



Referential Choices by Korean Learners of English: Pronouns or Names?*

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ABSTRACT

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This study addresses L2 learners' referential choices in varying local discourse contexts. Specifically, the study investigates whether Korean learners of English can acquire target-like referential patterns despite the typological differences between the two languages. A total of 109 adult Korean learners completed a cloze test in English in which passages contained blanks requiring either proper nouns or pronouns. The blanks occurred in topic-continuing or topic-shifting conditions, either within or across paragraphs. Learners chose between pronouns and proper nouns to refer back to antecedents. Referential choice data were analyzed using generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs). The results revealed significant effects of topic continuity and paragraph boundaries, indicating that learners produced pronouns more frequently in topic-continuing contexts and less frequently across paragraph boundaries. A significant interaction between topic continuity and proficiency further showed that higher-proficiency learners increasingly differentiated their referential choices across discourse contexts, preferring pronouns in topic-continuing contexts and proper nouns in topic-shifting contexts. Additional analyses of referential distance revealed no significant relationship with proficiency, although higher-proficiency learners exhibited numerically greater referential distance than lower-proficiency learners. The findings suggest that despite L1-L2 differences, increased exposure and proficiency enable learners to approximate native-like referential patterns in English discourse.

KEYWORDS

L2 referential choice, discourse context, Korean EFL learners, pronouns, proper nouns, full NPs

1. Introduction

Pronouns are among the most important linguistic devices for creating coherence in discourse (Givón 1983a, 1983b, Gordon et al. 1993, Grosz et al. 1983, Prince 1981, Walker et al. 1998). As anaphoric expressions, their interpretation depends on identifying an antecedent outside the local clause. Resolving such dependencies requires comprehenders to select, from among multiple discourse referents, the most likely antecedent. In production, speakers and writers must use pronouns in ways that minimize ambiguity, enabling hearers or readers to identify the intended referent with ease. This involves choosing between pronouns and full noun phrases (NPs)—including lexical NPs and proper nouns—based on discourse factors such as the current information status of the referent.

While the general tendency is to introduce new entities with full NPs and to use pronouns for subsequent mentions, referential choice is influenced by more than just newness versus givenness. Grammatical and discourse variables (e.g., word order, topic vs. non-topic) as well as cognitive factors (e.g., activation level, working memory constraints) all affect whether a pronoun or a full NP is chosen. Acquiring such patterns is not straightforward. For Korean learners of English, the challenge may be greater, as the Korean referential system differs substantially from that of English (Kameyama 1988, Kim-Renaud 2009, Sohn 1999, Song 2022, Walker et al. 1994, Walker et al. 1998). To begin with, Korean, as a pro-drop language, allows null subjects when they are inferable from the context, which may lead Korean learners of English to omit subjects in contexts where English requires overt pronouns. Even after they learn that English does not allow null subjects, they will still face the problems of deciding where to use pronouns and where to repeat lexical nouns or names. Despite these challenges, research on Korean learners' use of English referential expressions remains limited (Kim 2000, Kim et al. 2015), and studies on their productive use are especially scarce.

This study examines Korean EFL learners' use of different referential expressions in varying discourse contexts and investigates how their choices change with proficiency. In particular, it focuses on learners' choice between pronouns and full NPs in the subject position and examines how their choice patterns vary across proficiency levels.

2. Background

2.1 Referential Choices: Pronouns, Names, and Lexical NPs

Anaphoric pronouns signal that their referent has already been introduced and is presumed familiar to the listener or reader. However, when multiple referents are active in discourse, using pronouns risks ambiguity and misinterpretation. Studies on the English referential system indicate that native speakers manage this by aligning pronouns and other referential expressions in accordance with discourse and cognitive constraints. The following sections consider some of the main constraints that affect native speakers' referential choices.

2.1.1 Prominence of the referent

Studies on discourse processing and production have suggested that prior mentions in discourse differ in their likelihood of being referred to by a pronoun, depending on their prominence (Foraker and McElree 2007, Garrod and Sanford 1994, Gordon and Hendrick 1997, 1998, Grosz et al. 1983, Grosz and Sidner 1986, Hudson-D'Zmura and Tanenhaus 1998). While language users have a choice between full NPs and pronouns, the use of pronouns

signals that their referent is currently the most prominent discourse entity, which corresponds to the ongoing discourse topic or focus (Garrod and Sanford 1994, Gordon and Hendrick 1997, 1998, Gordon et al. 1993, Hudson-D’Zmura and Tanenhaus 1998, Kim et al. 2015). This is consistent with Centering Theory, which proposes that highly accessible entities, or centers of attention, are more likely to be expressed through reduced forms such as pronouns (Gordon et al. 1993, Grosz et al. 1995, Grosz and Sidner 1986).

In English, topical referents, as the highest-ranked centers of attention, typically occupy the sentence-initial subject position (Gordon et al. 1993, Gordon and Hendrick 1997, 1998). Pronouns in the subject position therefore tend to signal that the topic of the previous sentence continues into the current utterance. This intuitive knowledge of the referential system is shared by both senders and receivers. Listeners generally expect that the topic in the previous utterance will continue to be the topic of the following utterance. They also expect that the continued topic will be realized in the form of a pronoun (Gordon et al. 1993, Hudson-D’Zmura and Tanenhaus 1998, Kim et al. 2015). As Gordon et al. (1993, p. 312) put it, “the continuity of the centers across utterances and the manner in which the centers are realized” largely determines the extent to which a discourse segment is coherent (Gordon et al. 1993, Hudson-D’Zmura and Tanenhaus 1998, Kim et al. 2015, Walker et al. 1998).

As a pronoun is the default referring expression for a continued topic, repeating a proper name or other full NP instead of a pronoun can incur processing difficulty. This effect, known as the “repeated name penalty” (Gordon et al. 1993), has been demonstrated by various discourse processing studies (Hudson-D’Zmura and Tanenhaus 1998, Gordon et al. 1993, Gordon and Hendrick 1997, Song and Fisher 2005). Gordon et al. (1993), in their reading-time experiment, demonstrated that sentences repeating a proper name as in (1) led to longer reading times than those using a pronoun as in (2).

- (1) Bruno was the bully of the neighborhood. Bruno often taunted Tommy.
- (2) Bruno was the bully of the neighborhood. He often taunted Tommy.

A similar slowdown was documented in Hudson-D’Zmura and Tanenhaus (1998). In their reading-time analysis using connected sentences as in (3), they found that native English speakers read the second sentence with a repeated name significantly more slowly than one containing a pronoun. However, the repeated name penalty disappeared when there was a topic shift. In the topic-shifting condition, where the topic of the first sentence did not continue in the second sentence as in (4), native English speakers were found to prefer a repeated name in the second sentence to using a pronoun, showing slower reading times for sentences containing a pronoun subject.

- (3) Jack_i apologized profusely to Josh_j. Jack_i/ He_i had been rude to Josh yesterday.
- (4) Jack_i apologized profusely to Josh_j. Josh_j/He_j had been offended by Jack's comment.

The findings suggest that pronoun use is the default option in the topic-continuing condition while repeating names is the preferred option in the topic-shifting condition. Given such preference and default expectation on the part of comprehenders, delivering a message otherwise can cause processing difficulty. Part of the speaker’s/writer’s role is therefore to facilitate comprehension by aligning with the listener’s expectations and cognitive processing capabilities (Prince 1981). By using a pronoun subject, the speaker/writer as a cooperative partner signals to the hearer/reader that the topic still continues. Repeating a full NP for the continued topic would be dispreferred because it would incur processing penalty on the part of the comprehender. Likewise, using a pronoun subject in the topic-shifting condition would mislead the comprehender into forming the expectation that the topic would continue, thereby also causing processing difficulty.

2.1.2 Segment boundary

Referential choice is also sensitive to discourse segmentation (Chafe 1980, Grosz and Sidner 1986, Lawson 2020, Levy 1984, Song and Cohen 1991, van Dijk 1982). Discourse—spoken and written—is organized into coherent subunits or “episodes” centered on a theme or an event, and these segments are marked by some sort of identifiable boundaries. In the case of spoken dialogue, segment boundaries are marked by prosodic cues such as acoustic features of initial and final utterances (Grosz and Sidner 1986) as well as linguistic features such as tense and aspect (Song and Cohen 1991). In a written narrative, which serves as the material for our experiment, the text is segmented into multiple subparts according to discourse elements such as time, setting, and character (Chafe 1979), and the boundaries often align with paragraph breaks (Ariel 1988, Lawson 2020).

Segment boundaries are also indicated by variation in referring expressions (Givón 1983b, Grosz and Sidner 1986, Levy 1984, Song and Cohen 1991). Research on discourse structure suggests that full NPs are commonly used at the opening of new segments. This pattern of selection also applies when the topic continues from the previous segment (Givón 1983b, Lambrecht 1994, Lawson 2020, Partee 1984, Yoshida 2011). Repeating a name here functions as a signal of transition from one episode to a new one, re-establishing the topic and helping readers reorient when a new segment/paragraph begins. The repeated name penalty, therefore, tends to operate only within a paragraph, not across paragraphs.

2.1.3 Activation level and referential distance

Referential choices are also affected by the accessibility of an antecedent. Pronoun interpretation requires that the antecedent be active in memory. From a working memory perspective, the activation level of an antecedent NP decreases over multiple pronoun uses (Ariel 1988, Gibson 1998, Givón 1983a, 1983b, Gordon et al. 1993, Gordon et al. 2001, Warren and Gibson 2002). The referent’s rich representation decays due to increasing distance between the current pronoun and the most recent explicit antecedent as well as the presence of intervening material. To reactivate the referent and to restore its full representation, an explicit referential form must be reintroduced into the discourse even when there is no change in topic (Ariel 1988, Givón 1983a, 1983b, Lawson 2020, Walker 1996).

From a memory perspective, then, the repeated name penalty is applicable only within the referential distance over which discourse entities are accessible (Givón 1983b, Kintsch 1988, Walker 1996). Givón (1983b) suggests that native speakers can maintain referents over about seven to ten clauses, beyond which accessibility drops, requiring the reintroduction of the referent via a full NP. Walker (1996) similarly suggests that centering applies to discourse entities within short-term memory—or “cache” memory—for up to about seven propositions, and that if the distance exceeds the limited capacity of cache memory, the discourse entity can no longer function as an accessible center. For L2 learners, who generally have lower working memory capacity in the target language (McDonald 2006), this maximum distance is likely to be shorter.

Taken together, native English speakers’ referential form choice is influenced by the accessibility of discourse entities within the current discourse context, which is shaped by factors such as topic continuity, discourse segmentation, and referential distance. Highly accessible discourse entities are more likely to be referred to using reduced forms such as pronouns, whereas discourse entities with lower accessibility are more likely to be referred to using more explicit forms such as lexical NPs or proper nouns. Table 1 summarizes the key contextual features that constrain native English speakers’ choice between pronouns and full NPs, along with the referential preference continuum associated with these contexts.

Table 1. Referential Preferences in Different Contexts

Contextual feature	Referential preference					
	Pronoun <-----> Full NP					
The topic of the preceding sentence continues.	+	+	+	-	-	-
The referential chain is within a segment boundary.	+	+	-	+	-	-
The referential distance is short.	+	-	+	+	+	-

As illustrated in Table 1, higher positive values assigned to these discourse features indicate greater accessibility of discourse entities, which in turn increases the likelihood of pronoun use. In contrast, higher negative values indicate lower accessibility of discourse entities, which in turn increases the likelihood of using a full NP. According to Table 1, pronoun use across the four conditions resulting from the combination of topic continuity and paragraph boundaries—topic-continuing/within-paragraph, topic-continuing/across-paragraph, topic-shifting/within-paragraph, and topic-shifting/across-paragraph—would be expected to follow approximately the order below.

topic-continuing/within-paragraph > topic-continuing/across-paragraph $\approx$ topic-shifting/within-paragraph > topic-shifting/across-paragraph

It can also be inferred that referential choice in the topic-continuing/across-paragraph context, due to the discontinuity introduced by a paragraph break, might pattern more closely with that observed in the topic-shifting/within-paragraph context than with that in the topic-continuing/within-paragraph context. If L2 learners are similarly sensitive to topic shifts and paragraph breaks as cues to discourse discontinuity, their patterns of pronoun use would likewise be expected to follow the order similar to that described above.

2.2 L2 Learning of English Referential System

2.2.1 Korean referential system and cross-linguistic influence

Selecting between a pronoun and a full NP in discourse requires sophisticated intuitive knowledge, as it depends on multiple factors operating within the ongoing discourse context. It is therefore unrealistic to expect L2 learners to acquire such knowledge instantaneously. For Korean learners of English, mastering the use and interpretation of pronominal anaphors may be particularly challenging, given the substantial differences between the Korean and English referential systems.

First, Korean—classified as a high-context, discourse-oriented language (Huang 1984, Kwon and Sturt 2013, Li and Thompson 1976, Song 2022)—permits the omission of pronouns. The subject or object may be omitted if its referent can be inferred from context. In contrast, English requires the overt use of pronouns—either subject or object pronouns—even when the referents are inferable from the discourse. This grammar-discourse interface makes it likely that Korean learners, especially beginners, will omit pronominal subjects in English in contexts where they are inferable.

Second, Korean has a relatively limited pronoun inventory, and many scholars argue that Korean possesses only one third-person pronoun, *ku* ('that'), with little or no gender distinction (e.g., Kim et al. 2015, Kim-Renaud 2009, Sohn 1999, Song 2022). The female counterpart, *kunye* ('she/her'), is a recent innovation largely confined to written narratives. Even *ku* is infrequent in spoken language, where it is typically combined with a common noun—such as *saram* ('person'), *puwn* ('person [+honorific]'), or *aiy* ('child, guy')—to form expressions like *ku saram*,

ku puwn, or *kyay*. Further, lexical nouns denoting kinship (e.g., *emma* ‘mother’, *oppa* ‘brother’) or social roles/titles (e.g., *sensayngnim* ‘teacher, sir’; *kyosuwnim* ‘professor’; *sachangnim* ‘boss’) are often used even in contexts where English would require pronouns. Such reliance on full NPs for anaphora can lead Korean learners to overuse repeated names and lexical NPs in English, incurring the repeated name penalty.

2.2.2 L2 Studies on pronoun acquisition

The pro-drop nature of Korean, its limited pronoun system, and the frequent use of full NPs for repeated referents collectively pose challenges for Korean EFL learners acquiring English referential expressions. Nevertheless, research on L2 referential acquisition has largely been confined to the acquisition of correct pronoun forms. In particular, most previous studies have focused on L2 learners’ gender marking in third-person pronouns and associated errors (e.g., Antón-Méndez 2010, 2011, Dong et al. 2015, Lahoz 1991, Renaud 2011, Song 2022, Truscott and Sharwood 2004, Tsoukala et al. 2017). These studies have generally found that speakers of languages without gender distinctions in personal pronouns make more errors in L2 gender distinctions of personal pronouns than those with such distinctions. Other studies have examined whether speakers of pro-drop languages struggle to acquire an L2 system requiring obligatory pronouns. Findings show that such learners—especially in early stages—sometimes use null subjects in English (Hahn 2000, Hwang 2012, Kim 2000, Roebuck et al. 1999). These findings indicate that, as in the acquisition of other L2 features, learners’ L1 exerts cross-linguistic influence in pronoun acquisition.

A smaller body of work has investigated whether learners choose referential forms appropriately in context. Felix (1981), in a longitudinal study of L1 German learners of English, not only found frequent pronoun errors but also an overuse of full NPs where pronouns were expected. In contrast, Chaudron and Parker (1990) observed that low-proficiency Japanese learners preferred pronouns for both new and given referents. A few studies, however, suggested that L2 learners can eventually approximate native-like pronoun use: for instance, Kim (2000) reported that Korean ESL learners’ pronoun use increased over time and aligned with discourse prominence patterns.

More recently, experimental studies have explored L2 referential knowledge and processing associated with the repeated name penalty. In the Korean EFL context, Kim et al. (2015) examined whether advanced Korean learners of English were sensitive to the repeated name penalty using an acceptability judgment task. Participants read short texts that consisted of four connected sentences and rated the acceptability of a final sentence whose subject varied in terms of topic continuity (topic-continuing vs. topic-shifting) and referential form (pronoun vs. repeated name). Learners were generally found to prefer pronouns for continued topics and repeated names for shifted topics, which resembles the preference patterns observed in native English speakers (Hudson-D’Zmura and Tanenhaus 1998, Gordon et al. 1993). However, the analysis also showed a main effect of referential form, revealing an overall preference for repeated names over pronouns. Kim et al. (2015) contributes to the literature as one of the very few studies to examine Korean learners’ preferences for English referential expressions across discourse contexts; however, because the study focused exclusively on advanced learners, it does not address whether lower-level learners also exhibit similar patterns or whether learners’ L2 referential patterns gradually approach target-like use as their overall proficiency increases.

Importantly, the study examined only receptive knowledge and did not address how they actually use referential expressions in production. Nor did it take into account other factors influencing referential choice such as segment boundaries or referential distance. To date, no research has directly examined how learners’ sensitivity to these variables gradually develops as L2 proficiency increases. To address this gap in the literature on L2 referential acquisition and to provide a more in-depth understanding of the developmental patterns underlying L2 learners’

referential systems, the present study posed the following research questions.

1. Are Korean EFL learners' referential choices sensitive to topic continuity versus topic shift?
2. Are their referential choices sensitive to paragraph boundaries?
3. Are their referential choices sensitive to referential distance?
4. Do their referential choices vary with proficiency level?
5. How does their referential system evolve with increasing proficiency?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

A total of 109 adult Korean learners of English participated in this study. The participants were undergraduate students in their twenties attending universities in the Gyeonggi and Chungcheong regions of South Korea, enrolled in English-related courses. All participants had received at least ten years of formal English education in school, beginning in the third grade of elementary school.

3.2 Materials

Participants were presented with an English passage with blanks and completed a cloze test. The text was developed by the authors and subsequently edited by three native speakers. As a type of fill-in-the-blank assessment, the cloze test consisted of blanks embedded within a coherent passage, requiring participants to supply appropriate words based on the broader linguistic context.

The passage, which narrated a story about two friends, *Tom* and *Jane*, consisted of five paragraphs and contained a total of 41 blanks, which required various content words and function words as answers, including proper nouns, lexical nouns, verbs, pronouns, prepositions, etc. On average, one deletion (i.e., blank) occurred every 7.2 words. Out of these blanks, 17 items were the test items that required a subject NP either as a proper noun *Tom* or *Jane* or as its pronoun form *he* or *she*, allowing participants to make their choices based on local contextual clues. The other 24 items were filler items, and were dispersed throughout the text.

The test items were distributed throughout the text in a way that varied along two dimensions: (1) whether the required response involved a continued topic or a shifted topic, and (2) whether the item appeared at a paragraph boundary. To be specific, the blanks were presented under one of four conditions, in which C and S represent topic-continuing and topic-shifting contexts, respectively, whereas N and Y represent the absence and presence of a paragraph break, respectively.

Topic-Continuing/Within a Paragraph Condition (C-N): The topic of the preceding sentence is maintained in the current sentence, with both sentences occurring within the same paragraph.

Topic-Continuing/Across Paragraphs Condition (C-Y): The topic of the preceding sentence is maintained in the current sentence, with the two sentences occurring across paragraph boundaries.

Topic-Shifting/Within a Paragraph Condition (S-N): The topic shifts from the preceding sentence to the current sentence within the same paragraph.

Topic-Shifting/Across Paragraphs Condition (S-Y): The topic shifts from the preceding sentence to the current sentence, with the shift occurring across paragraph boundaries.

Examples of each item type are provided in Table 2 below, with blanks completed by the authors.

Table 2. Examples of Each Condition

Topic continuity	Paragraph boundary	Condition	Example	Items ¹
Continuing	Within	C-N	...So <u>Jane</u> ran home and hurriedly cleaned the house. (<u>Jane/She</u>) made tomato soup and some pasta.	2, 4, 10, 12, 18
	Across	C-Y	...Then <u>Jane/she</u> remembered the picture of them and hung it above the fireplace. [paragraph boundary] Now it was 7:30. (<u>Jane/She</u>) had waited for more than an hour.	6, 15
Shifting	Within	S-N	...Then the doorbell rang. <u>Jane/She</u> rushed to the door and opened it. (<u>Tom/He</u>) was standing at the door.	8, 14, 17, 23, 31, 36, 38, 40
	Across	S-Y	“ <u>We</u> had to work at the office until seven without a break. So sorry.” [paragraph boundary] (<u>Jane/She</u>) said that it was okay.	27, 34

Note. C = topic-continuing; S = topic-shifting; Y = across-paragraph; N = within-paragraph

The text was also designed to include a section in which the same topic *Jane* was maintained over an extended span (Paragraph 1 and the beginning of Paragraph 2). That is, *Jane* was maintained as the agent throughout an extended stretch of discourse, without *Tom* intervening as a shifted topic, as presented below (The blanks have been completed by the authors, with item numbers attached):

[Paragraph 1] ...It was already 5:00. So Jane ran home and hurriedly cleaned the house. (2. Jane/She) made tomato soup and some pasta, and then put forks and knives (3. on) the table. Everything looked perfect. Then (4. Jane/She) remembered the picture of them and hung it (5. above) the fireplace.

[Paragraph 2] Now it was 7:30. (6. Jane/She) had waited (7. for) more than an hour...

The distance between the first explicit mention of *Jane* in Paragraph 1 and the next explicit mention in Paragraph 2 was eight propositions (and 43 words in word count). A discourse environment in which the same topic is maintained over an extended stretch, as in this case, was considered well-suited for measuring individual participants' referential distance—specifically, the distance between their first repeated use of *Jane* following its prior mention of *Jane*—and for comparing it across proficiency levels. The reliability of the cloze test, as measured by KR-20, was 0.83, indicating a high level of internal consistency.

3.3 Procedure

Participants were asked to complete a cloze test in which they silently read a story and wrote the word they thought most appropriate for each blank as they progressed through the text. The task was conducted individually and required approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

¹ The passage used in the present study consisted of five paragraphs, yielding four paragraph transitions, two of which maintained the discourse topic of the preceding paragraph, while the other two introduced a different topic.

3.4 Data Analysis

Participants' responses were recorded and scored on a binary scale, with correct answers assigned a score of 1 and incorrect answers a score of 0. For the test items requiring pronoun or proper noun subjects, a response was treated as correct if it referred to a contextually appropriate discourse entity regardless of whether a pronoun or a proper noun was used. Analyses were conducted only on correct responses, and the proportions of pronouns and proper nouns were calculated for each condition (C-N, C-Y, S-N, and S-Y).

To investigate the influence of discourse constraints and proficiency on referential choices, the data were analyzed using generalized linear mixed-effects models (GLMMs) with a binomial logistic link function. The dependent variable was referential form choice, coded as a binary outcome (pronoun = 1, proper noun = 0). The fixed effects included topic continuity (topic-continuing [C] vs. topic-shifting [S]), paragraph boundary (within-paragraph [N] vs. across-paragraph [Y]), and participants' English proficiency, which was treated as a continuous predictor. Topic continuity and paragraph boundary were treatment-coded using R's default contrast scheme, with the topic-continuing (C) and within-paragraph (N) conditions serving as the reference levels. Participants' English proficiency was operationalized as their accuracy rate on the filler items of the cloze test.² The resulting proficiency scores were *z*-standardized and entered as a centered continuous predictor.

Mixed-effects modeling was adopted because the response variable was binary and the data involved repeated observations from the same participants and items. The analyses were conducted in R using the lme4 package. Models were fitted using the bobyqa optimizer (maxfun = 200,000), and convergence and singularity diagnostics were inspected when evaluating alternative random-effects structures. The initial fixed-effects structure included all main effects and their interactions:

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pronoun_use ~ topic * paragraph * proficiency
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Random intercepts for participants and items were included to account for participant-specific and item-specific variability. Because two discourse conditions were represented by only two items each, by-item random slopes were not evaluated, as item-level slope estimation was considered unreliable and potentially prone to convergence and singularity problems. A more complex random-effects structure including by-participant random slopes for topic continuity, paragraph boundary, and their interaction was initially evaluated. However, based on convergence and singularity diagnostics, a more parsimonious random-effects structure retaining only random intercepts for participants and items was ultimately adopted. Fixed effects were evaluated using Wald *z*-tests.

To further examine significant interactions involving proficiency, conditional simple-slope analyses were conducted using estimated marginal trends. Specifically, the effect of proficiency on pronoun use was estimated separately for each discourse condition. Predicted probabilities were calculated and visualized using interaction plots. Statistical significance was evaluated at an alpha level of .05.

² Cloze tests have been widely validated as measures of overall language proficiency through both correlational studies and construct-based research (Alderson 1980, Bachman 1985, Brown 1983, Chihara et al. 1977, Cohen 1980, Hahn 2018, Hinofotis 1987, Jonz 1976, 1987, Oller 1979, Oller and Conrad 1971). Previous studies have demonstrated substantial correlations between cloze tests and various proficiency assessments, including standardized tests such as TOEFL (Hinofotis 1987, Jonz 1976, Oller and Conrad 1971). Research has also suggested that cloze tests assess not only intrasentential language abilities, such as vocabulary and grammar, but also higher-level abilities involving intersentential relationships and discourse processing (Alderson 1980, Bachman 1985, Brown 1983, Chihara et al. 1977, Cohen 1980, Hahn 2018, Jonz 1987, Oller 1979, Oller and Conrad 1971).

Participants' referential distance was measured in terms of both word count and proposition count between the most recent prior mention of a proper name and its subsequent occurrence. As mentioned, this analysis was conducted based on the learners' use of pronouns and proper nouns in the discourse section extending from Paragraph 1 to the beginning of Paragraph 2, which centered on the story of *Jane*. To examine whether referential distance increased as learners' proficiency increased, linear regression analyses were first conducted using proficiency as the predictor and referential distance measures as dependent variables. Pearson correlation analyses were also performed to examine the strength and direction of the relationships between proficiency and each referential distance measure. An additional exploratory analysis was conducted to investigate whether differences in referential distance might emerge between learners with relatively higher and lower proficiency levels. Participants were therefore divided into above-average and below-average proficiency groups using the mean proficiency score as the cutoff value, and independent-samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the groups on word count and proposition count. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d* and interpreted according to conventional criteria (small = .20, medium = .50, large = .80; Cohen, 1988).

4. Results

4.1 Descriptive Patterns of Pronoun Use Across Discourse Conditions

Participants' mean score on the cloze test was 30.8 out of 41 points (75.1% accuracy). Their mean proficiency, as measured by accuracy (%) on the filler items, was 65.21 (*SD* = 14.86). In terms of referential choice, participants overall used pronouns 53.7% of the time and proper nouns 46.3% of the time ($\chi^2(1, N = 2150) = 11.91, p < .001$). However, their referential choices varied across discourse conditions, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Proportion of Pronoun Use Across Discourse Conditions

Condition	<i>M</i> (%)	<i>SD</i> (%)	Pairwise comparisons
C-N	71.23	36.92	Higher than C-Y, S-N, and S-Y (all <i>ps</i> < .001)
C-Y	45.24	43.59	Lower than C-N (<i>p</i> < .001), higher than S-Y (<i>p</i> < .05)
S-N	42.27	38.07	Lower than C-N (<i>p</i> < .001)
S-Y	38.32	44.82	Lowest pronoun use overall

Note. C = topic-continuing; S = topic-shifting; Y = across-paragraph; N = within-paragraph

The highest rate of pronoun use was observed in the C-N condition (*M* = 71.23%, *SD* = 36.92), whereas the lowest rate was observed in the S-Y condition (*M* = 38.32%, *SD* = 44.82). Pairwise comparisons revealed that pronoun use in the C-N condition was significantly higher than that in the C-Y, S-N, and S-Y conditions (all *ps* < .001). Pronoun use in the C-Y condition (*M* = 45.24%, *SD* = 43.59) was significantly lower than that in the C-N condition (*p* < .001) but significantly higher than that in the S-Y condition (*p* < .05). Pronoun use in the S-N condition (*M* = 42.27%, *SD* = 38.07) was significantly lower than that in the C-N condition (*p* < .001). However, the difference between the S-N and S-Y conditions did not reach statistical significance (*p* = .074). Descriptively, the mean rates of pronoun use across the four discourse conditions followed the order below: C-N > C-Y > S-N ≥ S-Y. This ordering closely resembled the referential pattern predicted for native speakers, except that the difference between the S-N and S-Y conditions was not statistically significant.

The findings suggest that both topic continuity and paragraph structure influenced L2 learners' referential form selection in ways broadly consistent with patterns reported for native English speakers. Figure 1 additionally

presents the proportions of both pronoun and proper noun use across the different discourse conditions. As illustrated in the figure, pronoun use decreased substantially as discourse continuity was disrupted, particularly when topic shifts coincided with paragraph boundaries, whereas proper noun use showed the opposite pattern and was highest under this condition.

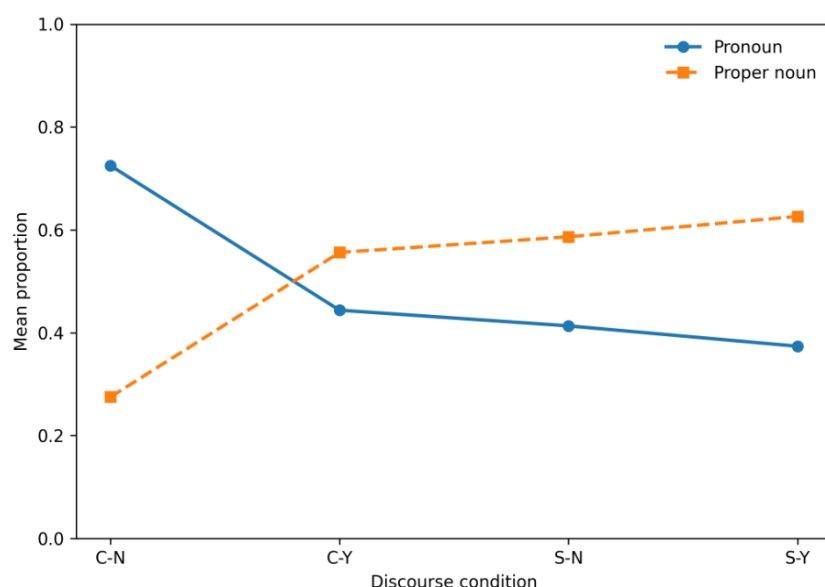


Figure 1. Proportions of Pronouns and Proper Nouns Across Discourse Conditions

Note. C = topic-continuing; S = topic-shifting; Y = across-paragraph; N = within-paragraph

4.2 Effects of Topic Continuity, Paragraph Boundaries, and Proficiency on Referential Choice

A generalized linear mixed-effects model (GLMM) with a binomial logistic link function was conducted to examine the effects of topic continuity, paragraph boundary, and English proficiency on referential form choice. The fixed-effects estimates from the generalized linear mixed-effects model are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. GLMM Fixed-Effects Estimates

Predictor	Estimate	SE	z	p
Topic	-1.334	.126	-10.601	< .001
Paragraph	-1.201	.175	-6.871	< .001
Topic × Paragraph	1.001	.241	4.157	< .001
Proficiency	.019	.007	2.817	.005
Topic × Proficiency	-.034	.008	-4.036	< .001
Paragraph × Proficiency	-.011	.012	-.919	.359
Topic × Paragraph × Proficiency	-.011	.016	-.664	.506

The analysis revealed a significant main effect of topic continuity, indicating that participants produced significantly fewer pronouns (and more proper nouns) in topic-shifting contexts than in topic-continuing contexts ($\beta = -1.334$, $SE = .126$, $z = -10.601$, $p < .001$). A significant main effect of paragraph boundary was also observed, such that pronoun use decreased across paragraph boundaries relative to within-paragraph contexts ($\beta = -1.201$,

$SE = .175, z = -6.871, p < .001$).

Importantly, the interaction between topic continuity and paragraph boundary was significant ($\beta = 1.001, SE = .241, z = 4.157, p < .001$), indicating that the effect of topic continuity differed depending on paragraph structure. Consistent with this finding, the particularly low rate of pronoun use in the S-Y condition likely reflects the combined effects of topic discontinuity and paragraph segmentation.

The model additionally revealed a significant main effect of proficiency ($\beta = .019, SE = .007, z = 2.817, p = .005$), suggesting that higher proficiency learners generally produced more pronouns overall. However, this effect was modulated by a significant interaction between topic continuity and proficiency ($\beta = -.034, SE = .008, z = -4.036, p < .001$), varying significantly depending on topic continuity/shift. This interaction indicates that the influence of proficiency differed across discourse conditions: higher proficiency increased pronoun use in topic-continuing contexts but decreased pronoun use in topic-shifting contexts. This pattern indicates that higher proficiency learners became more sensitive to discourse continuity when selecting referential forms.

The interaction between paragraph boundary and proficiency was not significant ($\beta = -.011, SE = .012, z = -.919, p = .359$), suggesting that proficiency did not independently modulate sensitivity to paragraph boundaries. Likewise, the three-way interaction among topic continuity, paragraph boundary, and proficiency was not significant ($\beta = -.011, SE = .016, z = -.664, p = .506$). Taken together, these findings suggest that proficiency primarily influenced learners' sensitivity to topic continuity rather than to paragraph boundaries.

To further examine the effect of proficiency across discourse conditions, conditional simple-slope analyses were conducted separately for each discourse condition. Table 5 presents the conditional simple-slope analyses of the effect of proficiency across discourse conditions.

Table 5. Conditional Simple-Slope Analyses of the Effect of Proficiency Across Discourse Conditions

Condition	Slope (β)	SE	z	p
C-N	.019	.007	2.81	.005
C-Y	.009	.009	0.95	.342
S-N	-.014	.005	-2.92	.004
S-Y	-.036	.011	-3.38	< .001

Note. C = topic-continuing; S = topic-shifting; Y = across-paragraph; N = within-paragraph

As shown in Table 5, proficiency modulated pronoun use differently across discourse conditions. In the C-N condition, proficiency positively predicted pronoun use, indicating that higher-proficiency learners increasingly preferred pronoun forms in highly continuous discourse contexts. In contrast, proficiency negatively predicted pronoun use in the topic-shifting conditions (S-N and S-Y), suggesting that sensitivity to topic shifts is an important factor distinguishing higher- and lower-proficiency learners. A weak and non-significant positive tendency was observed in the C-Y condition, suggesting that sensitivity to paragraph boundaries may not strongly distinguish higher- and lower-proficiency learners.

The strongest negative slope was observed in the S-Y condition, indicating that higher-proficiency learners increasingly avoided pronouns when both topic continuity and paragraph continuity were disrupted. These findings suggest that higher-proficiency learners were sensitive to both topic shifts and paragraph boundaries, preferentially using pronouns in highly accessible contexts while favoring proper nouns in contexts involving discourse discontinuity.

Figure 2 presents the predicted probabilities of pronoun use as a function of proficiency across the four discourse conditions based on the GLMM model (Values on the x-axis represent standardized proficiency scores).

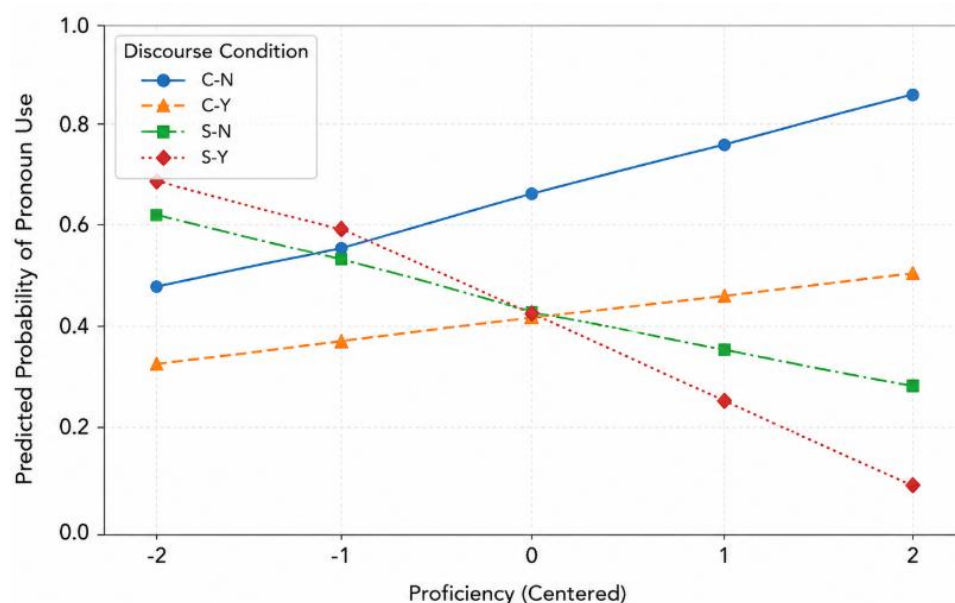


Figure 2. Model-Based Predicted Probabilities of Pronoun Use Across Discourse Conditions

Note. C = topic-continuing; S = topic-shifting; Y = across-paragraph; N = within-paragraph

As shown in the figure, the divergence between topic-continuing and topic-shifting conditions became progressively larger as proficiency increased. In particular, pronoun use increased in the C-N condition but decreased sharply in the S-Y condition, further demonstrating that higher-proficiency learners adjusted their referential choices more systematically according to discourse accessibility. This pattern suggests increasingly target-like modulation of referential choice.

4.3 Referential Distance and L2 Referential Choice

Participants' mean referential distance was 21.46 words ($SD = 17.51$) and 4.40 propositions ($SD = 2.92$), indicating substantial variability in learners' referential distance, as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Referential Distance

Measure	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Word count	21.46	17.51	7	43
Proposition count	4.40	2.92	2	8

To examine whether referential distance increased as learners' proficiency increased, separate regression analyses were conducted using proficiency as the predictor and word count and proposition count as dependent variables. The results revealed no significant relationship between proficiency and word count ($\beta = .009$, $r = .008$, $p = .947$) or between proficiency and proposition count ($\beta = .002$, $r = .009$, $p = .942$). These findings suggest that increased proficiency may not be associated with greater referential distance, regardless of whether referential distance was measured in terms of word count or proposition count.

As an additional exploratory analysis, participants were divided into above-average and below-average proficiency groups based on the mean proficiency score ($M = 65.21$). Higher-proficiency learners showed numerically greater referential distance than lower-proficiency learners in terms of both word count ($M = 23.11$

vs. 19.61) and proposition count ($M = 4.68$ vs. 4.09). However, these differences did not reach statistical significance for either word count ($t = .84$, $p = .406$, $d = .20$) or proposition count ($t = .84$, $p = .405$, $d = .20$), showing only a weak effect size as shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Referential Distance by Proficiency Group (above vs. below average)

	Proficiency group		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Above-average	Below-average			
Word count	23.11	19.61	.84	.406	.20
Proposition count	4.68	4.09	.84	.405	.20

5. Discussion

The present study examined how topic continuity, paragraph structure, and English proficiency influenced Korean EFL learners' referential form choice. The results demonstrated that both topic continuity and paragraph boundaries significantly affected pronoun use. The strong effect of topic continuity indicates that learners adjusted their referential choices according to discourse continuity, producing pronouns more frequently in topic-continuing contexts than in topic-shifting contexts. The results also revealed a significant effect of paragraph boundaries, suggesting that learners tend to treat paragraph boundaries as indicators of discourse discontinuity or attentional shift. Importantly, the significant interaction between topic continuity and paragraph boundaries indicates that paragraph segmentation amplified the discourse-discontinuity effect associated with topic shifts.

One of the most important findings concerns the role of proficiency. Although proficiency showed a positive overall effect on pronoun use, the significant topic continuity $\times$ proficiency interaction demonstrated that the effect of proficiency differed substantially across discourse conditions. The conditional simple-slope analyses further clarified this pattern. In the C-N condition, proficiency positively predicted pronoun use, indicating that higher-proficiency learners increasingly preferred reduced forms in highly continuous discourse contexts. In contrast, proficiency negatively predicted pronoun use in the topic-shifting conditions, with the strongest effect observed in the S-Y condition. Taken together, these findings indicate that higher-proficiency learners increasingly differentiated between contexts with high referential accessibility and those involving low referential accessibility. This suggests that the development of L2 referential choice is not simply characterized by increased pronoun use overall. Rather, as proficiency increases, learners appear to use pronouns more selectively in accordance with discourse structure, reflecting increasingly target-like discourse-pragmatic competence.

Our findings so far are unlikely to be attributable to formal instruction because instruction on referential expressions in Korean EFL classrooms is generally limited to form-focused teaching on gender and number agreement associated with pronouns. Likewise, textbooks appear to provide very limited explicit instruction on the appropriate use of pronouns in discourse contexts.³ Nevertheless, the Korean learners, despite the cross-

³ To examine this issue, we reviewed the 2022 Revised English Curriculum (Ministry of Education of Korea 2022) and two textbooks for each grade level developed under the revised curriculum. The textbook analysis included two English textbooks for each grade level developed under the 2022 revised curriculum: Elementary School English 3–6 published by YBM (Choi et al. 2024a, 2024b, Choi et al. 2025a, 2025b) and Chunjae Education (Kim et al. 2024a, 2024b, Kim et al. 2025a, 2025b); Middle School English 1–2 published by Chunjae Education (Lee et al. 2024, 2025, So et al. 2024, 2025); and High School Common English 1–2 published by Chunjae Education (Kang et al. 2024a, 2024b) and YBM (Park, Kim et al. 2024, Park, Yoon et al. 2024). Our review revealed that the 2022 revised English curriculum contains no explicit treatment of referential

linguistic differences in referential systems, demonstrated not only the ability to use pronouns according to discourse context but also an understanding that, in cases of discourse discontinuity (such as topic or paragraph shifts), more explicit forms are appropriate. The mechanisms underlying this development remain unclear. One plausible explanation is that learners gradually acquire implicit knowledge of English referential expressions through repeated exposure to written discourse. Importantly, the finding that higher-proficiency learners used referential expressions more appropriately across discourse contexts suggests that acquisition of the L2 referential system is a gradual developmental process.

On the other hand, the absence of a significant interaction between paragraph boundary and proficiency suggests that sensitivity to paragraph boundaries did not vary substantially across proficiency levels. Although paragraph boundaries independently influenced learners' referential choices, their effect appeared to be relatively stable across proficiency levels, suggesting that paragraph segmentation may have functioned as a salient cue to discourse discontinuity even for lower-proficiency learners. From a learner perspective, paragraph boundaries may serve as readily noticeable cues that naturally encourage the use of fuller referential forms, whereas topic shifts, particularly those occurring within the same paragraph, may be less perceptually salient and therefore require more explicit instruction.

Our analyses of referential distance revealed no significant relationship between learners' proficiency and referential distance. Additional exploratory analyses comparing above-average and below-average proficiency groups showed a tendency for higher-proficiency learners to produce greater referential distance; however, these differences did not reach statistical significance, and the observed effect sizes were small. While these findings suggest that increases in proficiency may not necessarily lead learners to maintain referents across longer discourse spans, the absence of a significant relationship may be partially attributable to the fact that the span of topic continuity within the same paragraph in the present study was not sufficiently long. A more meaningful relationship between proficiency and referential distance may emerge in experimental designs that permit greater maximum referential distances and provide learners with opportunities to maintain reference across more extended stretches of discourse.

At the same time, the present findings should be interpreted with caution, as we did not directly compare learners' referential choice patterns with those of a native-speaker control group, but instead relied on an indirect comparison with predictions derived from previous L1 literature. Future research employing a native-speaker control group is needed to verify the validity of our results.

6. Conclusion

The present study investigated how topic continuity, paragraph boundaries, and English proficiency influenced Korean EFL learners' referential form choice. The results demonstrated that learners systematically modulated pronoun use according to discourse structure. Pronouns were used most frequently in topic-continuing within-

forms, including pronouns. The only explicit reference was found in an achievement standard for an elective English course (*Practical English Conversation*), which states that students should "use appropriate discourse markers (such as conjunctions and pronouns) to construct cohesive and coherent discourse" when describing factual information. Furthermore, an examination of the English textbooks for each grade level revealed that the treatment of referential forms was limited to aspects such as the selection of gendered pronouns and the distinction between nominative and accusative forms. No sections explicitly addressing referential choice within discourse contexts were identified.

paragraph contexts and least frequently in topic-shifting across-paragraph contexts. Importantly, proficiency played a crucial role in this process. Higher proficiency learners increasingly differentiated between discourse contexts with high and low referential accessibility, preferentially using pronouns in highly continuous contexts while avoiding them in discontinuous contexts. These findings suggest that the acquisition of referential expressions in a second language involves not only morphosyntactic development but also increasingly sophisticated discourse-pragmatic sensitivity.

Given that Korean EFL classrooms rarely provide explicit instruction on the use of referential expressions at the local discourse level, the present findings suggest that learners can nevertheless develop sensitivity to the L2 referential system through extensive exposure to discourse itself, even when the target language employs a referential system different from that of their native language. An important question for future research is whether more proactive pedagogical intervention can further facilitate learners' acquisition of the L2 referential system.

The present study contributes to the broader literature on L2 discourse processing and referential accessibility in several important ways. Previous studies have shown that native speakers systematically modulate referential forms according to discourse accessibility and prominence, preferring reduced forms in highly accessible contexts while using fuller forms in contexts involving discontinuity or ambiguity. The present findings suggest that L2 learners likewise become increasingly sensitive to such discourse constraints as proficiency develops. The study further contributes to L2 pronoun and referential system research by examining learners' actual language use within a natural stretch of text containing diverse local discourse environments and by investigating not only learners' knowledge of pronouns but also their broader understanding of the L2 referential system, including the use of full NPs.

Several limitations of the present study point to directions for future research. Although the present study sought to examine how L2 referential choice develops with increasing proficiency, it captured only a partial trajectory of L2 referential system development, as most participants were post-beginner adult learners with at least ten years of exposure to English through public education. Future research that includes beginning learners is expected to provide a more comprehensive account of how the L2 referential system evolves across the full developmental continuum. In particular, such research may reveal which L1-specific referential features emerge during the initial stages of acquisition and how learners gradually approximate target-like referential use as proficiency develops.

Second, proficiency in the present study was operationalized through cloze-test performance on filler items. Because the target items were embedded within the same test, this approach may have introduced a limited degree of circularity. Future research using independent proficiency measures, such as standardized tests or institutional placement tests, is needed to verify the present findings regarding the influence of proficiency on learners' referential choice.

Another limitation of the present study is that the experimental passage did not contain a sufficiently long stretch of uninterrupted topic continuity. This constraint limited the maximum referential distance that could be observed within the task. To more accurately assess learners' maximum referential distance, future studies should include conditions in which a single discourse entity remains the topic across a longer and uninterrupted stretch of discourse. Such a design would allow for a more precise examination of the relationship between proficiency and referential distance by revealing how far learners can successfully maintain and interpret reference across discourse.

Finally, the present study relied on previous literature to characterize native speakers' referential choice patterns rather than directly comparing L2 learners with native speakers. Future research that includes native speakers as a control group may clarify how closely learners' referential choice patterns approximate those of native speakers.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Secondary, Tertiary