Discourse in Narrative

Toolan (2001) identifies distinct modes of embodying characters' chains of speech and thought in narrative based on which a narrator gains the opportunity of opting for different character-focused variants. He states that these styles comprise categories including direct discourse or DD that accounts for direct speech (DS) and direct thought (DT), indirect discourse or ID that includes indirect speech (IS) and indirect thought (IT), and free indirect discourse or FID that covers free indirect speech (FIS) and free indirect thought (FIT). Despite the taxonomy driven from speech and thought frames, very often in discursive analyses and commentaries, the single subsuming category of discourse covers the two subtypes of speech and thought.

2.1.1. DD

Coulmas (1986) states that the traditional types of reported speech are *oratio recta* (DS) and *oratio obliqua* (IS). The former brings to mind the original speech event and describes or declares to communicate the original speaker's exact words. Thus, DS is not the reporter's language and represents the reported speaker's speech. That is, the reporter acts out and re-inhabits the reported speaker's role.

Li (1986) argues that DS requires the reporter-speaker to mime the role of the reported speaker. It serves as a natural vehicle for the flamboyant and dramatic representation of the character role. The direct quotation is regarded as the most vivid and widespread oral mode of expression in many languages.

The following excerpt (1) quoted from the short story entitled "The Dead" by Joyce (1914) and excerpt (2) taken from a passage in the novel entitled "To the Lighthouse" by Woolf (1927) represent instances of DS and DT, respectively:

DS: After a pause, she [Aunt Julia] asked: "And what are galoshes, Gabriel?" (1)

DT: "It was odd," she thought. (2)

Direct forms of speech and thought were placed inside quotation marks to be set apart from narrators' framing clauses. Toolan (2001) remarks that when the first two modes occur without the narrator's framing clause, they are said to be free representing free direct discourse, namely, FDS and FDT, respectively.

2.1.2. ID

According to Aikhenvald (2004) indirect discourse represents a speaker's report of the other's speech in her or his own words. All deictic elements conform to the reporter's here and now perspective. The ID defining characteristics comprise the pronoun references, verb tenses, complementizers, deictic markers, and the degree of the conformity of the reported speaker's identity with the original identity.

The following extract (3) is taken from the short story entitled "Greenleaf" by O'Connor (1971) and represents an IS instance. Passage (4) is extracted from the short story entitled "Clay" by Joyce (1914) and represents an instance of IT. Examples of IS and IT were underlined.

IS: He said there was more money in nigger-insurance than any other kind, and before company, he was very loud about it. (3)

IT: She thought she would have to stand in the Drumcondra tram because none of the young men seemed to notice her, but an elderly gentleman made room for her. (4)

2.1.3. FID

Bakhtin's (1981) concept of dialogicity and multivoicedness, namely, heteroglossia, is concerned with the discourse of a novel. Bakhtin maintains, "heteroglossia, once incorporated into a novel (whatever forms of its incorporation) is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse" (p. 324).

From Bakhtin's (1981) viewpoint, double-voiced utterances render two speakers simultaneously and concurrently convey both the character's direct intention and the author's refracted intention. This position entails dual competing voices, double meanings, and twofold expressions. Elsewhere, Bakhtin (1984) speculates that when a member of a speaking community stumbles upon an utterance, it does not operate as a nonaligned product of language or as an expression bereft of other participants' aspirations and assessments and unpopulated by their voices.

Maynard (2007) holds that although Bakhtin primarily concentrated upon the novelistic discourse, heteroglossia is typically pertinent to the all-embracing phenomena of communication. She goes further and states that language subsists, both internally and externally, as a dialogizing phenomenon that reveals meaning dimensions. Through manipulating and profiting from this potential in language and linguistic creativity, the speakers discover and reflect manifold interior and exterior voices and construct their shared meanings.

Koven (2002) studies the application of the Bakhtinian perspective to personal narratives and values a third possible character role or variant of reported speech characteristic to modern fiction. The speakers are likely to adopt a critical distance from a narrated occasion to share their present stance toward a formerly presented storyline and themselves within it with the addressees. FID instances represent character and interlocutory double

voicings wherein the narrator's voice and current reaction merge with the reaction s/he has the character perform. Double voicing that relates the narrated event more to the here and now event of speaking often results in the emotional intensification of discourse stretches.

Sharvit (2004;2006) concedes that modality is the linguistic feature that appears more noticeably in FID than in any other alternative form of discourse. Sentence adverbials such as certainly, perhaps, maybe, surely, and the like are a few to mention. The use of such devices makes discourse chunks neither direct nor indirect but combinations and integrations of characterological directness and narratological indirectness.

Passage (5) is taken from the short story entitled "Red" by Maugham (1974) and the excerpt (6) is extracted from Woolf (1927). These pieces of writing illustrate instances of free indirect speech (FIS) and free indirect thought (FIT), respectively. Instances of FID were italicized.

FIS: Then he sank heavily in his chair. *Was that the man who had prevented him from being happy? Was that the man whom Sally had loved all these years and for whom she had waited so desperately?* (5)

FIT: When she looked in the glass and saw her hair grey, her cheek sunk, at fifty, she thought, *possibly she might have managed things better – her husband; money; his books. But for her own part, she would never for a single second regret her decision, evade difficulties, or slur over duties.* (6)

2.2. Reported Speech and SLA Research

Cacchione (2006) asserts that research studies on the acquisition of reported speech in L1 are few. Studies on the analysis of the acquisition of reports of speech in L2 are even fewer and merely examine the syntactical features. Mayes (1990, as cited in Kuo (2001)) taped and transcribed 22 hours of conversations and conversational narratives and found that speakers apparently favored direct quotes over indirect ones. Moreover, MacWhinney's (1995, as cited in Cacchione's (2006)) analysis of the acquisition of speech reports in Italian, supported that direct forms took priority over other reporting forms of quotation and showed that there was no obvious acquisitional development toward the entire mastery over direct speech reports. As far as the written narrative milieu is concerned, Smith (2010) reported that although Japanese university students study or are, at least, exposed to the use of reported speech in the late middle school or early junior high school L2 lessons, but they often do not master quoting direct reports accurately.

3. METHOD

The present study explored the representation of character discourse in the narrative writings by Iranian L2 learners. What follows explains the research methodology of this study. Thus, the participants, treatment material, procedure, and data analysis are discussed, respectively.

3.1. Participants

Seven Iranian L2 learners (five women and two men) selected from a range of sophomore EFL learners at Khorramabad Branch of the Islamic Azad University participated in the study. The participants took part in two L2 writing classes. Each participant was given a topic about her or his story of English learning and a copy of a wordless picture narrative as a prompt. They were taught the technical and grammatical features of the first-person narration and wrote their personal narratives during two sessions. They were free to plan a plot on the given content and were recommended to consider the researcher as the receiver of their stories. The researcher scaffolded the participants with the necessary lexical and linguistic knowledge including the required grammatical structures that they lacked to overcome what might hinder their successful story writing. The writing time lasted from thirty to forty-five minutes, and the minimum word limit for each narrative was eighty words. Then the inscribed narratives were collected.

3.2. Treatment Material

The participants were given a picture story entitled “A Doctor’s Appointment” (Singleton, 2001) and were reminded to feel free in expressing their experiences. The picture story has eight frames and presents a safe, impersonal prompt to allow the respondents to discuss the topic, ask questions about it, and obtain certain information. As the story is about cartoon characters, it seems to be adaptable for use at different proficiency levels.

3.2.1. The Picture Narrative Plot

A person who had pain went to a medic. The doctor examined the patient with great care, asked him specific questions about the symptoms, and gave him a lot of information. The man pretended that he comprehended the doctor’s pieces of advice; nonetheless, he did not speak much English and knew nothing of what the doctor said. Although the doctor allowed him to ask questions, the man did not ask any. He got clear prescriptions. However, he was unable to take them. When he arrived home, one of his family members asked him what the doctor said. The man reported that he did not know. He became upset and mixed up at the end of the story.

3.3. Procedure

After two writing sessions, fourteen narrative pieces of writing were collected. For quantitative data analysis, the researcher compared the mean scores for the average of each mode of character discourse in the obtained narratives. Through qualitative data analysis, the researcher indicated how the participants shifted into and out of different modes of reported speech to present the characters’ speeches and thoughts.

3.4. Data Analysis

The researcher utilized the narratives written by the participants. The obtained data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The content analysis of the writings was conducted to indicate the character discourse representation in narratives by the participants. Grammatical mistakes, corrections, and verbal interactions extraneous to this study were eliminated.

4. RESULTS

This section reports and discusses the results obtained from the quantitative and qualitative data analysis for answering the research questions. The researcher performed the data analyses. Explanations are also presented to clarify the outcomes.

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The frequencies of clauses that indicated the three modes of depicting characters in the narratives written by the participants were calculated. Thus, the relative loading of each character position was tallied up in both picture narrative-based (PNs) stories and topic-based narratives (TNs). The mean scores (M) obtained for the number of DD, ID, and FID instances used in L2 narrative data were compared to determine the dialogical principle of the written L2 narratives regarding the character discourse representation.

4.1.1. DD

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the number of DD clauses in PNs (M=0.95) and TNs (M=0.05). As shown, the relative loading of DD in PNs is more than the equivalent instances in TNs. Thus, PNs include more direct quotations than TNs.

Table-1. Descriptive statistics of DDs in PNs & TNs.

Data type	N	Frequency	Mean
PN	7	37	0.95
TN	7	2	0.05

Source: Participants' narrative writings.

4.1.2. ID

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the number of ID clauses in PNs ($M = 0.05$) and TNs ($M = 0.05$). As illustrated in Table 2, the number of ID instances in PNs is larger than the number of ID clauses in TNs. However, PNs include more IDs than TNs. Also, the number of ID clauses is smaller than the number of DD clauses in the obtained data.

Table-2. Descriptive statistics of IDs in PNs & TNs.

Data type	N	Frequency	Mean
PN	7	8	0.89
TN	7	1	0.11

Source: Participants' narrative writings.

4.1.3. FID

The quantitative analysis of the data illustrated that there was no FID clause in PNs and TNs. That is, the participants did not violate the purely direct or indirect reporting styles. They either drew on DDs or used IDs to give voice to the characters in their narratives.

4.1.4. Research Question 1

Research question 1: Are there any differences between the relative leading of the three modes of character representation in the L2 narratives written on the given topic and the L2 narratives written on the assigned picture narrative by Iranian EFL sophomores?

The positive answer to the first research question signified that there were differences in the occurrence of the three modes of character representation in PNs and TNs. The number of DD and ID clauses used in PNs was more than the number of the same clauses in TNs. However, there was no instance of FID in the written narratives by the participants.

4.1.5. Research Question 2

Research question 2: What is the dialogical principle of character discourse in L2 narratives written by Iranian EFL sophomores?

The frequencies of DD, ID, and FID for PNs and TNs showed the dialogicality principle of the character discourse representation in the narratives by the participants. The results demonstrated that the dominant type of reporting in both PNs and TNs was DD. Also, there was no FID clause in the obtained data. Thus, the dialogicality principle of character discourse in both PNs and TNs was put as $DD > ID > FID$.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis of the L2 narrative writings centered on presenting specific excerpts taken from the participants. The following extracts indicate that the respondents used DD and ID reports to voice the characters in their PNs and TNs. As mentioned previously, the obtained data include no FID clause. DD instances were placed inside quotation marks. Also, ID clauses were underlined.

4.2.1. Examples of DD and ID Clauses in PNs

Excerpt (1) indicates the participant's use of both DD and ID clauses to represent the character in a piece of writing based on the assigned picture narrative. The participant shifts from an authorial clause to a DD clause. Then the participant draws on two authorial clauses followed by an ID clause.

... My mother asked me: "What did the doctor say?" I laughed painfully and I said that I didn't understand anything at all. ... (1)

4.2.2. Examples of DD and ID Clauses in TNs

Excerpt (2) illustrates another participant's use of a DD instance to voice the protagonist character in the narrative inscribed based on the given topic. Excerpt (3) shows the participant's use of the ID clause to reveal the character's speech. This learner makes a transition from an authorial clause to an ID clause followed by another authorial clause.

... I was very hopeless of learning and speaking, but I decided and told me: "I can learn it." ... (2)

... I told her that I had exam in July. I study very hard for it. ... (3)

5. DISCUSSION

The statistical analysis of the narratives inscribed by the participants indicated that they represented characters based on the categories of direct and indirect speech reports. Also, the number of direct character dialogues was larger than the number of indirect instances. No instance of FID was in the narratives. Thus, the dialogicality principle of character discourse representation in the L2 written narratives is formulated as DD > ID > FID. This finding is commensurable with the outcomes of other studies on reported discourse in L2 (e.g., MacWhinney, 1995, as cited in [Cacchione, 2006](#); Mayes, 1990, as cited in [Kuo, 2001](#)).

The participants recounted their narratives more from the perspectives of quoted characters. As [Koven \(2002\)](#) argues, narrators, drawing on DD, step back, renovate, or re-inhabit the skin of narrated personas to uncover performed characters' voices. Secondary to the characterological device of directness, they, more willingly, adopt an authorial or narratological role position and neutrally encode the characters' voices through ID. Koven also asserts that the indirect mode of representing the characters' speech is monolithic as the speakers' present attitudes toward then and there narrated sequences of actions and the addressees remain mute.

5.1. Pedagogical Implications

As [Rühlemann \(2009\)](#) puts forth, the quote analysis of textbooks gives the impression that reported discourse has a single mode and is the same as the indirect speech. This issue is likely to affect the L2 learners' conception of reported discourse in particular ways. First, the L2 learners may assume that the reporting system is one-way. This makes them divulge the choice of merely the indirect variant or the narratized mode from the direct report. Also, they may assume the direct mode as the major one in conversation and the preferred choice to be used in the genre of narrative fiction writing. He adds that the indirect narratized mode of discourse is intriguingly of secondary importance in both conversation and fiction and of primary significance in a journalistic writing style. The analysis of quotatives in EFL resource books reveals more parallels between the discourse representation in textbooks and the newspaper reportage.

The present study added to studies that help switch the point of view from mere syntactical and grammatical perspectives concerning the dualistic direct versus indirect reports of speech or discourse in most L2 resource books in the context of EFL education. It necessitates a further interactional approach and emphasizes more dialogized and multifarious participation frameworks and tripartite production formats for giving voice to characters including FID. This pluralistic perspective on reported speech modes seems to be conducive to assuming the possibility of the

speakers' capacity in the juxtaposition or even overlapping of these roles. Also, the findings of this study indicate that using the picture narrative prompt extracts more DD and ID clauses from the participants than assigning them a narrative topic. Thus, it recommends L2 teachers and researches to use picture narrative prompts to teach and practice the various modes of reporting to L2 learners.

6. CONCLUSION

All in all, the present study analyzed the representation of character discourse in narratives written by the Iranian L2 sophomores. It showed that the first-person participants have a tendency toward the presentation of characters' streams of discourse primarily through direct quotations and secondarily via the indirect mode of narration. Thus, the dialogical principle of character-focused segments of talk in the written narratives by the L2 participants is more DD-focused and less ID-oriented with no FID clause. Also, it indicates that giving the L2 participants a narrative picture prompt extracts more reported discourse instances than assigning them a narrative topic. Thus, the picture narrative may serve as an influential prompt to teach and practice the reporting system in the L2.

A Bakhtin-inspired standpoint (Bakhtin, 1981;1984; Koven, 2002; Maynard, 2007) entails moving beyond more or less binaristic analyses of reported speech in communication, in general, and in narrative performances, in particular. Also, as discussed by Rühlemann (2009), due to the implications of such a dualistic approach toward the presentation of reported discourse in the instructional context, the journalistically-oriented discourse mode in L2 textbooks should be reconsidered. There is a need to account for other reporting modes that are characteristic of real-life situations in L2 resource books.

6.1. Limitations of the Study

This study had some limitations. First, the availability of participants formed the restriction imposed on the sampling procedure. Also, few L2 participants took part in the study. Thus, the obtained results may lack generalizability. Moreover, the small number of participants did not allow the researcher to have two independent groups to attain statistically robust results. Furthermore, the participants did not show a willingness to continue the process of data collection to generate more pieces of narrative writings for the further analysis. The researchers are recommended to conduct large population and collaborated studies on participants with different proficiency levels to overcome limitations of participant availability. Besides, they are advised to encourage the participants to engage in warm-up communicative activities to prevail over their possible lack of a willingness to communicate in the L2.

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