

# A Comparative Analysis of Discourse Structures in EFL Learners' Oral and Written Narratives

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Received: August 1, 2011      Accepted: August 12, 2011      doi:10.5296/ijl.v3i1.917

## Abstract

This study was undertaken to respectively portray the discourse features underlying the oral and written narratives produced by Chinese EFL learners. Via detailed analysis of the qualitative data, this study seeks to reveal the universal and distinctive structural components in oral and written narratives by EFL learners and to what degree EFL learners' oral and written narratives deviate from each other in discourse structures. Results show that the discourse constructs underlying EFL learners' oral and written narratives, on both the macro and micro scales, are schematically and structurally very much alike, albeit only one trivial discrepancy. In addition, the frequency distributions of each structural component further demonstrate that the two registers saliently differ in the compositional constituents of abstracting the topic in the beginning and terminating the whole narration, and they also share with each other some universal structural features as to how they elaborate the core story. Implications of these findings for narrative studies are discussed.

**Keywords:** Discourse structures, Oral narratives, Written narratives, EFL learners

## 1. Introduction

This study intends to investigate the discourse structures generated from Chinese EFL learners' oral and written narratives elicited with the same topic prompt, with a primary focus on the comparison of the universal and different discourse features on the basis of the narrative structures in EFL learners' oral and written narrative compositions. In what follows we present a literature overview of the relevant studies concerning the notion of narrative/narrative structure and empirical written and oral narrative studies so as to frame our own research and conceptualize the research questions guiding it.

### *1.1 The Concept of Narrative*

There are a number of disciplines that investigate narrative, including cognitive psychology, cognitive science, ethnography, history, linguistics, literary science, sociology and theology (Quasthoff, 1997). Thus, there are considerable variations in the definitions of narrative from various perspectives.

In literary study, there are roughly four basic approaches to the definition of narrative, which may be termed as temporal, causal, minimal, and transactional (Bal, 1985; Richardson, 2000). The temporal approach posits the representation of events in a time sequence as the defining feature of narrative; the second holds that some causal connections between the events is essential; the third and the most capacious, which originates from Genette (1980), insists that any statement of an action or event be regarded as a narrative, since it implies a transformation or transition from an earlier to a later state; the transactional approach takes narrative as simply a way of reading a text, instead of a feature or essence found in a text. Generally speaking, the temporal and the causal stances have been regarded as the most commonly employed positions.

Linguistic studies present a more diversified picture than literary studies. Some researchers (Capps & Ochs, 1995; Labov, 1972) define narrative from a socio-linguistic perspective. According to Labov, a narrative is defined as "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred" (1972: 360). In this sense, narrative serves as a means to organize human experience, or as a process to construct meaning by recapitulating past experience. Some studies (e.g. Mandler & Johnson 1977; Rumelhart 1980) analyze the notion of narrative from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, which views narrative as a cognitive schema. Narrativity is therefore the product of a tropological operation by which the metaphor of narration is applied to a series of words on a page. This definition considers narrative as a product, or to be more precise, one of reflections of an individual's discourse ability. Other researches make investigation into narrative from a pedagogical perspective and probe into functions of narratives in language acquisition (Baynham, 2000). Toolan (2001) defines narrative as a perceived sequence of non-randomly connected events, typically involving, as the experiencing agonist, humans or quasi-humans, or other sentient beings, from whose experience we humans can 'learn'. His definition is innovative in that it, on the one hand, introduces three defining

features of narrative: sequenced and interrelated events; foregrounded individuals and crisis to resolution progression; on the other hand, proposes the idea that addressees can learn from narratives.

Given that narratives in this study are the EFL learners' oral and written discourse and that their production is based on a given topic, L2 learners' narratives are broadly defined, on the basis of Bruner's encapsulated conception, as anything recounted or recorded in the form of a series of interrelated events and/or states associated with participants of these events. In line with the definition, the minimum requirements of a narrative consist of (1) sequenced or interrelated events; (2) the participants of actions; (3) retrospective interpretations of sequential events. There are some advantages of defining L2 learners' narrative as such. Firstly, both spoken form and written form have been taken into consideration. Secondly, the defining feature of narrative—"temporal sequence" in a series of events is recognized but not over-emphasized to meet the need of L2 narrative production on a given topic. Finally, "interrelated" would be understood as generally connected, which is a more general, oblique and indefinite logical relation underlying the events or states in L2 learners' narratives.

### *1.2 The Notion of Narrative Structure*

Narrative structure is another key term involved in the research. In this section, the conception of narrative structure is reviewed on the basis of the existing literature from literary, sociolinguistic, psychological and pedagogical perspectives.

In literary study, narrative structure has been roughly conceptualized as the structural framework that underlies the order and manner in which a narrative is presented to readers, listeners or viewers. Generally speaking, a literary narrative normally contains three components: beginning, middle and end (Yu, 2005). It begins with the setting, the characters, and the character's problems. The middle of a narrative is organized around a plot, which is "distinct from story" (Tomashevski, 1965: 67). Basically, a story is regarded as a skeletal description of the fundamental events in their natural, logical and chronological order (Toolan, 1988). Plot refers to how the story is told, that is the form of storytelling, or the structure, that the story follows. In this part, an initiating event, a series of subsequent events embedded with roadblocks, rising excitement and climax are included. The end of the story contains a resolution and thus the ending to the story.

The most representative theory on narrative structure in the province of sociolinguistics is proposed by Labov, who studied the development of narrative techniques from children to adults with diversified social background to isolate and distill the elements of narrative. These inquiries perfectly corresponds to sociolinguistic frameworks, i.e., language is communicative, social and interactional in nature, and sociolinguists address questions of how language is shaped and reshaped in the discourse of everyday life, and how it reflects and creates the social realities of life (Yang and Sun, 2010). According to Labov (1972), the basic components of a narrative structure include: the abstract (summary and/or point of the story), orientation (time, place, characters and situation), complicating action (the event

sequence, or plot, usually with a crisis or turning point), evaluation (where the narrator steps back from the action to comment on meaning and communicate emotion--- the soul of the narrative), resolution (the outcome of the plot), and a coda (ending the story and bringing action back to the present). Not all stories contain every element, and they can occur in varying sequences. Labov's characterization of narrative structure "reflected contemporary concerns and influenced later work in discourse analysis" (Johnstone, 2001: 638). It, however, is suitable for detailed case studies instead of large number of narrative inquiries.

The notion of narrative structure in psycholinguistic studies is related to the underlying structure of narrative, known as story schema or story grammar. Story grammar is the mental representations of the elements of a story or the knowledge of how stories are organized, which readers/listeners employ in their comprehension and resulting memory-representation of narrative discourse. Despite the fact that different researchers (e.g. Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Rumelhart, 1977) have posited somewhat different variations of the SG model, the basic components of a narrative are universal. Stories consist of sets of sequentially related categories (setting, initiating event, internal response, attempt, consequence and reaction) and each category refers to different types of information that serve specific functions in the story. Although the models of story grammar are useful in developing an understanding of story comprehension, crucial problems have been identified. One is that the models provide only simple characterizations of a small class of discourses, namely single goal, single protagonist stories, thus failing to be applied to the naturally occurring stories as well as language teaching and learning.

Moreover, attempts of defining narrative structures have also been made from the pedagogical perspective. Bardovi-Harlig (1992) distils two constituents of narrative discourse when studying learners' narratives, they are the foreground and the background. The foreground relates events belonging to the skeletal structure of the discourse and consists of clauses that move time forward (Dry, 1981). The background does not itself narrate main events but provides supportive materials that elaborate on or evaluate the events in the foreground. This interpretation of narrative structure, which examines from a macroscopic aspect, may therefore be operative for researches with large sum of subjects.

The notions of narrative structure in the literary, sociolinguistic, psychological and pedagogical perspectives provide some basic understanding of the narrative structure. The ultimate purpose of the present study, however, is to search for the paradigmatic discourse structures emerging from the learners' oral and written data of narrative production. Therefore, narrative structure in this study is broadly defined as the way the learners organize message in reporting or recording their past experience. In this sense, narrative structure is regarded as a structure of information, in which salient idea units in narrative discourse will be highlighted for further categorization.

### *1.3 Empirical Studies on Spoken and Written Narratives*

The most fundamental classification of discourse is that between the analysis of oral and

written language. Generally speaking, there is a long history of research on the linguistic characterization of speech and writing.

Three interrelated aspects of speech and writing, according to Halliday, need to be taken into consideration, they are the nature of the medium, the function served and the formal properties displayed (1989: 78).

Concerning the first aspect, after a comprehensive analysis of such features as lexical density and grammatical intricacy, Halliday (1989) concludes that the written language presents a synoptic view. It defines its universe as product rather than process, as a thing that exists; spoken language, on the other hand, exhibits a dynamic view. It defines its universe primarily as process, encoding it not as a structure but as constructing. In the spoken mode, language phenomena happen instead of existing.

As for the functions served by speech and writing, such scholars as Goody (1977), Goody and Watt (1963), propose that the two modes of production serve quite distinctive functions in society. Goody (quoted in Brown and Yule, 1983: 13) points out that written language has two main functions: the first is the storage function which permits communication over time and space; and the second is one which shifts language from the oral to the visual domain, permitting words and sentences to be examined out of their original contexts where they appear in a very different and highly “abstract” contexts. Speech, on the contrary, is largely employed for the establishment and maintenance of human relationships. Therefore, it is plausible to suggest that written language is used to decipher and transfer information (primarily transactional use), whereas oral language is mostly used in daily life with an aim to establish and maintain social relations (primarily interactional use).

Furthermore, a vast body of research has been conducted to examine the formal differences between speech and writing (see, e.g., Biber, 1988). Basically, writing is claimed to be more structurally complex and elaborate than speech, indicated by such features as longer sentences or T-units and a greater use of subordination (Chafe, 1982); more explicit than speech, in that it has complete idea units with all assumptions and logical relations encoded in the text; more decontextualized, or autonomous, than speech, so that it is less dependent on shared situation or background knowledge; less personally involved than speech and more detached and abstract than speech (Chafe, 1982); characterized by a higher concentration of new information than speech (Brown and Yule, 1983); and more deliberately organized and planned than speech (Akinnaso, 1982).

Most of these abovementioned characterizations stem from typical speech and typical writing, instead of all spoken and written genres, and these generalizations are far from accurate and adequate. The genre of narrative, for instance, has been scarcely employed to draw comparisons between speech and writing. Specifically, most studies on narratives concentrate on the investigation of narrative structures in either written or oral language, with more emphasis on oral narratives (Johnstone, 2001; Özyildirim, 2009). Therefore, there is an urgent need to investigate the narrative structures in the oral language in comparison with the

written version, which will probably allow significant conclusions to be drawn about the structural features of narratives as a specific genre.

#### *1.4 Rationale for the Study*

Narrative plays an important role in the development of individuals and human society. As Johnstone states: “the essence of humanness, long characterized as the tendency to make sense of the world through rationality, has come increasingly to be characterized as the tendency to tell stories, to make sense of the world through narrative” (2001: 635). Narrative studies, as a significant part of the repertoire of the social sciences, have touched upon a wide range of disciplines and professions including cognitive science, ethnography, linguistics, literary science, sociology and theology (Quasthoff, 1997). Among narrative studies, literary approaches and linguistic approaches are two major research areas in this regard. Literary studies tend to show “what systematic attention to language can reveal about narratives themselves, their authorship/tellers, and those to whom they address” (Yu, 2005: 2). Within linguistics, researchers have examined various perspectives ranging from the formal structure of narrative to the use of narrative in the presentation. On the basis of the theories and empirical studies of narratives, the present study is conducted for the following three reasons:

First, following the basic classification of oral and written language, the narrative research can be roughly divided into three categories: (1) oral narratives (e.g. Fung & Cater, 2007; Hoey, 1991); (2) written narratives (e.g. Brown & Yule, 1983; Ellis and Yuan, 2004); (3) oral and written narratives (e.g. Dykstra-Pruim, 2003). Generally speaking, in narrative studies, most attention has been paid to the first two categories: either oral narratives or written narratives. Sporadic studies can be found in examining and comparing oral and written narratives, let alone the comparison of discourse structure in EFL learners’ oral and written narratives.

Second, spoken and written language have been studied and compared by linguists from various perspectives, including similarities and differences in their history, nature, form and functions, etc. However, few researches have been conducted on the comparison of discourse structures between the two registers. In most of the narrative studies, discourse structure is regarded as one of the elements guaranteeing coherence in both oral and written narratives, which serves as “a defining characteristic of a competent narrative” (Pavlenko, 2006: 108) and can offer insights into EFL learners’ discourse competence to some extent. This study is designed to compare the discourse structures in oral and written narratives, aiming to provide a novel perspective in narrative studies and shed some lights on oral and written language teaching and testing.

Third, generally speaking, in the relevant fields, a large proportion of the literature exclusively deals with L1 language; few researchers have studied L2 language, fewer still, have made the comparison of discourse structures in L2 learners’ oral and written narratives, to the present researcher’s limited knowledge. As a result, there is an urgent need to investigate the discourse patterns in Chinese EFL learners’ oral and written narratives, which

can possibly benefit L2 language research, teaching and learning to some extent.

## **2. Research design**

### *2.1 Research Questions*

The present study addresses the following questions:

1. What are the discourse structures that are likely to be generated from Chinese EFL learners' oral narratives on a given topic?
2. What are the discourse structures that are likely to be generated from Chinese EFL learners' written narratives on the same topic?
3. What are the shared and different discourse features across the learners' oral and written narratives in terms of narrative structures?

### *2.2 Research Methods*

To generate theoretical models of discourse structures from EFL learners' oral and written narratives, this study, not relying on any existing models of narrative analysis but on empirical facts, primarily adopts three qualitative research methods, i.e., grounded theory analysis, content analysis and narrative analysis.

The three qualitative methods share a lot of common features such as data reduction, categorization of narrative components and construct formulation. In addition, they are all concerned with textual analysis. In the present study, the basic principle of the qualitative method to the narrative data was represented by a systematic interpretation of narratives on the basis of the comprehensive employment of three qualitative research methods. While qualitative content analysis functioned to derive themes or generate salient ideas from data reduction, narrative analysis was employed to identify the core story so as to mark off the narrative beginning and ending and categorize the message sequences in the story. Furthermore, both qualitative content analysis and narrative analysis were applied to develop the content- and structure-based categories from different perspectives. In the entire process of categorization, however, it was grounded theory method that integrated the most salient themes generated through the analysis of the data and established the connection between categories and sub-categories developed through either qualitative content analysis or narrative analysis.

### *2.3 Data Collection*

The data employed in the study consists of two parts. The oral data was extracted from SECCL (the Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners), while the written part was collected within 45 minutes in class from narrative compositions produced by sophomores, who exclusively major in English.

#### *2.3.1 Oral Data*

The data in the present study was extracted from the Spoken English Corpus of Chinese



Learners (SECCL), which was built on the basis of “Graded Test for English Majors (TEM)-Band 4 Oral Test” (TEM-Band 4 Oral Test), a national standardized test to assess the Chinese college EFL learners’ spoken English in different types of situations and on a wide range of topics. The samples employed in this study were word-by-word transcribed texts of 30 monologic narratives from TEM Band 4 Oral Test of 2002, in which test takers were required to talk on the given topic of “Describe an embarrassing situation in which you feel angry”. Speakers had three minutes to prepare and the monologic talk lasted three minutes.

### 2.3.2 Written Data

The written sample consists of 30 narrative compositions produced by 30 sophomores in Yangzhou University. The participants were exclusively English majors with about ten years of learning English on average. The age of informants ranges from 20 to 22.

The topic of the composition was “Describe an embarrassing situation in which you feel angry”, the same as the one in TEM-Band 4 Oral Test of 2002. The time limit of the writing task was 45 minutes. During their independent writing, neither dictionary nor other reference books were allowed.

## 2.4 Data Analyzing Procedures

### Step 1: Coding T-units

The procedure of coding T-units in this study is conducted to reduce the learners’ narratives to acceptable and analyzable elements, and to lay a solid foundation for producing core constructs and developing categories from the analyzable units. A T-unit is essentially a main clause including all subordinate clauses and other constructions that go with it. For the practical purpose of the present study, a T-unit was coded on the basis of the following principles.

1. A simple sentence, or a clause in the coordinate sentence (with such coordinators as “and”, “but” and “so”), as shown in Example 3.1 and Example 3.2, was regarded as a T-unit.

#### Example 3.1

[T20]We don’t have to act as typical boys or girls one day. [T21]And that’s the end of the story.

*(From Oral Case 3)*

#### Example 3.2

[T22] I donated all my money, [T23] but what I got was satirize, misunderstand and being wronged.

*(From Written Case 13)*

2. A complex sentence, which consists of a main clause with its subordinate clauses, as shown in Example 3.3 and Example 3.4, was a T-unit.



**Example 3.3**

[T5] *When I retell my story, I found the teacher was waving to us and the lots of students went out of the room.*

*(From Oral Case 18)*

**Example 3.4**

[T1] *Although many years has passed, I still remember that embarrassing experience.*

*(From Written Case 3)*

3. Either direct speech or indirect speech, together with the reporting clause, as in Example 3.5 and 3.6, was considered as a T-unit.

**Example 3.5**

[T11] *when I get back... I asked <arfed arfed> John "John, where's your homework?"* [T12] *John said, "Oh, sorry, I couldn't finished today, so you'd better go to the teacher's office without wizout my homework."* [T13] *I said "Ok, well."...*

*(From Oral Case 17)*

**Example 3.6**

[T17] *One of my friends said to those boys: "You guys really shouldn't treat your monitor like this. Even if you are discontent with her, you should speak it out rather than rebel against her..."*

*(From Written Case 10)*

However, oral English is quite different from that of written one in that the former is usually casual, repetitive and less grammatical or systematic. Therefore, in the spoken data of this study, either incomplete clauses due to the speakers' failure in meaning construct (See Example 3.7), or repeated (or self-repaired) clauses (as shown in Example 3.8) were not counted as T-units.

**Example 3.7**

*Eh... .. but eh... the... I remember... that the sun... on... eh... .. the Sun... the... the Wednesday Wednesday at that morning...*

*(From Oral Case 18)*

**Example 3.8**

*... But... but her mother... her mother comfort me...*

*(From Oral Case 23)*

**Step 2: Identifying the core constructs**

Generally speaking, there were at least two content-based core constructs to be identified in

this step, e.g., Topic and Core Story.

It is well acknowledged that all coherent narratives have a topic, either explicit or implicit. The identification of a topic plays a significant role in analyzing a narrative since topics function as “the central organizing principle for a lot of discourse” (Brown & Yule, 2000: 73). Therefore, the identification of a topic can facilitate the analysis of a discourse structure to a large extent. In the practice of the present study, it is not difficult to identify the general topic that the speakers/writers intended to describe, largely due to the fact that all the narratives employed in this study were produced by learners on the same topic prompt. However, it is operationally difficult to mark off the topic segments in that learners discern topics in a rather diversified ways. With an aim to solve the practical problem, a “fuzzy” definition was adopted in the research, a topic, therefore, is simply what the test takers are being talked/written about. This loose definition greatly promotes the demarcation of topics, which lays a solid foundation for determining the core story.

The core story, as its name suggests, is indispensable in constructing and analyzing a narrative. Thus, the interpretation of a core story can not only help the researcher have a better understanding of the narratives, but also facilitate the analysis of discourse structures. To determine the core story, both content analysis and narrative analysis principles were employed. While the narrative analysis was applied to decide the story elements in the core story, the content analysis was used to identify the construct of core story through the data reduction. To be specific, two principles of content analysis were followed in the present study, they were centering and chaining. Centering deals with parts of a story or habitual narratives that cluster around or are drawn toward the topic; and Chaining is on parts of a story or habitual narratives that are in one way or another connected (for example, temporally or logically linked, either explicitly or implicitly) (Yu, 2005). As a result, anything that fails to concentrate on the topic or connect to the topic was not regarded as a category of core narrative.

### **Step 3: Categorizing the spoken and written narrative structures**

On the basis of the preliminary findings from the above steps and the results of related empirical research, the identified core stories were further analyzed and categorized from both macroscopic and microscopic perspectives.

#### **1. Categorization of macrostructural constituents**

Three major constructs, namely, Topic Manifestation, Core Narration and Finale were tentatively identified and generalized.

Topic Manifestation is an opening construct which exists at the beginning of the spoken and written narratives with an aim to initiate the narration and manifest the topic. It serves as an abstract or a topic of interest put forward for the rest of the spoken and written narratives.

[T1]When I was in middle school, I I also lived in the dormitory. [T2]At that time, there are 8 persons in my dormitory. [T3]And every day, we lived very happily.

*(From Oral Case 7)*

Core Narration, as its name suggests, is the core part of a narrative. It is defined as the central narrative construct that elucidates the narration through providing the listeners/readers with the speakers'/writers' personal experience.

[T4]I still remember it is a beautiful sunset. [T5]There were 2 roommates stayed with me. [T6]One was talking to someone in the computer. [T7]She has a boyfriend, and they always talk through Internet. [T8]When she talking, it was obvious that she was talking to her boyfriend. [T9]It was time for me to go to library. [T10]I got ready and said goodbye to my roommates. [T11]In addition, I happily said to the girl: "Have a good time with your boyfriend!" [T12] then, I went to the library happily.

[T13]Two hours later, when I stopped back to the room, I felt the atmosphere was shilling. [T14]All our 6 roommates were in the room without any sound. [T15]Suddenly, the girl shouted to me: "It's you who said loudly to my mon that I have a boyfriend. Now, they know all the things." [T16]Then she kept complaining. [T17]I was so embarrassing, as well as shocked, [T18]I naturally said: " I' sorry." [T19]And sat in my seat with tears in my eyes. [T20]I was really not deliberately to say that. [T21]Why she was angry with me only and embarrassed me in front of our roommates. [T22]What's more, she changed the emotions in QQ, which meant to blame me. [T23]I was really angry. [T24]Standing in front of the window, I watched the shining stars in the sky and I recall my memory about the whole thing. [T25]At first, I felt sorry about that. [T26]But the rude behavior my roommate presented covered my sorrows. [T27]Maybe she could choose some gentle ways to blame me, [T28]but she was determined to embarrass me publicly. [T29]It was a extreme way. [T30]Our friendship broke up at that moment.

*(From Written Case 1)*

The labeling of Finale is also anchored in the segmentation of narrative content. After investigating the spoken and written narratives from the perspective of both the organization and content, Finale is categorized as a structural constituent to signal the termination of the narratives and present the appraisal or thematic remarks of the speakers/writers.

[T25] In fact, I should be angry with them. [T26]But I think it is unnecessary because we should stay here together. [T27]Although there is it, it was their mistake, I still should regret them. Because we are good friends and in the future if we remember this.

*(From Oral Case 07)*

## 2. Categorization of microstructural components

Each macrostructural constituent was further analyzed into its variants or subcategories, which were roughly constructed as follows:

### 1) Identifying the subcategories of Topic Manifestation

Generally speaking, there are two ways of manifesting the topic in Chinese EFL learners' narrative compositions, which can be distilled and labeled as Explicit Topic Manifestation and Implicit Topic Manifestation.

Explicit Topic Manifestation, as its name suggests, commences the narrative beginning in which the speakers/writers tend to explicitly signal the opening and identify the topic so as to make a solid foundation for the following Core Narration. This way of manifesting the topic has the advantage of directness and effectiveness in that listeners/readers can obtain the topic of the narration at the outset of the narratives. The construct of Explicit Topic Manifestation can be further classified into third-level components, i.e., Immediate Topic Manifestation (Immediate TM for short) and Suspended Topic Manifestation (Suspended TM for short). The tertiary-level categories differentiate from each other in terms of the place of Topic Manifestation. To be specific, narratives with Immediate Topic Manifestation introduce the topic in the first or second T-unit; therefore, Immediate TM usually encompasses the time, the place and the theme at the very beginning of the narratives. In Example 3.9, the speaker manifested the topic immediately via introducing the time (in the third grade of high school), the character (the narrator as one of the protagonists) and the general theme of the event (a very embarrassing and angry event) in the first two T-units.

### **Example 3.9**

[T1]The very event made me very embarrassed angry was happened in my high school.  
[T2]Then I was in the third grade preparing for the final <fanal> examination.

*(From Oral Case 06)*

Narrators who choose Suspended Topic Manifestation, then, demonstrate the topic at the beginning of the narratives other than the first two T-units. As illustrated in Example 3.10. The speaker initiated her talk by mentioning her hatred for dishonesty in the first two T-units, followed by her manifestation of the topic from T-unit 3 to T-unit 5, in which the main character and the angry event were identified.

### **Example 3.10**

[T1] I hate all the dishonest man., Eespecially my closed friend. [T2]If I was cheated by others, I would be very very angry. [T3]And there is one thing my closest friend cheat me and make me very angry. [T4]He is my old friend. [T5]And we are get along well with each other well.

*(From Oral Case 9)*

Implicit Topic Manifestation, on the other hand, implies the narrators' introductory information underlying the narrative event, which cannot be detected and specified from the very outset of the narratives. Therefore, listeners/readers have to understand the narratives comprehensively and thoroughly to infer the underlying theme of the topic, as illustrated in Example 3.11.

**Example 3.11**

[T1]When I was in middle school, I I also lived in the dormitory. [T2]At that time, there are 8 persons in my dormitory. [T3]And every day, we lived very happily...

*(From Oral Case 7)*

**2) Identifying the subcategories of Core Narration**

Core Narration is the central component of a narrative, in which a single episode or a series of episodes are depicted so as to illustrate and elucidate the theme of the topic. As a fundamental and indispensable category in a narrative, Core Narration consists of the kernel event following a temporal, spatial, or associative order; along with the narrators' appraisals of the episode. According to the focus of content, Core Narration can be classified, in the present study, into Episodic Narration and Evaluative Narration.

Episodic Narration, as illustrated in Example 3.12, consists of a simple episode or a series of episodes following a chorological, causal, or thematic sequences to elucidate the general theme of specific narratives. Based on the quantity of the episode in EFL learners' narratives, Episodic Narration can be further divided into two subcategories, namely, Single-Episodic Narration and Multiple-Episodic Narration.

Narrators in Single-Episodic Narration employ a single episode, whether it is complete or not, to describe the process of a specific event. In Example 3.12, the speaker gave a detailed depiction of her embarrassing situation of being regarded as a thief by her best friend.

**Example 3.12**

[T14]I could never forget that day in which she lost her pause when we have had the PE class and went back to classroom, she wanted to buy a drink and then found her pause was missing. [T15]She said that someone must have stolen her money when we were having the PE class. [T16]I told her to check her bag again, [T17] but to my surprise, she asked loudly that whether I had went back into our classroom half an hour ago. [T18] I said yes because I wanted to get my cloth. [T19]In the meantime, I felt embarrassing as all the classmates were looking at me as if it was me who stolen her money. [T20]Cici glared at me and asked, "you are my friend, why did you do this?" [T21]I felt so angry that she didn't trust me. [T22]I really felt disappointed and didn't know what to say. [T23]Since then, I lost my best friend who I thought to be.

*(From Written Case 6)*

Multiple-Episodic Narration, as its name indicates, encompasses a serious of episodes which follow chorological, spatial or thematic sequence to narrate the core story and elucidate the theme. As exemplified in Example 3.13, the narrator integrated four episodes in chorological order (see the italic words and phrases). Episode one (From T-unit 1 to T-unit 5) described a story of lending money to her friend; Episode two (From T-unit 6 to T-unit 8) mentioned that the narrator had anxiously waited for her friend to return the cash after they came back to the

dormitory; in Episode three (From T-unit 9 to T-unit 12), the narrator asked her another friend to remind the friend of returning money, however, this friend refused her requirement; it was in the last Episode that the narrator successfully got fifty yuan and apology from her friend.

### Example 3.13

[T1] *One day* my friend and I went shopping in the stationer... in the stationer's shop. [T2] My friend needed to buy a pen. [T3] But since his money has run... had had run out, he borrowed money from me. [T4] At that time, I took a note of fifty yuan with me. So I lend it... I lent it to him. [T5] After my friend paid money to the stationerary the stationer... the stationer give the change to my friend....[T6] *When... when we returned to the dormitory*, I thought my friend would... would return the money immediately because I had to buy something for myself. [T7] Also at that time, my money... I had run out of my money. [T8] But to my surprise, my friend didn't return it. [T9] *After several days*, I... I... I tell... I told it to another friend. [T10].. the... my... the... this friend told me it better asked directly for the money..[T11]. um... I felt embarrassed to ask for money back.[T12] At that time I hadve no way but to... but to ask for it back. [T13] So *one day* I told my friend... "did you still remember that day you borrowed me fifty yuan but you hadn't... haven't returned it to me." [T14] My friend denied it. [T15] I was so angry. [T16] hHow could he deny it? [T17] Then I give an exact account of what happened of the day when my friend bought a pen... bou... bought a pen....[T18] After... after hearing this, my friend also felt embarrassed.[T19] tThough he apologized to me., I couldn't... I couldn't recover myself from being embarrassed and angry.

(From Oral Case 1)

However, in Evaluative Narration, the speakers/writers tend to attach more significance to the depiction of the narrators' mental world and the evaluation of the specific event. In Example 3.14, the writer took a spring out to enjoy the beautiful scenery, but her mood was disturbed by an embarrassing situation which irritated her: a guy spat in her arm and left without apology. The narrator put the emphasis on the evaluation of the immoral behavior after a brief description of the event. It is obvious that a large proportion of the Core Narration falls into the category of Evaluative Narration (See the italic T-units in Example 3.14).

### Example 3.14

[T9] I brought my new electronic camera with me and decided to take lots of pictures of the spring. [T10] Everything went smoothly as I taking those amazing pictures. [T11] I was squatting myself for a flower, which was still in bud when there was something wet and sticky flew into my arms. [T12] It immediate gave me a start and I shuddered after I figured it was the sputum of someone's. [T13] *A feeling of sick and all those nasty words was welling up in my mine.* [T14] *How can anyone do this unmoral deed especially when he ignores others.* [T15] *I really couldn't believe it!* [T16] *I still remember how embarrassed I was* when I tried to find something to rub my arm clean. [T17] My mind worked frantically when I stood up to ask an apology from that unethical guy. [T18] Worse still, *I was even more angry* when I could only strain my eyes to the sight of his back. [T19] *How come he just left without any*

*sign of apology.* [T20]I really couldn't tell whether there would be another victim.

[T21]*It goes without saying that all my cheerfulness and happiness gone with the wind.*  
[T22]*All of the rest day I was thinking of the embarrassing moment and a feeling of anger would strike upon me.* [T23]*How unfortunate I was!* [T24]*How terrible the citizens in today's society.* [T25]*Since when have they degenerated.* [T26]*As an educated person, I still remember Premier Zhou tell us what to do if you need to spit. Produce a tissue and apply it to your mouth, the throw it to the dustin.*[T27] *I believe it's every citizen's unshakable responsibility to be moral and ethical.* [T28]*Only by behaving ourselves can we build a beautiful and harmonious society.*

*(From Written Case 4)*

### 3) Identifying the subcategories of Finale

Via analyzing Chinese EFL learners' narratives in the present study, we could distill four types of Finale: Consequential Finale, Evaluative Finale, Mixed Finale and No Finale.

Consequential Finale is one way of ending the narratives via giving a brief introduction of one or two subsequent events, which play the role of displaying consequences and signaling the termination. In Example 3.15, after being irritated by her friends, the speaker ended her monologic talk with the consequence of the specific event, which is refusing to greet her friend any more.

#### **Example 3.15**

[T20] uUntil now when I saw my friend... I would not like to... to greet him or... it greet him...

*(From Oral Case 2)*

Evaluative Finale is a mode of narrative termination characterized by the speakers'/writers' comments or emotions associated with the Core Narration. Example 3.16 is an instance of this type.

#### **Example 3.16**

[T46]What a terrible spring outing!

*(From Written Case 11)*

Mixed Finale is the mixture of various modes of narrative termination. The speakers/writers end their narration by means of both displaying consequences and evaluations. In Example 3.17, the speaker integrated the consequences of the Core Narration (as shown in T-unit 34) and her internal evaluation of that day (T-unit 35).

#### **Example 3.17**

[T34]From then on, I always kept in mind that be careful when doing everything, and pay



attention to every details and never let those reasons for misunderstanding fall upon myself. [T35]Because I trully know the feeling of being both embarrassment and anger can do nothing.

*(From Written Case 13)*

In addition, Finale is supposed to be absent in some of the cases (As shown in Example 3.18). The speakers/writers terminate their narratives right after the description of the Core Narration.

### **Example 3.18**

[T13]" oh yes,. Of course." The shop the shopkeeper... showed him should showed her another one and... Jane... Jane think... Jane thought the color was not very well and... and she said... eh... " I don't want this one."

*(From Oral Case 6)*

(3) Establishing the relationships between categories and subcategories

Regardless of the structural differences, the present study sought to establish the relationships between categories and their subcategories. Thus, a model of the Chinese EFL learners' oral and written narratives is to be constructed on the basis of the macro- and micro-structural constituents.

### **Step 4: Describing and comparing the narrative structures underlying learners' oral and written narratives**

On the basis of the research questions, a comprehensive and in-depth comparison and delineation of discourse structures underlying learners' oral and written narrative compositions were conducted. Both the quantitative and qualitative analysis of oral and written discourse structures were exerted in terms of the following respects: Firstly, all the spoken and written data were coded and processed to lay a foundation for further analysis; secondly, the researcher counted the total number of different structural components in both oral and written data, and calculated the frequency of each structural constituent in different registers to examine and analyze the distributional features of narrative structures. Additionally, a cross-register comparison would be performed to delineate learners' narrative structural features in a comprehensive fashion, thus generating a better understanding of the relationship between narrative structural components and registers.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### *3.1 Structural Models Generated from EFL Learners' oral Narratives*

As demonstrated in Figure 1, the Chinese EFL learners' oral narratives consist of three macrostructural components, i.e., Topic Manifestation, Core Narration and Finale. In the meantime, each of the macrostructural categories can be hierarchically realized into its respective secondary and tertiary subcategories. To be specific, Topic Manifestation can have

the representations of Explicit TM and Implicit TM, whereas the former can be divided into Immediate TM and Suspended TM. The construct of Core Narration is composed of the subcategories of Episodic Narration and Evaluative Narration. Those narratives with Episodic Narration can be further categorized as Single-Episodic Narration and Multiple Episodic Narration in the tertiary level representation. In addition, the component of Finale is fabricated by Consequential Finale, Evaluative Finale, Mixed Finale and No Finale.

### *3.2 Structural Models Generated from EFL Learners' written Narratives*

The discourse structural components of Chinese EFL learners' written narratives, on the other hand, are schematically similar to those of the oral production (see Figure 1). In terms of the macrostructural categories, written narratives share the same constructs of Topic Manifestation, Core Narration and Finale. Concerning the microstructural components, writers encompass resembled constructs in their oral narratives in spite of the absence of the subcategory of No Finale. The discovery of such homogeneity may sustain the hypothetical notion of Rumelhart (1975, 1977) and Yu (2005) that prototypical elements or schematic constructs universally pervade in narratives.

### *3.3 Comparison of the Discourse Structures between EFL Learners' oral and Written Narratives*

In spite of the schematic similarities in discourse structures, there are some significant frequency discrepancies pertaining to the distribution of structural components between oral and written narratives.

With regard to macrostructural categories, salient differences exist in the constructs of Topic Manifestation and Finale (see Table 1), which are present in a majority of the written narratives and absent in most of the oral discourse.

The cross-register comparison of the microstructural components, then, reveals more differences. First, the employment of Topic Manifestation exhibits reverse distributional features in oral and written narratives. In the secondary subcategories, most speakers adopt Implicit TM, while writers favor Explicit TM. Concerning the tertiary level constructs, speakers have a preference for Immediate TM; writers, on the contrary, tend to employ Suspended TM more frequently (see Table 2). Second, the use of Core Narration enjoys more resemblances than discrepancies in oral and written narratives. The similarities lay in the favors of second-level component Episodic Narration and third-level constituent Multiple-Episodic Narration. The cross-register nuance of this category, if any, exists in the employment of Evaluative Narration, since more writers than speakers adopt this subcategory in their narratives (see Table 3). Last but not the least, oral and written narratives display relatively significant differences in the use of various subcategories of Finale. Specifically, speakers tend to opt for the sub-construct of No Finale; in contrast, none of the writers adopt this component and their preference is in Evaluative Finale (see Table 4).

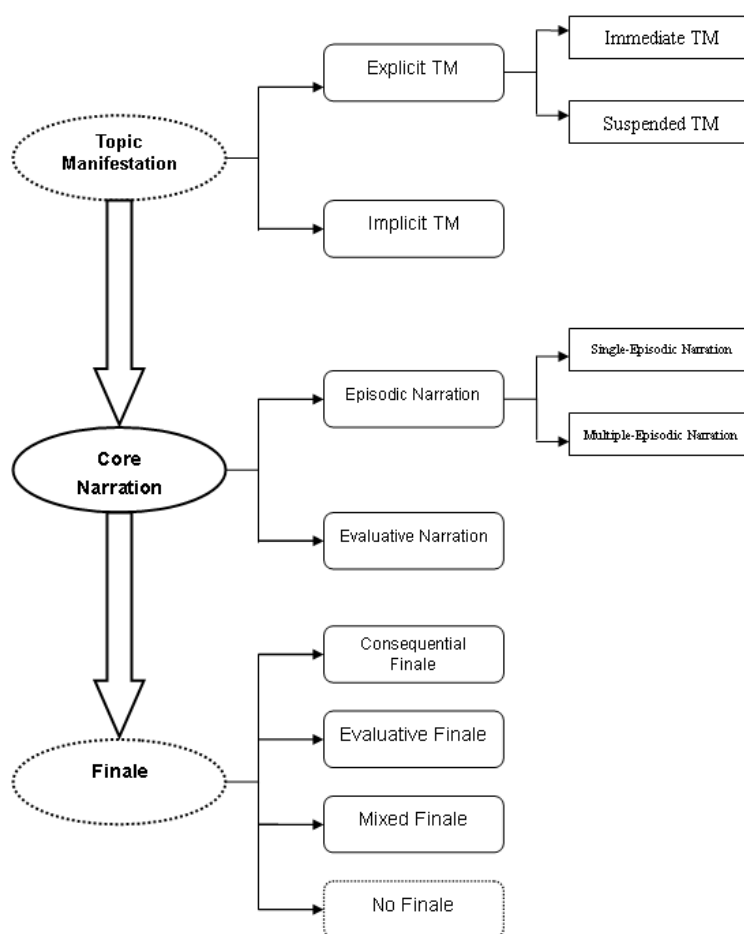


Figure 1. The Structures of EFL Learners' Oral and Written Narrative Productions

As a result, on the basis of the cross-register comparison, we can prudently arrive at the conclusion that the resemblance between oral and written narratives, in the main, exists in the category and subcategory of Core Narration. More discrepancies, however, can be distilled in both the macro- and micro-structural components of Topic Manifestation and Finale. Oral narratives, on the whole, have the defining features of flexibility and incompleteness; written narratives, however, are characterized by relatively intact structural components and more evaluative constituents.

Table 1. Frequency distribution of macrostructural components in oral and written narratives

| Macrostructural Components | Oral Cases (n=30) |            | Written Cases (n=30) |            |
|----------------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|
|                            | Frequency         | Percentage | Frequency            | Percentage |
| Topic Manifestation        | 8                 | 26.7%      | 27                   | 90.0%      |
| Core Narration             | 30                | 100%       | 30                   | 100%       |
| Finale                     | 11                | 36.7%      | 30                   | 100%       |

Table 2. Frequency distribution of Topic Manifestation in oral and written narratives

| Types of Topic Manifestation |              | Oral Cases (n=30) |   |            |       | Written Cases (n=30) |    |            |       |
|------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|---|------------|-------|----------------------|----|------------|-------|
|                              |              | Frequency         |   | Percentage |       | Frequency            |    | Percentage |       |
| Explicit TM                  | Immediate TM | 8                 | 6 | 26.7%      | 20.0% | 27                   | 10 | 90.0%      | 33.3% |
|                              | Suspended TM |                   | 2 |            | 6.7%  |                      | 17 |            | 56.7% |
| Implicit TM                  |              | 22                |   | 73.3%      |       | 3                    |    | 10.0%      |       |

Table 3. Frequency distribution of Core Narration in oral and written narratives

| Types of Core Narration |                             | Oral Cases (n=30) |    |            |        | Written Cases (n=30) |    |            |       |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------|----|------------|--------|----------------------|----|------------|-------|
|                         |                             | Frequency         |    | Percentage |        | Frequency            |    | Percentage |       |
| Episodic Narration      | Single-Episodic Narration   | 29                | 9  | 96.7 %     | 30.0 % | 25                   | 5  | 83.3%      | 16.7% |
|                         | Multiple-Episodic Narration |                   | 20 |            | 66.7 % |                      | 20 |            | 66.7% |
| Evaluative Narration    |                             | 1                 |    | 3.3%       |        | 5                    |    | 16.7%      |       |

Table 4. Frequency distribution of Finale in oral and written narratives

| Types of Finale      | Oral Cases (n=30) |            | Written Cases (n=30) |            |
|----------------------|-------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|
|                      | Frequency         | Percentage | Frequency            | Percentage |
| Consequential Finale | 3                 | 10.0%      | 2                    | 6.7%       |
| Evaluative Finale    | 7                 | 23.3%      | 20                   | 66.7%      |
| Mixed Finale         | 1                 | 3.3%       | 8                    | 26.7%      |
| No Finale            | 19                | 63.3%      | 0                    | 0%         |

#### 4. Conclusion

This study explored the discourse structures underlying Chinese EFL learners' oral and written narratives elicited with the same topic prompt, with a primary focus on the comparison of the universal and different discourse features on the basis of the narrative structures in learners' oral and written narrative compositions.

Many implications can be drawn from the findings, which are dealt with from both theoretical and practical perspectives.

On the one hand, many theoretical implications can be drawn from the present research, an essential one being that, through the comprehensive and in-depth analysis of discourse structural constructs in both oral and written narratives conducted by Chinese EFL learners, the study has developed the general narrative theories, testified such theoretical hypothesis as Story Grammar and expanded some established narrative structural patterns (e.g. Labov, 1972; Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Pavlenko, 2006; Yu, 2005). Furthermore, the cross-register

comparative study of discourse structural components, via an all-round and thorough investigation into structural constituents in oral and written narratives of Chinese EFL learners, can provide language practitioners with novel linguistic models and evidences of cross-register study, thus enriching and deepening the comparative study of oral and written discourse to some extent.

On the other hand, the findings yielded from this study may hold some practical implications for language education and language assessment. Given that salient frequency differences exist in structural constructs between oral and written narratives in EFL learners' discourse, teaching practitioners need to enhance the learners' awareness of distinctive features of each register as well as the significance of macro/micro structural components so as to improve the discourse completeness and facilitate communicative effectiveness.

### **5. Limitations of the study**

The limitations of the present study can be encapsulated as follows:

First, the sample cases under investigation, which consist of 30 oral narratives extracted from SECCL and 30 written narrative compositions produced by English majors, seemed to be small in size. The findings yielded from this study, then, need to be tested by future research with a larger sample.

Second, the oral and written narratives in the present study exclusively elaborate on a single topic, which lacks comprehensiveness and representativeness to some extent. Since discourse structures may be influenced by narrative topics, future studies should take the cross-topic variations of structural components into consideration.

Furthermore, when conducting data analysis and generalizing structural components, the qualitative methods may probably lead to subjective categorization and insufficient inquiry. More quantitative investigations, therefore, needs to be made so as to distill an all-round and in-depth discourse structural features in EFL learners' oral and written narratives.

### **6. Avenues for future research**

Generally speaking, the results of the investigation reveal some interesting tendencies and provide novel explorations of the relationship between oral and written narratives. On the basis of the study, future research is warranted in several perspectives.

On the one hand, researchers can execute the studies which are longitudinal in orientation so as to investigate how EFL learners' narrative structures develop and vary across different registers diachronically.

On the other hand, given that the present study is conducted on the basis of the narrative production of Chinese EFL learners in testing and classroom settings respectively, the line of the inquiry, then, can also be extended to culturally, behaviorally and academically diversified learners across various contexts. In this way, fruitful findings yielded from these studies may contribute to a more comprehensive portrait of learners' narrative competence in oral and

written discourse.

### Acknowledgement

This study was supported by grants from the National Social Science Foundation of China (Project No. 07BYY064).

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