

## **ENGLISH DEMONSTRATIVES IN ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAYS BY VIETNAMESE EFL STUDENTS AND NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In teaching English as a foreign language to non-native learners, English demonstratives (*this, these, that, those*) are introduced as a syntactic concept. However, they also have an important role in enhancing text coherence by making reference in writing compositions. Important as it is, the proper use of demonstratives remains a problem to several EFL students due to the absence of detailed instructions on how demonstratives function in written discourse. This research looks at the differences in the use of English demonstratives in argumentative essays written by Vietnamese EFL learners and native English speakers. Adopting a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis, the research finds that learners with low level of writing proficiency use proximal *this (these)* statistically less than native English writers, which can be considered one of the contributing factors to weaker arguments in low score essays. This finding leads to the suggestion for English teachers in Vietnam that the role of demonstratives in making text reference needs to be considered important, and official instructions on demonstratives with their pragmatic use should also be introduced to EFL learners.

**Key words:** English demonstratives, coherence, cohesive devices, essay writing

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Getting their name from the Latin word *demonstrare*, which means *to point out*, demonstratives are words whose basic function is referring to specific entities that the speaker/ writer wants to indicate. In modern English,

demonstratives include *this*, *these*, *that* and *those* (Kaplan, 1994). Authors of general grammar books (Kaplan, 1994; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999) explain that there are two dimensions to categorize English demonstratives: proximity (between *near* and *far*) and number (between *singular* and *plural*). This two-way distinction also largely constitutes the explanation about English demonstratives in most EFL teaching practice, lesson planning, and material designing (Leńko-Szymańska, 2004).

However, rather than physical distance and the matter of singular or plural, the choice of demonstratives in written discourse involve discourse register (spoken or written), writer's intentions and the larger textual environment in which the demonstrative is used (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Petch-Tyson, 2000). Specifically, in written discourse, demonstratives play a critical role in text organization thanks to their ability to point to such higher-order entities as events, propositions and facts; which are usually non-nominal antecedents. They were first addressed as the term *text reference* by Halliday & Hasan (1976), which is considered "one of the major cohesive devices of the English language" (p. 67). This *text reference* helps summarize previous content into a concise phrase, thus bringing about a rhetorical effect that Petch-Tyson (2000, p.46) calls *brick-building*, which facilitates the creation of a rigid hierarchy of arguments, one built upon another. Therefore, the increased use of this *text reference* is proposed to have a positive influence on producing a more dynamic and persuasive text – a desirable result of argumentative essay writing.

Important as it is, the proper use of demonstratives remains a problem to many EFL students due to the absence of detailed instructions on how demonstratives function in written discourse and the simple reliance on the learners' instinct in selecting which demonstrative to use. Indeed, the use of demonstratives as referring expressions in written discourse proves to be challenging to learners of different L1 backgrounds: Dutch, French, Swedish, Finnish, Polish, Japanese, Korean and Chinese (Petch-Tyson, 2000; Lenko-Szymariska, 2004; Niimura & Hayashi, 1994; Oh, 2009; Zhang, 2015).

Similar to other groups of EFL learners, it is assumed that Vietnamese EFL learners also share some difficulties when using demonstratives as referring expressions in written discourse. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how the use of demonstratives in written discourse of Vietnamese EFL learners differs from that of native English speakers, whether or not these differences vary according to learners' writing proficiency, and what factors, if any, lead to such disparities.

This study is limited to the use of demonstratives in argumentative essays written by one group of native English speakers and two groups of Vietnamese college students who are majoring in English. It investigates the use of English demonstratives categorized by two dimensions: proximity (proximal & distal) and pragmatic uses (exophoric, anaphoric or discourse deictic use) by Vietnamese EFL learners in argumentative essays in comparison to the ones written by native English speakers.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. English demonstratives in linguistics

In linguistics, demonstratives are identified as one type of deixis, which means *pointing* through language (Levinson, 1983). The domain of deictic expressions is traditionally divided into three categories: person deixis referring to people (e.g. *I, you, me*), temporal deixis indicating time (e.g. *now, then, today, and yesterday*) and spatial deixis referring to place (e.g. *this, that, here and there*) (Buhler, 1934). Among these types, demonstratives belong to the class of spatial (or place) deixis, serving as a device to locate other subjects by their distance to the deictic center, or the speaker (Levinson, 1983; Diessel, 1999).

#### 2.1.1. Proximal and distal demonstratives

The near-distant polarity conveyed in the choice of proximal and distal demonstratives can be spatial, temporal, psychological or sequential, as illustrated in examples (1) to (4) compiled by Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999).

- (1) I like *this* car better than *that* one over there. [spatial]
- (2) I like *this* movie better than *that* concert last night. [temporal]
- (3) I like *this* candidate, which is why I didn't vote for *that* one. [psychological]
- (4) *This* dress is less attractive than *that* one. [sequential]

Proximal demonstrative *this* goes with referents that are physically near the speaker, at present, more preferred and first mentioned; while distal demonstrative *that* indicates referents that are spatially far from the speaker, in the past, less preferred and second mentioned in discourse.

However, these distinctions do not give a complete account for various uses of *this* and *that* in discourse, which leads to other alternative approaches, such as the idea of *focus*, or the attention degree that the listener should pay to the referent (Sidner, 1983; Strauss, 1993, 2002; McCarthy, 1994). These approaches suggest that uses of demonstratives are not always determined

by the concept of distance, but also by the cognitive status of the referents themselves. According to the “Gradient Focus Framework” suggested by Strauss (1993, 2002), *this* requires high focus, signals a shift from the old to the present topic while *that* is a marker of middle focus, in which little new information is needed and the focus of attention is maintained for the old topic.

### 2.1.2. Exophoric, anaphoric and discourse deictic use of demonstratives

Diessel (1999) suggests that there are four basic pragmatic uses of demonstratives: exophoric, anaphoric, discourse deictic and recognitional use. These four uses are illustrated in the following examples (Zaki, 2011, p. 31)

- (5) Is *this* my book? (accompanied by a pointing gesture) [exophoric]
- (6) A pregnant woman has to undergo several checks. *These checks* are called antenatal. [anaphoric]
- (7) The country is in recession. *That* has been expected for months. [discourse deictic]
- (8) Do you still have *that radio* that your uncle gave you last year? [recognitional]

In written discourse, discourse deictic use of demonstratives plays the crucial role in text organization as well as the persuasiveness effects of arguments. Since discourse deictic demonstratives can be used to refer to higher-order entities, or non-nominal antecedents such as clauses, propositions or even a passage, they create text reference to the writings. Therefore, the ability to accurately employ demonstratives in making text reference thus contributes to the text’s coherence and helps efficiently expresses writers’ arguments and intentions.

## 2.2. Studies of EFL learners’ use of English demonstratives

There have been several studies carried out to investigate the differences in demonstratives use in written discourse of native English speakers and non-native learners from various language backgrounds. They all reveal that there exists a clear disparity in the use of demonstratives in essays of native English speakers and non-native learners of English.

For European learners, Mauranen (1993), Petch-Tyson (2000) and Leńko-Szymańska (2004) conducted studies using electronic corpora collected from advanced English learners in Dutch, France, Finland, Sweden and Poland. Mauranen (1993) investigated the use of demonstratives as text reference in Finnish writings and English writings of highly competent Finnish writers and native English speakers, while Leńko-Szymańska (2004) investigated Polish learners’ use of demonstratives in argumentative

writings. Both studies indicated that EFL learners in the study do not acquire the native-like pattern of implicit use of demonstratives. Unlike these two studies which focus on learners of only one language, Petch-Tyson (2000) carried out an experiment with corpora from learners of diverse native language backgrounds (Dutch, French, Finnish and Swedish). The data included argumentative essay writings of different topics from two corpora: Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) and the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). All instances of demonstratives *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* were retrieved from two 50,000-word corpora, first by using a data retrieval software program and later manually verifying ambiguous cases. Qualitative analysis was also conducted with 150 samples of demonstrative expressions from each corpus. The researcher then found several differences in the use of demonstratives between EFL learners and native English speakers: EFL groups use significantly fewer demonstratives than native English writers, but EFL groups overuse distal demonstrative *that*. Besides, demonstrative anaphors are less frequently and effectively used in making text reference in the learner corpora, which may lead to less hierarchically structured arguments made by EFL learners.

While all the above mentioned studies examine European groups of EFL learners, the use of demonstratives in written discourse of English learners in Asia was also investigated through some other studies. Oh (2009) conducted a research that compares the corpora of native English speakers' argumentative writings (LOCNESS) with Korean EFL learners' essays from Seoul National University Korean English Learner Corpus (SKELC), which was later sub-divided into two sub-corpora based on the writers' TEPS<sup>3</sup> scores: high proficiency group and low proficiency group. After examining the use of demonstratives in three sets of essays quantitatively and qualitatively, Oh (2009) had some interesting observations, some of which are similar to what Petch-Tyson (2000) found in European learners' corpus. She found that Korean EFL learners have less frequent use of demonstratives in general, heavy dependence on distal demonstrative *that*, underuse of *this* and *those* as pronouns, and underuse of *these* as a determiner. The lack of text reference in Korean EFL groups' writings is also observed, which leads to less successful attempts to guide readers to interpret the text in a specific way. These problems are less serious in high proficiency group. However, both groups of learners demonstrate the same issue of limited lexical range attached to

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<sup>3</sup> TEPS is an abbreviation of Test of English Proficiency, a test developed by Seoul National University, South Korea to assess Korean EFL learner's English proficiency.

demonstratives. She then suggested that the increase of language proficiency does not necessarily correspond to a native-like pattern of demonstrative use, and those problems of overuse and underuse can affect the quality of arguments made in the learners' essays.

However, these typical patterns of EFL learners' demonstrative use found by Petch-Tyson (2000), Leńko-Szymańska (2004) and Oh (2009) do not appear in Chinese EFL learners' argumentative writings, as Zhang (2015) pointed out. Chinese participants in Zhang (2015)'s study are found to have a similar pattern in demonstrative use with native English speakers, though there are still some errors frequently observed like unclear referents and inconsistent uses of *this* and *that*.

Since different groups of EFL learners demonstrate dissimilar problems in using demonstratives in written discourse, it is crucial to closely investigate each group's specific use of demonstratives and its differences with native English writers so that meaningful implications can be drawn to improve EFL learners' writing skills. It is also expected that Vietnamese EFL learners show a certain degree of disparity with native English speakers in demonstrative use in argumentative writings, and Vietnamese students with high level of writing skills will face less problems than those with low writing proficiency.

Although these studies have greatly contributed to the investigation of demonstrative uses from L2 learners' perspectives, there has been no research comparing the pragmatic use of demonstratives of native English speakers and Vietnamese EFL learners in a comprehensive way. This study is expected to fill in that gap by providing an analysis on three pragmatic uses (exophoric, anaphoric and discourse deictic use) of demonstratives following Diessel (1999)'s classification in a systematic manner.

The study seeks answers to two specific research questions:

1. How does the use of English demonstratives (regarding proximity and pragmatic uses) by Vietnamese EFL students differ from native English speakers?
2. Do these differences vary depending on writing proficiency levels?

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1. Data collection**

The study investigated three sets of writing samples, which were argumentative essays responding to the question: "Should people be allowed to obscure their identity online?". The first set included 27 essays (300-450 words long) written by native English speakers (hereafter NES),

who were undergraduate or graduate students of an education department at a university in New York, USA. Meanwhile, 53 essays in the other two sets (Vietnamese high score group – VHS and Vietnamese low score group – VLS) were composed by Vietnamese EFL college students who were sophomores majoring in English language at two different universities in Hanoi. (Table 1)

**Table 1.** Information of three sets of data

Group	Native English speakers (NES)	Vietnamese English speakers (VES)	
		VHS	VLS
Number of essays	27	26	27
Number of tokens	9987	8705	8047

Initially, 65 students from three second-year classes took part in the study. All students were asked to write a 300-word essay on the topic. The essays were then rated by two Vietnamese raters: the researcher herself and a graduate student who owns a bachelor’s degree in English language teaching and who is currently working as an English lecturer at a university in Hanoi.

The two raters scored 65 essays based on the four criteria in IELTS Task 2 Writing band descriptor. Judging from the criteria elaborated in the score descriptor, the researcher decided to put essays scored 7 or above into a high score (VHS) set, while essays rated below 5.5 were classified as a low score (VLS). Two raters independently scored these essays. The inter-rater reliability was calculated by Cohen’s kappa statistics with the observed value of 0.82, which indicated that the agreement between the two raters was almost perfect. After two raters reached an agreement on the results, there were 26 Vietnamese essays that scored 7 or above; and 27 Vietnamese essays with scores lower than 5.5. The other 12 essays whose scores were from 5.5 to 6.5 fell into the category of “undecided” and were discarded from the study.

### **3.2. Data analysis**

Both quantitative and qualitative analysis were employed in this study to generate comprehensive and profound results on the use of demonstratives.

The quantitative analysis procedure required four steps in total. First, all

demonstratives employed in 80 essays were manually identified. All cases of *this*, *these*, *those* were taken into account; while the occurrence of *that* as a demonstrative was carefully determined (complementizer and relative pronoun *that* were excluded). Second, demonstratives were classified into proximal *this(these)* and distal *that(those)* groups. Third, pragmatic uses of demonstratives were observed by classifying these tokens into three groups: exophoric, anaphoric and discourse deictic reference. In the fourth stage, disparities in frequency of each demonstratives' use were then calculated and compared across three groups using one-way ANOVA and Tukey's post hoc test, to see whether there was a statistically significant difference between native English speakers and Vietnamese EFL learners with strong and poor writing skills. The computer software program SPSS 23.0 for Windows was used, setting the significance level at 0.05 and 0.005 respectively.

Besides quantitative research methods, this study also adopted qualitative analysis, which was realized by a close examination into specific uses of demonstratives in writing compositions. The differences in the preference towards distal or proximal demonstratives, as well as pragmatic functions of demonstratives as exophoric, anaphoric or discourse deictic reference were investigated at this stage. Prominent examples were then extracted to demonstrate the observed differences in preferred patterns between native English speakers and two groups of Vietnamese EFL learners.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Overall frequencies

According to the result by one-way ANOVA test, there is a remarkably significant difference in the number of demonstratives employed among three groups,  $F(2,77) = 7.469$ ,  $p = .001^{**}$ . The disparity within three groups is further elaborated in Table 2, which presents the results of the Tukey's post hoc test comparing three sets of data.

**Table 2.** Mean difference in the use of demonstratives between three groups

	NES/VHS	NES/VLS	VHS/VLS
Mean difference	1.87*, $p = .015$	2.38**, $p = .001$	0.51, $p = .717$

statistically significant \*\* $p < .005$ , \* $p < .05$



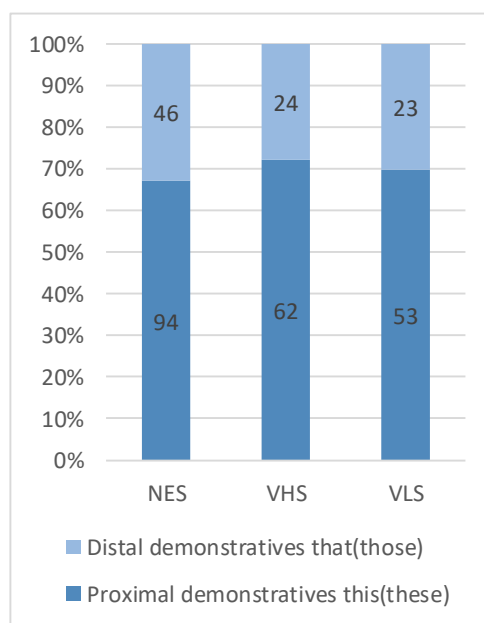
As can be inferred from Table 2, the gap between native and non-native English writers' demonstrative use in argumentative writing is statistically robust for high score essays and even larger for low score essays. Although there is no statistically significant difference between two groups of learners ( $p=0.717$ ), it can be noted that the disparity between native and non-native writers decreases when writing proficiency increases.

The observed result is persistent with previous findings by Petch-Tyson (2000), Wang & Sun (2006) and Oh (2009) that native speakers usually use demonstratives more frequently than EFL students, particularly in the case of Dutch, French, Finnish, Swedish, Chinese and Korean learners.

#### 4.2. The use of proximal and distal demonstratives

The proportion of proximal and distal demonstratives used in three sets of essays is demonstrated in Figure 1. It is apparently a common trend in both native and non-native English speakers' writings that proximal demonstratives *this(these)* are much more preferred than distal demonstratives *that(those)*.

This finding, however, contradicts what was found in the previous studies about the overuse of *that* in EFL students' writings (Petch-Tyson, 2000; Leńko-Szymańska, 2004; Wang & Sun, 2006; Oh, 2009). These researchers discovered that EFL groups generally underuse proximal demonstratives *this(these)* and overuse distal demonstrative *that*. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that Vietnamese EFL learners in this study do not have the same problem of overusing distal demonstrative *that* when compared to other EFL groups.



**Figure 1.** Proportion of proximal and distal demonstratives used by three groups (normalized number of cases per 10,000 words)

##### 4.2.1. Proximal demonstratives this(these)

A Tukey post hoc test was carried out to find out which specific groups differ from the others in the use of proximal demonstratives. While there is no statistically significant difference in the frequency of proximal demonstratives used between native English speakers (NES) and learners

with strong writing skills (VHS) ( $p=.094$ ), learners with low level of writing proficiency (VLS) are found to use proximal *this(these)* statistically less than NES group ( $p<.05$ ).

As Halliday and Hasan (1976) points out, *this* “conveys a sense of immediacy and also of solidarity with the hearer, of shared interest and attention” (p. 61). This remark is later supported by Mauranen (1993), saying proximal demonstrative *this* has “the effect of bringing the reader round to the writer’s orientation, or point of view, by implying that the writer as well as the reader are both ‘here’, on the same side, looking at things from the same perspective” (p. 96), thus it creates “closeness or solidarity” between the writer and the reader. This effect can be illustrated in example (9).

(9) It makes some people feel that it is alright to make racist or sexist comments because they do not have to worry about anyone knowing that it was them. *This* is worrisome for me. I think that it only perpetuates *these* ideas instead of allowing people to become more tolerant of others and advancing together as a society. In a certain way I suppose you have to feel embarrassed by *these* thoughts to be able to want to change. (taken from NES #47)

The combination of proximal demonstrative *this* and an adjective indicating the writer’s attitude *worrisome* brings the matter closer to the reader’s attention and perspectives. Later, the plural proximal demonstrative *these* is chosen twice to serve two purposes: not only referring to the previously mentioned *ideas* and *thoughts*, but also builds an interactional closeness to the reader’s view point.

On the other hand, for Vietnamese EFL learners with poor writing skills, it is assumed that they are less likely to take advantage of this rhetorical function of proximal demonstratives *this(these)* to build effective argumentation, as shown in example (10):

(10) Nowadays, the internet is more and more developing widely. *That* makes people communicate each other easily. However, the widespread internet influence and easy accessibility has opened doors to new methods of crime. *These* include fraud, cyber-bullying and identity theft. Some people think that we should be allowed to obscure our identities online. It is convenient for us if we do *that*. (VLS #51)

While *these* (referring to crime methods mentioned previously) may draw the reader’s attention and create a certain extent of closeness between the writer’s standpoint and the reader’s perspective, *that* seems to divert the reader’s focus by making a distance between the argument and the writer himself. In consideration of McCarthy’s (1994) proposal about focus-shifting

functions of *this* and *that*: whereas *this* may be able to establish hierarchy in arguments, *that* has the function of shifting focus across different topics.

From the examples analyzed above, it can be noticed that Vietnamese EFL learners, especially less proficient writers might not be aware of proximal demonstratives' rhetorical function to create a close relationship and an impression of solidarity between the writer and the reader, thus make less successful arguments in argumentative essays. However, at this stage, this is only a hypothesis which needs to be comprehensively studied and verified with larger corpora.

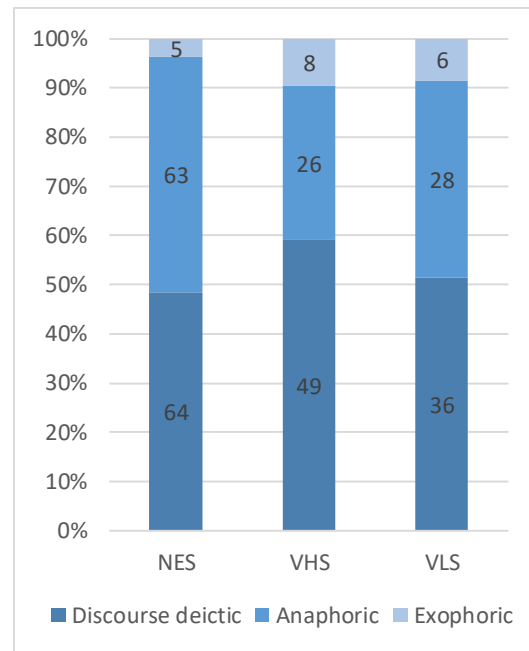
#### 4.2.2. *Distal demonstratives that(those)*

From the qualitative analysis, it is found that both native English speakers and Vietnamese learners of English demonstrate the similar use of distal demonstrative *that(those)*, which indicates psychological distance of the writer and the referents being discussed in discourse when the referents are not preferred or desired by the author, or the writer is holding either an indifferent or a negative attitude towards the referents. This use of distal demonstratives thus helps the reader successfully interpret the writer's attitude and standpoint in argumentation, which can be illustrated in the following examples.

(11) These people might start out as nothing more than a username and a set of fingers on a keyboard, but it is through *that* partial sense of anonymity that they become a living and breathing voice. (NES #16)

(12) Having a mask to conceal identity, users become more and more courageous to speak out whatever they think no matter how hurtful and offensive it is. *That* is when cyber bullying appears. (VHS #7)

(13) If someone uses their actual information to post their opposite point of view towards government or any departments, *that* person might



**Figure 2.** Proportion of pragmatic uses of demonstratives in three groups (normalized number of cases per 10,000 words)

be suspected to be a reactionary or even investigated by police officers.  
(VLS #12)

*That* in all examples refer to the situation or the person mentioned in the previous clause, but more importantly, it shows that the writer is trying to dissociate himself from these referents, since they are not what he would fancy. Native English speakers and both groups of Vietnamese EFL learners are observed to make a good use of distal demonstratives to create mental distance and express disapproval with the referents.

### **4.3. The use of exophoric, anaphoric and discourse deictic demonstratives**

In three sets of essays, three pragmatic uses of demonstratives (exophoric, anaphoric and discourse deictic) are found. In exophoric use, demonstratives refer to entities outside the text. Anaphoric use of demonstratives is identified when they are used to refer to preceding nouns or noun phrases; whereas when the antecedents are clauses, propositions or a passage of text, demonstratives are said to have discourse deictic use.

The distribution of the other three pragmatic uses of all demonstratives in three groups is exhibited in Figure 2.

Across three groups, demonstratives are most frequently used to point to referents expressed by propositions rather than noun phrases, with around half of them identified as having discourse deictic use: 48% for NES, 59% for VHS and 51.4% for VLS. Exophoric is the least used function since less than 10% of demonstratives are used to refer to entities in present speech situation.

A one-way ANOVA test was conducted and it was discovered that there is a statistically significant group difference in the frequency of anaphoric demonstratives between groups ( $F(2,77)=5.565$ ,  $p=.006$ ).

#### **4.3.1. Anaphoric use**

It is found that when referring to antecedents as noun phrases, native speakers use significantly more demonstratives than both Vietnamese learner groups. Both Tukey's indexes are significant at  $p<0.5$  ( $p=.013$  when comparing NES and VHS,  $p=.015$  when comparing NES and VLS).

Anaphoric demonstratives generally point to the referents expressed by a noun phrase in the preceding clause. In most simple cases, that noun phrase includes the noun modified by the demonstrative determiner itself, or its synonyms. Several instances can be found in non-native speakers' essays:

(14) It is argued that the most benefit of online is free expression. If people are forced to use their real identity, *this benefit* will be lost. (VHS #57)

As for native speakers' essay, anaphoric use of demonstratives is not limited to only this kind of reference. Apart from pointing to the exact or synonymous noun phrases like all cases in non-native English writings, demonstratives are used by native speakers in a wider variety of referential patterns. The referents are still noun phrases, but they can be denoted through a collecting noun, or be located far backward in the discourse but not the immediate preceding clause, or be expressed through different noun phrases that share the same meaning:

(15) The ability to conceal your identity, be who you are, and listen to things without the judgment of society is a positive, but the abuse of *that obscuring power* can lead to bullying and dangerous lies that can have serious impacts on peoples' lives. All in all, you can't stop obscuring online identities, but that doesn't mean people shouldn't be responsible with *that ability*. (NES #49)

The remarkable difference in frequency can thus be attributed to a noticeable dissimilarity in the diversity of vocabulary and structures employed by demonstrative determiners in three groups' essays. It is observed that native speakers utilize a wide range of noun phrases with demonstrative determiners, especially *this/these*, whereas only a limited range is employed in both groups of non-native speakers' essays. According to Mauranen (1993), demonstrative noun phrases can help readers to accurately identify and have a particular viewpoint on the referent being discussed, thus "serve the purpose of guiding the reader's interpretation process to match the writer's intention" (p. 65). Non-native learners' limited utilization of demonstrative noun phrases, therefore, can affect the effectiveness of arguments in their writings.

#### **4.3.2. Deictic discourse use**

Although compared to native speakers, fewer instances of demonstratives used as discourse deixis are found in Vietnamese EFL learners' essays, there does not seem to be a marked difference in frequency across all three groups. Moreover, similar patterns of referring to a clause or sentence are also prevalent in both groups of non-native learners' essays, though there is no case of demonstratives having antecedents as a paragraph as in English native speakers. Examples of these discourse deictic use can be easily detected in three group's essays:

(16) The internet, however, is a vehicle to anonymity [...] whom also gains profit.

With all of *these factors* considered, one is not always anonymous regardless of Twitter handles, Tumblr URLs, Facebook names, or Google+ identities. (NES #40)

(17) In contrast, others may argue that anonymity makes people less responsible for their actions. *This* is true to some extent as anonymity can easily help facilitate cyber-bullying, stalking, or fraud. (VHS #20)

(18) For example, I have two Facebook accounts, but my mother only knows about one account which I have not posted any information about my study, my feeling, my love- that I posted in the others. *That* makes me free. (VLS #28)

In such cases, demonstratives act as connective tools that both summarize the information presented in the previous clause and establish “a thematic ground” for following sentences (Diessel, 1999, p. 102). This referential use of demonstratives plays a crucial role in text’s coherence since it helps connect two discourse units by produce an overt link between them, thus facilitate readers’ understanding and boost the effectiveness of arguments in argumentative essays.

The most commonly used type of equative structure is predicative construction starting by *this + be....*, as illustrated in native speakers’ writing examples below:

(19) The child-predators our teachers warn us about as we begin to make use of the internet are not obscuring their identity. They’re just flat-out misrepresenting it. *This is an entirely different problem*, the scope of which extends beyond the issue of personal identity. (NES #16)

Initiating with *this + be*, the structure in example (19) continues with an evaluative noun phrase or an adjective indicating the writer’s personal opinions about the referent: *an entirely different problem*. It serves the function of inducing the reader to the writer’s expected interpretations, since it conveys the writer’s perceptions and attitudes towards the proposition being mentioned. A relatively wide range of assessing adjectives (*different, difficult, trivial, dangerous, worrisome*) and specifying nouns (*problem, question, matter, issue*) are employed to express the writer’s judgment in native speakers’ essays. This variety in Vietnamese learners’ essays is, however, quite limited. Only *true, difficult* and *controversial topic* is found in low score

essays (as in (20)) while students with high level of writing exhibit a more positive utilization of the evaluative noun phrases (as in (21)).

(20) For example, some men make up their age and profile on Facebook to attract and be friend with younger girls as bad motives. *This is true.* (VLS #32)

(21) It is argued that the most benefit of online is free expression. If people are forced to use their real identity, this benefit will be lost. *This is a completely wrong idea* because people still have the freedom to say what they think, do what they want online by themselves. (VHS #57)

In a nutshell, in referring to previous propositions of academic discourse, demonstratives play a crucial part in making text reference and improve the whole text's coherence. Moreover, by combining them with assessing adjectives and nouns, the writers can also express their judgements towards those propositions previously discussed. However, Vietnamese EFL learners, although are able to employ demonstratives to make text reference and connect sentences, still do not seem to utilize an extended source of vocabulary useful for indicating writers' attitudes in argumentative essays. This is the gap where Vietnamese EFL learners need practice to fill in, since they have not yet gained the ability to use a wide variety of vocabulary to present their attitudes in such cases.

## **5. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

### **5.1. Summary of key findings**

Native English speakers employ a greater number of demonstratives than both groups of Vietnamese EFL learners. The gap between native and non-native writers decreases when writing proficiency increases, which indicates that demonstratives use of learners with strong writing skills moves more closely towards native speakers' norms, in terms of frequency.

In terms of proximal and distal demonstratives, all three groups share a similar pattern as proximal demonstratives are employed much more than distal demonstratives. Therefore, it can be suggested that Vietnamese EFL learners in this study do not have the same problem of overusing distal demonstrative *that* like other EFL groups.

Regarding the use of proximal demonstratives *this(these)*, the difference between native and non-native English writers varies according to writing proficiency level. While there is no statistically significant difference in

the number of distal demonstratives used between native English speakers and the high score group, learners with a low level of writing proficiency are found to use proximal *this(these)* statistically less than native English writers. This lack in proximity form of demonstratives can be considered one of the contributing factors to less effective arguments in low score essays, since they help create the closeness and solidarity between the writer's standpoints and the writer's perspectives.

For distal demonstrative *that(those)*, no statistical significance is found across three groups. Qualitative analysis also reveals that three groups make good employment of distal demonstratives to express psychological distance of the referents with the writer, so the reader can successfully interpret the writer's attitude and standpoint in argumentation.

Among three pragmatic uses, three groups share the same distribution of pragmatic uses when demonstratives are mostly employed to point to referents expressed by propositions, and exophoric is least used. In referring to antecedents as noun phrases, native speakers use significantly more demonstratives than both Vietnamese EFL learner groups. The remarkable difference in frequency of demonstratives used with anaphoric function can be attributed to a noticeable dissimilarity in the diversity of vocabulary and structures employed by demonstrative determiners in three groups' essays. It may reflect non-native EFL students' struggle when dealing with nominal reference in argumentative essays.

Regarding deictic discourse use, there does not seem to be a marked difference in frequency across all three groups in cases where demonstratives are found to connect phrases, sentences and paragraphs in academic discourse. However, qualitative analysis reveals that Vietnamese EFL learners, despite being able to use demonstratives to refer to propositional antecedents in discourse, still have limitations in utilizing them.

## **5.2. Limitations and suggestions**

Despite the researcher's strong desire to investigate the subject matter, some problems encountered during research time led to a number of limitations. The research only involved a limited number of participants, which made the findings not generalizable to the whole population of Vietnamese EFL learners. Besides this, more insights about the problems found would have been gained if the researcher had had the chance to use another data collection instrument: interviews.



The study's limitations give rise to numerous suggestions for further researches. The issue can be studied on a larger scale by employing bigger number of participants from different colleges in various areas. Another direction is investigating students' use of demonstratives before and after some treatment, for instance the instruction of pragmatic uses of demonstratives.

### **5.3. Implications**

Some pedagogical implications can be drawn from the findings above. For educators, curriculum designers and English teachers in Vietnam, it is high time that there should be official instructions on demonstratives with their pragmatic uses to EFL learners. Non-native speakers appear to be only familiar with semantic meaning of distal and proximal demonstratives due to proximity-based explanations, and their function as a referring device in written discourse. They have little awareness about rhetorical functions of demonstratives, for example *this* helps produce a certain degree of closeness between the writer and reader, induce the reader to stand on the same side with the writer; or *that* establishes psychological distance between the referents and the writer, from which the writer's attitudes can be indicated. Although such functions are well-acknowledged and properly used by native speakers, non-native speakers, especially those with low writing proficiency might not likely to resort to these effects of demonstratives to strengthen their arguments.

Besides, the role of demonstratives in making text reference also needs to be paid close attention to, since it proves to play an important role in enhancing the effectiveness of argumentative essays. Examples from sample essays with detailed analysis should be provided to the students, so that they will be aware of this crucial function of demonstratives.

Another problem with non-native students' writings is the lack of variety in vocabulary and structures used with demonstratives, from which poor expressions can be made and less successful arguments are produced. Vocabulary and structures, especially evaluating adjectives need to be richened through lots of practice.

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