An Analysis of the Use of Demonstratives in Argumentative Discourse by Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract—The present study aims to investigate the use of demonstratives in argumentative writing by Chinese EFL learners. A corpus-based study was conducted. In this study, demonstratives this, that, these, those, as well as it were tagged and analyzed. By the quantitative and qualitative analysis, the study shows the general features and typical errors of learners in using demonstratives. Some pedagogical suggestions are raised as well.

Index Terms—demonstratives, argumentative writing, corpus, EFL writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Demonstratives in English generally refers to this, these, that, and those. “The Grammar Book” explains that demonstrative determiners vary along two dimensions: proximity (this vs. that; these vs. those) and number (this vs. these; that vs. those) (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999). The above grammatical account of demonstratives constitutes the explanation about demonstratives in most ESL/EFL teaching practice and materials compilation (Lenko-Szymanska, 2004). However, extensive studies on demonstrative reference provide evidence that its use is far more complicated, especially at the discourse level. Choosing a proper demonstrative is related to genre (spoken and written), the speaker’s intention, and the larger discourse environment in which the demonstrative is used (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Petch-Tyson, 2000). To ESL/EFL learners the proper use of English demonstratives may remain a problem due to the lack of explicit instruction based on discourse and rhetorical analysis and a simplistic reliance on the learners’ intuition in deciding which demonstratives to use. Cross-linguistic comparison has showed evidence that ESL/EFL learners demonstrate a different pattern in their use of demonstratives; the underuse, overuse, and inappropriate use of certain forms have been revealed in learners of English (Lenko-Szymanska, 2004; Petch-Tyson, 2000; Wang and Sun, 2006). Therefore a reductionist approach to teaching English demonstratives may not be the best approach in EFL classes.

In this paper, I looked into the use of demonstratives in argumentative writing by Chinese EFL learners. The data were composed of 17 argumentative essays that second-year EFL students wrote for the writing part of a compulsory English language course New Standard College English (Reading and Writing) offered in Shandong University in China. Besides demonstratives this, that, these, and those, I included pronoun it in my analysis, for the reason that independent pronoun it also functions as demonstratives (McCarthy, 1994; Strauss, 2002). The quantitative and qualitative analyses of learners’ use of demonstratives showed that the learners in this study had a good command of English demonstratives and are able to use them for discourse purposes in building up cohesion. In the mean time, the analyses reveal some problems of learners in using demonstratives, which showed the necessity of addressing demonstratives explicitly in EFL classes. Some pedagogical suggestions are raised as well.

II. GRAMMATICAL CONSTRUCTS AND RELATED STUDIES

A. Grammatical Accounts of Demonstrative Reference

Halliday and Hasan categorized the use of English demonstratives into “three systematic distinctions: (1) between ‘near’ (this, these) and ‘not near’ (that, those); (2) between ‘singular’ (this, that) and ‘plural’ (these, those); (3) between Modifier (this, etc, plus nouns, eg: this tree is an oak) and Head (this, etc, without nouns, eg: this is an oak)” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, P. 60). By ‘nearness’ in the first distinction, it means that this implies something the speaker mentioned, some event closer in time to the speaker, or some shared common interest with the speaker. In contrast, that refers to something said by the interlocutor, an event associated with a past-time referent, and something unrelated to the speaker. This contrast can be observed in sentence (1). In the second distinction, a demonstrative adjective is found to be applicable to any class of noun, whereas a demonstrative pronoun is restricted in its reference to human nouns. Another important feature of demonstratives is that when this and that are used as a demonstrative pronoun, they can refer to “extended text, including text as ‘fact’” (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, P. 66). Sentence (2) illustrates the “text reference” feature of that. In extended text reference, that is always anaphoric (prior mention); this may be either...
anaphoric or cataphoric (subsequent mention) (Halliday and Hasan, 1976).

(1) A: I like apples, and I like bananas. These are my favorites.
   B: Those are my favorites too.
(2) A: I left my umbrella in the classroom.
   B: That was careless.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s explanation about the meaning of demonstratives in “The Grammar Book” (1999) is based on the proximity/distance distinction as well. They explained that the nearness or distance as conveyed by this, these, that, those “could be spatial, temporal (this = now vs. that = then), psychological (this = more preferred vs. that = less preferred), or simply sequential (this = first mention vs. that = second mention)” (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, P. 307). The proximal/distant contrast is shown in sentences (3) to (6).

(3) spatial: I like this restaurant than that one over there.
(4) temporal: I like this movie better than that movie I watched last month.
(5) psychological: I like this course better, so I didn’t choose that one.
(6) sequential: This dress is more expensive than that one.

It has been noted that there are different patterns of using demonstratives in spoken and written English. Based on an extensive analysis of spoken data, Strauss (1993) proposed that situational uses of demonstratives should be distinguished from textual and cataphoric uses. More importantly, pronoun it should be included in the analysis of demonstrative reference to provide an accurate account for the spoken data. Strauss found that that/those and it were used mainly with anaphoric textual reference, and this/these were used anaphorically only 51% because this/these are also used cataphorically, exophorically and nonreferentially (as cited from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999).

McCarthy (1994) made distinctions between different functions of demonstrative it, this, and that in written discourse. His hypothesis is that “(1) It is the unmarked reference item and refers to current entities or foci of attention. (2) This signals a shift of entity or focus of attention to a new focus. (3) That signals reference across entities or foci of attention, that is, to a topical entity which is not the current one” (P. 273). In a word, it carries on a focus under discussion, whereas this and that introduce and indicate a shift of focus in discourse. The choice of demonstratives is based on the larger discourse segments and environment in which the demonstratives are used, and is a reflection of the way the writer structures their arguments (McCarthy, 1994).

B. Studies of Demonstrative Use by ESL/EFL Learners

Studies on the use of demonstrative reference by ESL/EFL learners showed that learners’ pattern of demonstratives differs from that of native speakers. Petch-Tyson (2000) conducted a corpus-based comparison of native English speakers and learners of English with Dutch, French, Finnish, and Swedish L1 backgrounds in their use of demonstratives in argumentative writing. It was found that the EFL groups in general used demonstratives less frequently than the native writers and they were not as successful as their native-speaking counterparts in using demonstrative anaphors to make situation reference, which were shown in cases of unsuccessful reference, underuse of proximal demonstratives this/these, overuse of that, and failure to use retrospective labels properly in situation reference. Petch-Tyson suggested that in order to produce effective argumentative writing the lexical and rhetorical features of demonstratives should be addressed.

Lenko-Szymanska (2004) conducted a similar corpus-based analysis of the pattern of demonstratives as anaphora markers in Polish advanced learners’ English, as compared to the native counterparts. The results showed that Polish advanced learners of English overused demonstratives in argumentative writing, especially the distal forms that/those. Learners also showed an overuse of those as a determiner and an underuse of those as a pronoun. In Wang and Sun (2006) study of comparing the use of demonstratives by Chinese learners of English and native English speakers in argumentative writing, they found that Chinese learners of English had the tendency of underusing demonstratives in general but overusing the distal demonstrative that, which to some extent lessened the strength of their arguments. Their use of demonstratives as situation reference was also found unclear within the context.

III. THE STUDY

A. Data

In this paper, I looked into the use of demonstratives in argumentative writing by Chinese second-year EFL learners majoring in different fields. The data used in this study were collected in the writing part of a compulsory English language course New Standard College English (Reading and Writing) in Shandong University. The students in this study were college students of non-English majors, aging from 18 to 20.

The data used in this study were the first major essay that students wrote in the course. The writing task was an argumentative essay on Wal-Mart controversies. Students were asked to take a position on the issue, and present evidence and support for their arguments by incorporating different resources. Students went through a process of composing thesis statement, outline, draft one, draft two, and the final essay. The essays collected for the present purposes were the final version of the essay. Altogether 17 essays (19,811 tokens) were used for the present analysis.

B. Data Analysis and Procedures
Instances of this, these, that, those, and it were manually elicited from the essays. All instances of this, these, those, and it were included in the present study. Since that can function both as a singular demonstrative and a complementizer, the present study only included instances of that as singular demonstratives. Considering the fact that students incorporated different sources as support, instances of demonstratives in quotes were excluded.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted on the data. For quantitative analysis, the use of this, these, that, those, and it were categorized into three textual subcategories: anaphoric, cataphoric, and non-phoric uses. Anaphoric use refers to demonstratives as backward pointing in the text, cataphoric use is forward pointing in the text, and non-phoric use is to refer to an item that has not been referred to within the actual text (Strauss, 2002). Besides, this/these, that/those are counted respectively in their use of demonstrative adjectives and demonstrative pronouns. By conducting a qualitative analysis, the general features of using demonstratives in argumentative writing by these ESL students were identified, and the typical errors in using demonstratives were discussed.

IV. RESULT

A. Quantitative Analysis

Tab. I shows the overall frequencies of the demonstratives. It can be seen that it is more frequently used (48%) than this/these (37%), and that/those (15%). It is out of my surprise to find that it is the most frequent used demonstrative because it is commonly believed that this/these, and that/those are the generic demonstratives. However this finding echoes what was reported by Strauss (2002) on spoken discourse data of native American English speakers. It suggests that in ESL teaching, it may be necessary to include it in the explanation of demonstrative reference. Another interesting finding is that this/these compose 37% of the total, and is used more than twice as many as that/those. According to Lenko-Szymanska (2004) and Wang (2006), the use of this/these indicates a more native-like pattern. If their interpretations are correct, the findings here could be an indication that the students under discussion demonstrate a good command of demonstratives this/these and that/those.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>TABLE I FREQUENCIES OF DEMONSTRATIVES IN THEIR ANAPHORIC, CATAPHORIC AND NON-PHORIC</th>
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<td>Total number (%)</td>
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Tab. I also shows the respective frequencies of demonstratives in their anaphoric, cataphoric, and non-phoric uses. Generally speaking anaphoric use is the most frequently used function of the demonstratives. It is in line with the genre of the data, i.e. written discourse. For argumentative writing, it is necessary to apply demonstrative devices to create cohesion and coherence within the text. Anaphoric demonstrative, by referring to a proposition, a situation, a topic, or an entity that have been mentioned in the previous discourse, is the best device of forming cohesion within a written text (Petch-Tyson, 2000). Students’ proper use of the anaphoric demonstrative suggests a basic understanding of English demonstratives. There are instances of cataphoric demonstratives, especially in cases of that/those and it. A close look into the data reveals that the cataphoric uses of that/those and it are mostly idiomatic expressions. In sentence (7), the second those is used as a pronoun and followed by an attributive clause explaining what “those enemies” refer to. The pattern is frequent in the data. According to Wang (2006), it shows a native-like pattern of using demonstratives, because American students like to use those in “those + who” pattern indicating “the people who”. The first it in sentence (8) is a pronoun that introduces the real subject of the clause starting with the complementizer that “that Wal-Mart is destroying some local jobs”. Idiomatic uses of cataphoric it are frequent in the data; it showed a good command of idiomatic expressions by the students.

(7) Due to its success, it brought a lot of enemies against it. Those enemies are mostly those who are running out of business because of the existence of Wal-Mart.

(8) It’s true that Wal-Mart is destroying some local jobs, yet it is creating more job opportunities, cheaper products for the consumers and donations that help raise the standards of living of the area.

Tab. II shows the frequencies of demonstratives this/these and that/those when they are used together with a NP (noun phrase) or as a pronoun. It can be seen that this/these and that/those are more used together with a NP as demonstrative adjectives. Compared to what have been reported by Petch-Lyon (2000) and Wang (2006) on the overuse of that as demonstrative pronouns by Polish and Chinese learners of English, the learners in this study demonstrated a more balanced use of this/these and that/those as demonstrative adjectives.

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<th>TABLE II FREQUENCIES OF DEMONSTRATIVES ADJECTIVES AND DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUNS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrative adj. (%)</td>
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<td>this/these</td>
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<td>that/those</td>
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B. Qualitative Analysis
General features of using demonstratives
this / these

In the data this is used most often as situation reference or text reference (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). Learners use this to refer to the previously mentioned and described proposition and situation. At a psychological level, the proposition or situation may be positive and closer to the author's own position and arguments, as in excerpt (9). Sometimes the propositions can be less desirable and in distance far from the author's own position, as in excerpt (10). This is in contrast to the dominant analysis of this/these as being proximal demonstratives (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Lenko-Szymanska, 2004). It seems that this is mostly used to frame the arguments by stringing together the text and creating a natural flow of arguments and reasoning.

(9) In March 2005, Wal-Mart was ordered by court to pay an amount of $11 million for hiring of illegal immigrants \( \text{as janitor in its stores all over United State (Greenhouse, 2005).} \) This kind of settlement is just not server enough to stop Wal-Mart from hiring more illegal immigrant for cheap labor under the shadow of the law.

(10) In the video 'Is Wal-Mart beneficial for America,' it describes 'Rubbermaid' as if this company was a sacrifice of Wal-Mart's. Specifically speaking, as the cost of rubber raised, 'Rubbermaid' broke down because Wal-Mart refused to sell their products as price went up. However, looking at this issue from a different perspective, it was the Rubbermaid organization, which was at fault, depending completely upon another business when the company should have had its own competitiveness, was inappropriate.

In contrast to this as a text referent to frame the author's arguments, the plural form these is more used to refer to an entity or topic with a specific referent, as is shown in excerpt (11).

(11) Many would have to be thrown into the streets and this would not only be the 1.9 million people working. Myriad of these employees are parents who are also responsible for the daily needs of their family.

that / those

Categorized as distal demonstrative, that is documented as establishing 'a sense of distance', which could be spatial, temporal, psychological, or simply sequential (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, P. 307). The data in this study showed some tendencies of that as a distal demonstrative. those was observed to have a similar function, but indicates a more specific referent than that.

The learners in this study used that to refer to something further, less desirable, or simply present a neutral position when they state a fact or something less desirable to create a psychological distance. The author of excerpt (12) takes a position that Wal-Mart treats its associates unfairly. Women discrimination in salary treatment is one of the major aspects that the author develops to prove his arguments. In an example he used, after presenting the actual wages the woman associates were paid, the author followed up with demonstrative that commenting on the fact that “that was before tax”. Here, the anaphoric that has the connotation of ‘even that amount of money’, indicating this is a fact undesired by the author. A simple use of demonstrative that gives the notion the author does not agree with Wal-Mart’s unfair treatment to its woman associates. The use of that in excerpt (13) shows a neutral position of the author. It simply describes a situation. With the use of that the author creates a psychological distance from the statement.

(12) Her wages is …, and that was before tax.

(13) Although so many criticisms were made about Wal-Mart and tried to put its name down, Wal-Mart moved on with its strict business mind and strategy. Business world is tough. Whoever comes up with better idea and is willing to sacrifice their time and ability can survive. This means that company has to constantly update itself so that consumers would not get bored and lose their interest.

That is also used to indicate a physical distance in written texts. It creates a conceptual map about the locations of the topics. The author of excerpt (14) commented on the effects of having a Wal-Mart upon the retailers and community. When referring to those suppliers who may follow Wal-Mart’s step, the author used that indicating a physical distance between the remote and rural area where Wal-Mart usually opens up.

(14) Knowing that there will be many potential consumers in that area, suppliers will try to sell things near Wal-Mart as well, trying to free ride the market power. As a result, the community in that local area can grow due to sigma effect.

That is found to indicate sequential distance as well, i.e. second mentioning of the entity, topic, or proposition. In excerpt (15), the author used these several times to create a sense of suspense in her introduction paragraph. After having prompted her readers with a series of questions about the giant store, the author provided the answer. In giving the answer, she shifted from demonstrative these to that, indicating the store has been already mentioned in the context, and here when referring to it, it is a second/third mention.

(15) Have you seen the familiar big stores when you are travelling out of the hometown? Are you surprised that you can discover these stores every hole and corner even outside the USA? Are you curious about these stores? Wal-Mart, that is the Wal-Mart!

it

In comparison to the use of this/these and that/those, students’ use of demonstrative it is straightforward. It is mainly used in two occasions: one as pronoun referring to a specific referent in second mention, usually an entity or organization; the other as idiomatic expressions.

It as object reference refers to a specific referent, neutral in a sense that it is used to introduce a fact or an example. It could be followed by either positive evidence or negative evidence, but it is seldom followed by a comment. Excerpts
(16) Wal-Mart is now the largest retail store in the United States. It has come a long way from being in the bottom of its retail market to finally reach to top.

(17) Even though in some cases people would prefer shopping elsewhere than Wal-Mart, which would decrease the revenue generated to Wal-Mart, yet it benefits consumers as well as the economy overall. It benefits consumers because they would have more options to choose from, all with high quality goods and services and pleasing prices.

(18) Yet, it has often been criticized for its harsh labor practice it employ in order to be the most dominant store in the U.S. and World market and also to meet the everyday demand from its buyers.

The use of it in idiomatic expressions and sentence patterns indicates students’ mastery of the idiomatic expressions. The following are some examples.

(19) It’s reported that time record from 25,000 employees in July 2000 found 1,371 cases of minors working during school hours and at night.

(20) It may be hard for a company the size of Wal-Mart to pay notice to all its employees.

(21) It is true that Wal-Mart provides convenient and cheap goods to people but it also provides inconvenient services to the employees.

(22) Is it worth to buy from Wal-Mart while Wal-Mart does not treat his workers properly?

One of the biggest problems among the learners in this study is unclear referents of demonstratives. In excerpt (23), judging from the text, the second it should refer to Wal-Mart, but from the immediate discourse environment, it is hard to tell whether it refers to Wal-Mart or not. In excerpt (24), the author describes the situations of the Wal-Mart workers overseas. He mentioned the long hour shift, low wages, and lack of health insurance. At the end of the excerpt, the student uses a demonstrative this to summarize that “this is the situation of foreign workers face, but Wal-Mart has done virtually nothing to improve the situation”. By using this, the student’s intention is to refer to the poor treatments of overseas workers in different aspects as mentioned above. However, a mere use of this cannot signal clearly the more comprehensive referent, which may cause comprehension problems to the readers.

(23) The frontline video “Is Wal-Mart good for America?”, Gary Gereffi has reported that Wal-Mart is the dominant company for many United States suppliers. It requires that prices go down from year to year. If they cannot meet Wal-Mart prices, it will go offshore and those suppliers will go out of businesses.

(24) What’s more, Wal-Mart’s way to speed up the production time is to impose wage differential base on the time taken for production. The chance of such inhuman practices happening in an American factory is slim to none. However, because of the influences the Wal-Mart has on the Chinese suppliers; they can demand almost anything they want out of the workers. Such practice is further demonstrate when “Workers making toys for Wal-Mart in China's Guangdong Province reported that they would have to meet a quota of painting 8,900 toy pieces in an eight hour shift in order to earn the stated wage of $3.45 a day. If they failed to meet that quota, the factory would only pay them $1.23 for a day’s work” (“The real fact about Wal-Mart,” 2005). In addition to the long hour shift, according to Simon’s report “The survey of 16 Wal-Mart suppliers found that some pay as little as half the minimum daily wage, provide no health insurance or require mandatory overtime. One company provided only one restroom for its 2,000 employees” (Simons, 2007). This is the situation of foreign workers face, but Wal-Mart has done virtually nothing to improve the situation.

(25) To sum up, Wal-Mart is already in such a large scale that it is quite difficult to absorb the fact how it has done all of this mainly through its pricing technique and how it has over-taken the grocery markets and how it has sold $244.5 billion worth of goods last year.

(26) Wal-Mart imports all of its goods from developing nations because of their cheap rates. This Wal-Mart china trade is so colossal that it cannot be discontinued easily by both the ends.

(27) Many of those employees are parents who are also responsible for the daily needs of their family. This shows how Wal-Mart has taken the responsibility to take care of the lives of millions of people in the US.

Inconsistencies in the use of demonstrative this and that

Inconsistencies in the use of demonstrative this and that are found in the data. In excerpt (28), the author mainly uses this to frame and foreground his narration and argument. The use of “this fact” and “these people” are appropriate in the context. However, the abrupt shift from referring to the same group of people by these to those seems unjustified. It gives the readers an impression of inconsistency and a sudden break of discourse flow. Excerpt (29) is by the same
author. Here he used those to refer to ‘people who get promoted based on the years of service’, but right after it, he used this to refer to the proposition, stating that it does not apply to women. The argument is confusing due to the inconsistent use of this/these and that/those. Excerpt (30) reveals a similar problem in using these and those. Since the topic is Wal-Mart, the author refers to the small retailers as those, but when referring to them for the second time in the same sentence, she shifted to these, which seems to break her own rule of using demonstratives.

(28) China has billion of peoples and millions of them are unemployed. So they are willing to work for any kind of wage they can get. Because of this fact, Wal-Mart use a little of its billion of revenues to hire these people way under the average worker’s wage. The wage they pay to those workers is not even 10% of what they pay for American workers. This strategy further increases the profit to spending ratio.

(29) The first and for-most sign of discrimination is the denial of any kind of promotion even if women have worked as hard, maybe even harder than their male counterparts. But the reality is that those men will get promote based how years of service and sales they achieve, but this is not the same standard for women.

(30) Compared with those “poor” small retailers who work on the main street but lost their business life finally (Sarah Anderson, 1994, p. 21), Wal-Mart shows a much firmer spirit of competition than these small retailers.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS TO EFL TEACHING

The qualitative and quantitative analyses showed that the learners in this study have a good command of English demonstratives. The analyses haven’t shown the typical patterns of using demonstratives by ESL/EFL learners as reported by Petch-Tyson (2000), Lenko-Szymanska (2004), and Wang and Sun (2006). Still it is important to note that the learners have some problems in using English demonstrative properly. Therefore, the uses of demonstratives in written discourse may need to be explicitly addressed in ESL teaching. Specifically, the learner errors, such as unclear referents, overuse of a certain demonstrative, and the inconsistencies in using this and that, are worthy of formal instructions. A close discourse and textual analysis which focuses on demonstrative choices within context to build up cohesion and avoid redundancy may be needed in ESL classes. A comparison of the English speakers’ use of demonstratives and learners’ use of demonstratives may be helpful for students to understand the finer meaning differences between demonstratives. In terms of ESL writing classes, activities such as peer review or peer proofreading may provide the student writers with a better sense of audience and an enhanced awareness of using demonstratives clearly and accurately.

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