

A Contrastive Study of Textual Cohesion and Coherence Errors in Chinese EFL Abstract Writing in Engineering Discourse

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This pilot empirical study examined the deficiency of textual cohesion and coherence reflected in genre-based English abstract production of the engineering discourse by most Chinese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) advanced learners, using cohesive theory, text linguistics, and intercultural theory as the theoretical framework. The problems were addressed typically from the perspective of intercultural communication, aiming to help Chinese EFL advanced writers achieve effective communication in the interaction with International English readers (IE). This study compared the data obtained from 30 abstracts written by Chinese advanced EFL writers and another 30 abstracts written by English as Mother Language (EML) writers in terms of structural cohesion and non-structural cohesion. The contractive results showed that Chinese and English are surprisingly different in strategies of cohesion and coherence, and that the major cohesive and coherence errors made repetitively by most Chinese EFL respondents are more associated with their cultural transfer in a way of fossilization. We hope to provide meaningful insight into these problems by tracing the influence on linguistic, pragmatic, cognitive, and cultural aspects.

Although the shared norms of cohesion and coherence of a research report is required by the International English (IE) academic speech community, writers from Chinese language and culture comprehend the two textual features differently, especially coherence. Many cohesive and coherence problems occur in Chinese EFL writing, especially in EFL abstract writing, and this occurrence results from fossilization due to the strong influence of the native language and greatly hinders effective communication. This textual cohesive deficiency and incoherence in the abstracts by Chinese advanced EFL learners are actually systematic errors due to the cultural interferences in the production of English abstracts and the different audience's expectations regarding the textual quality required. The fossilization that occurs is mainly due to the ignorance of cultural influence which can even block effective communication in the information flow; therefore, there is a great need to draw attention to the issue and address the problems.

Many researchers have examined cohesion and coherence for a general purpose, assuming that the text creates cohesive strategies management as one of the crucial points of discourse in terms of information flow and theme (Zhu & Yan, 2001). Hoey (2000) states that these two textual features interact in a subtle and complex way and that he built lexical patterns to achieve cohesion and coherence for a general discourse. Selinker (1994) emphasizes how the second language learner passes through a stage of inter-language in which systematic errors of various kinds occur in second language learning and learner's production; many of his followers support the claim that the errors made by inter-language

writers are systematic. Their contributions make it possible for our attempt to relate the EFL abstract cohesion and coherence deficiency to the systematic problems which have not been addressed by applied research as a big issue from the perspective of intercultural communication, even though they are key text qualities raised by De Beaugrande and Dressler (1996).

The purpose of the present paper is to study the deficiency of cohesion (grammatical and/or lexical relationship between different elements of a text) and coherence (relationship linking the meanings of utterances in a discourse; these links can be based on the shared knowledge of the speakers) reflected in Chinese EFL abstract production from the perspective of text analysis and intercultural communications. The major reasons for the fossilization of incohesion and incoherence are explored for a better understanding of EFL abstract writing problems and for the better control of EFL abstract writing. Cultural influence and fossilization (incorrect linguistic features becoming a permanent part of the way a person speaks and writes) of the first language (L1) over the second language (L2) are believed to be the biggest hindrance to effective communication in the intercultural context. Our concerns in this research have been to seek out ways useful for the genre-based analysis of incohesion and incoherence found in Chinese EFL abstracts. As IE (International English) is the main concern, social identity and national identity are not involved in the analysis.

Methodology

This empirical study examines the textual quality of the cohesion and coherence shown in Chinese EFL doctoral abstract discourse. The measurements used here are (a) five cohesive ties formulated (Halliday & Hassan, 2001), (b) lexical cohesive framework proposed (Hoey, 2000), and (c) thematic progression developed (Zhu & Yan, 2001). The similarities and differences of cohesive and coherence strategies used by EML writers and by Chinese EFL advanced writers are made. This task attempts to explore the underlying linguistic, pragmatic, cognitive, and cultural factors affecting abstract textual issue of cohesion and coherence with comparison and contrast of the Chinese and English languages.

Subjects

The respondents are two groups of abstract writers. The first group comprises 30 non-English major EFL doctoral writers from Harbin Institute of Technology in different fields of science and with high English proficiency. Another 30 Chinese EFL correspondents used as a reference for determining the problems related are from Shanghai Jiao Tong University (one of the nine key universities). These Chinese respondents were chosen because they are highly representative of the proficiency level of English writing skills of young Chinese EFL researchers. The third group consists of 30 EML researchers whose nationalities were deliberately chosen to be English or American to represent the professional skills. Their abstracts collected from a famous international database are used as parameters.

Instruments

The tools used in this analysis of different cohesive strategies preferred by EML writers and Chinese EFL advanced learners are non-structural cohesion and structural cohesion proposed by Halliday and Husan (2001) and Zhu, Zheng, and Miao (2001). The first tool used for measurements of non-structural cohesion includes grammatical cohesion of reference, ellipsis, substitution, and conjunction proposed by Halliday and Husan (2001) and lexical cohesion of reiteration by Hoey (2000) in terms of simple repetition and complex repetition. For non-structural cohesion, ellipsis and substitution are not included, for their use is not suggested in genre-based abstracts. Another tool used for structural cohesion is concerned mainly with thematic progression proposed by Zhu and Yan (2001). These four progression patterns are used for the measurement of the progression of theme (informed) and rheme (uninformed), helping judge the development of the subject. According to Zhu and Yan's theory, the text coherence can be achieved and affected by some of these four patterns. The text with more subjects or more shifts of the subjects will weaken the textual coherence, but will strengthen its coherence with fewer shifts of subjects.

Results

The present work examined the genre-based abstract problems with improper cohesion and coherence with non-structural cohesion and structural cohesion used as measurements. The deficiency of cohesion and coherence was found in most of the Chinese EFL abstracts in lexical, grammatical, and textual levels. The errors of incoherence are the major reason for the block of information flow and ineffective communication to the target readers. The findings are shown in the following data analysis of abstracts by the Chinese group and EML respondents, and the task attempts to illustrate the implications for EFL teaching, learning, and translation by tracing the causes of the ineffectiveness.

Data Analysis

Table 1 shows overall data for non-structural cohesion found in abstracts either by EML writers or Chinese EFL writers. As can be seen, most EML writers tend to prefer covert cohesion by using fewer conjunctions than Chinese EFLs do in abstract writing to build links between form and meaning. Most Chinese respondents, however, tend to turn to overt cohesive devices, especially the conjunctions of sequential and reasoning such as *firstly*, *then*, *finally*, *what's more*, *furthermore*, and so on, for sentence cohesion and to build coherence of the ideas.

Table 2 shows the overall situation of lexical cohesion by EFL and EML groups in terms of repetition strategy. What we found was that EML writers tended to continue the idea by using a simple repetition, a complex repetition, or paraphrases. However, the data suggest that Chinese EFL writers tended to prefer the simple repetition in a way of repeating the exact form in their genre-based abstract discourse. That is, the subject or the objects used in the previous sentence are continued in the full repetition of the same form. Preferences for full

Table 1

Overall Table for Non-Structural Cohesion Shown in Abstracts of Two Groups

Non-structural cohesion	No	Reference	Conjunctions	lexical
EML	30	25%	14.6%	71%
EFL	30	25.5%	70%	69%

Table 2

Overall Table for Lexical Cohesion Repetition Shown in the Abstracts of Two Groups

Lexical cohesion	No	Partial repetition	Full repetition	Simple paraphrase	Complex paraphrase
EML	30	43%	53%	13%	11%
EFL	30	26%	76.60%	3%	0%

Table 3

Overall Table for Structural Cohesion of Thematic Progression Shown in Abstracts

Progression patterns	No	Parallel pattern	Continual pattern	Concentration pattern	Crossing pattern
EML	30	33.3%	29	23	7
EFL	30	25%	37	36	10

repetition are found not just in the abstracts but also in EFL essay writing and translations. This is somewhat different from the EML writers, who tend to use different ways to continue the subject rather than the mere simple repetition. For example, *the polymers* can be replaced by *the new polymers*, or later *the resulting polymers*; the word *discover* can be replaced by *the discovery*, or later *the finding*, and so on; thus the simple repetition is not encouraged in EML writing, and this could be found in other discourses as well.

Table 3 reveals structural cohesion in terms of thematic progression shown in abstracts by two different groups. As can be detected, most Chinese EFL subjects show a strong preference for the concentration progression pattern for structural cohesion, but EML respondents turn to different ways of continual pattern to achieve the structural cohesion. The high frequency of using concentration progression patterns by most of the Chinese EFL respondents signals their preference for the indirect statement starting with topic rather than the subject; however, the continual progression pattern chosen by most of EML writers reveals explicitly their preference for the directness starting with the subject. The figure of indirect statements in a way of concentration pattern suggest that Chinese EFL abstract are less logical, less coherent, and result in poor flow of the information.

Table 4 summarizes the obvious phenomenon of Chinese EFL and EML respondents. We can find from the table that up to 70% of background information produced by Chinese respondents tended to use indirect openings with numerous irrelevant and empty statements of important roles, research interest, and general ideas of science development, and so on, for coherence. Whereas the EML writers showed no traces of indirectness with empty

Table 4

Data for Indirect Statement Shown in the Background Section of Two Groups

Indirect strategies	No.	It is well known that	With the development of science technology	...plays an important role / ...is an important model	...has been a hot or interesting topic
EML	30	6%	0%	0%	0%
EFL	30	35%	9%	12%	6%

Table 5

Data for Indirect Statements Used as Coherence Strategies in Abstracts of Two Groups

Indirect strategies	No.	<u>In order to meet with, SVO</u>	<u>Based on some, SVO</u>	<u>According to the theory of, SVO</u>	In this paper, the a novel model is presented
EML	30	6%	0%	3%	6%
EFL	30	57%	21%	16%	15%

Table 6

Frequencies of Indirectness for Coherence Shown in the Abstracts by Two Groups

Coherence strategies	Background	Purpose	Method	Result	Conclusion
EML	0%	3%	20%	3.3%	0%
EFL	35%	57%	30 . 3%	27 . 6%	20 . 3%

background statements for coherence, even though four writers began the abstract with an indirect opening containing background information, their background is of very specific identification of the present research rather than the very general idea of the research area.

Table 5 presents the specific data for most commonly used indirect statements functioning as an illustration of coherence strategies by Chinese EFL and EML writers. The indirect statements with adverbials for each of the abstract sections written by Chinese EFL writers are found to be filled with phrases like *in order to*, *according to*, *based on*, *due to*, and *in this paper*, as well as clauses like adverbial clauses of time, reason, and condition. The majority of adverbial statements used in and extracted from Chinese EFL abstracts are often placed at the beginning of the abstract sections; however, EML writers tended to place these adverbials at the end except for an emphasis on the experimental conditions of the specific method or of the specific results designed for the experiment.

Table 6 reveals the frequencies of indirectness shown for coherence in the abstracts of two groups. As can be observed, a majority of the EML writers tended to place the adverbial clauses of time, reason, criteria, sequences, condition, concession, and so on, at the end of the sentences rather than at the beginning, while the case is quite different from Chinese EFL respondents who tended to do the opposite. The frequencies of using the indirect statements, is much higher in the Chinese group than the EML group, especially in the background (35%

EFL, 6% EML) and purpose sections (57% EFL, 3% EML). There are also some differences in other sections where the choice of directness by EML writers and indirectness by Chinese EFL advanced learners is explicitly shown.

From the six tables, we can verify the major cohesive and coherence problems found in the Chinese EFL abstracts. They are as follows: (1) the overuse of cohesive devices, (2) overt links, (3) improper repetition of the sentence subject or the object, (4) concentration progression patterns and indirect statements, and (5) indirect and empty background information. These occurrences are greatly associated with the linguistic interferences due to the cultural differences and overgeneralization of cohesive rules of the target language in their learning process and their production. The second major textual problem in terms of coherence is overuse of indirect opening and indirect statements in all sections of their abstracts, which results in incoherent message, a poor flow of information, and therefore ineffective communication.

To sum up, the findings suggest that Chinese EFL writers were not linguistically and culturally sensitive to this genre-based abstract discourse. Not following the restrictions of the specific genre-based text to achieve abstract cohesion and coherence, therefore, needs to be looked at interculturally. Hoey (2000) suggests that cohesive ties are not by themselves critical for coherence, and that cohesion is objective, while coherence is subjective for it may vary from reader to reader. Husan (1984) suggests that coherence is only measurable in terms of readers' assessment. Chinese EFL writers choose to develop indirect statements in most parts of their abstracts with a continual progression pattern for coherence, not considering the target readers of different cultures, and their expectation about the cohesive and coherence strategies required for an English abstract. However, their choices for concentration progression patterns weaken the coherence required in English writing including EFL abstract writing, and thus slow down the information flow.

Discussion

Five major cohesive and coherence problems shown in the Chinese EFL abstracts of engineering discourse are found to be the big interferences in the written communication for the academic exchange. The main reasons for the miscommunications are attributed to four major factors: linguistic, pragmatic, cognitive, and cultural factors. For linguistic reasons regarding cohesion deficiency and improper coherence, we need to examine one of the linguistic differences believed by many scholars as Chinese topic-prominent and English subject-prominent language (Chomsky, 1965; Jespersen, 1992). In a topic prominent language, a writer emphasizes the topic of the sentence and organizes its syntax by placing the grammatical unit of adverbial as basic sentence structure at the beginning, but with the main clause (subject and predicate) going behind (Shen, 1988; Zhao, 1968). According to Zhao (1968) and Shen (1988), this topic-prominent structure is found to be employed by many Chinese EFL writers, accounting for nearly 50% of the total structures used. Affected by the topic-prominent nature of the Chinese language, the Chinese EFL advanced learners are accustomed to this feature and are therefore fossilized when they write in the target language by repetitively transferring the topic-prominent structure and placing the adverbial phrases or

clauses at the very beginning of a sentence. What we should notice is that this linguistic feature is, in fact, an indication of structural cohesion in the concentration progression pattern examined in the present study. This occurs in many discourses, even in Chinese EFL genre-based English abstracts with sentences starting with, “In order to,” “In this paper,” “With the development of,” “According to,” “Because of,” “Based on,” “When,” and so on. The present study suggests that this topic-prominent structure is much preferred by the Chinese EFL group, who tended to place the topic rather than the subject at the beginning by using the concentration progression pattern, which is used as a cohesive strategy to link the sentences to continue the text. However, this strategy could result in the frequent shift of the topic rather than explicit logical connection of the ideas in a linear way. The reason why they prefer and repeat this linguistic trait in Chinese EFL writing process, including that of the abstracts, is that the writers are born to use the language structure and grow with it. In fact, this typically preferred topic-prominent structure found in most Chinese EFL writings might stem, to a great extent, from the Chinese culture, a culture of indirectness, to be detailed later.

Another big linguistic difference concerning cohesion is the diverse understanding of repetition both in form and in function. Linguistically, English and Chinese are two different languages in terms of repetition. English is a language of form demanding many different forms for one single idea in a given passage, thus repetition both of the form and meaning is not allowed in English language, except for rhetorical emphasis and for power (Fowler & Ramsey, 1992; Graves, 1979). Chinese is a language of meaning with fewer forms with repetition used for emphasis and power as well as a linguistic form, strategy, or pattern for cohesion and coherence, preferred by most Chinese, including Chinese EFL writers in their writing process, sometimes unconsciously. Therefore, repetition for cohesion and coherence is widely accepted in a Chinese context for more purposes than simply emphasis or power. Hinkle (2001) pointed out that Chinese students tend to resort to rhetorical devices like repetition to reveal the tension of the writer. The commonly used repetitive strategy in many of Chinese CET (College English Text) essays we found was not for power and emphasis, but for cohesion. For instance, the topic sentence follows normally by “it can..., it can..., it can...” or by “for..., for..., for,” and so on. Also, we find that Chinese EFL writers repeat the subject or the object of the sentences again and again, like “Spacecraft...; it...; The spacecraft...”; “The problem..., the problem...; It...” However, we could seldom find this repetition as the cohesive strategy in an English mini-essay (Lian, 1993), thus *the spacecraft* can be replaced by native English speakers with synonyms such as *the space-shuttle*, *spaceship*, *the spacecraft*, *the shuttle*, *the ship*, and *the craft*. So we can also find the replacement in an EML abstract for the term *polymers* by *the new polymers*, *resulting polymers*, and *these materials*, but not at all in the Chinese EFL abstracts.

The second reason concerning cohesion and coherence deficiency is the unawareness of pragmatic difference. Pragmatically, Chinese EFL technical genre-based writers have been attempting to *translate* the idea prepared in their mind rather than *creating* the abstract in their production, for the text translated in *English* is presented totally in *Chinese ways*: concentration progression pattern and topic-prominent structure for both cohesion and coherence, simple lexical repetition for cohesion, empty and indirect background for coherence, and over generalization of overt links. Also, Chinese writers, including Chinese

EFL respondents, are seldom trained to consider textual cohesion and coherence as important parts of a writing task, and therefore are not familiar with these ideas and their implications. However, the EML researchers are quite informed of these concepts which are considered as the most important textual qualities and are offered in most of the writing books for high school students and undergraduates, and in some of the most important theoretical works by Brown and Yule (1983), De Beaugrande and Dressler (1996), Halliday and Hassan (2001), many others. We can believe rationally that English native speakers are well-trained in textual cohesion and coherence, and also would not transfer those five items mentioned above in the production process. Previous research indicates that SLA and linguistic relativity have some common concerns especially in regard to conceptual transfer study of pragmatic transfer in reading and writing (including textual and syntactic transfer), and this transfer could lead to a misunderstanding as they are unacceptable by target audiences with different expectations. In fact, topic-prominent structure and subject-prominent structure are just two different pragmatic rules for textual cohesion and coherence, and the latter is encouraged in the English context for easy reading and effective communication. Also, partial repetition, simple paraphrase, and complex paraphrase, which are commonly found in English writing for lexical repetition, are restraints for good writing production and thus are much pragmatically employed (Pinkham, 2000), whereas Chinese EFL learners and the instructors failed pragmatically to guide the learners with knowledge of different lexical repetitions, and various lexical repetition strategies are absent in both most of text books and teaching plans, even though they account for approximately 40% of cohesion in many discourses (Hoey, 2000) in both reading and writing passages. Another pragmatic deficiency of cohesion in abstract presentation is the improper use of overt conjunctions to connect ideas, which is the result of the Chinese EFL overgeneralization of rhetorical strategies for cohesion to be employed in English language. Language teachers assume that English is a language of form and conjunctions, especially of sequences, a view encouraged by more of the Chinese EFL language instructors. This overgeneralization can also account for pragmatic errors concerning cohesive and coherence deficiency in terms of overt links and over use of the links used in genre-based Chinese EFL abstracts.

Although the above two reasons could account for many of the problems, the cognitive factor is the most important reason when related to the socio-interactive approach, for it shows that writing is an enmeshed network of concept, socially-situated events and behavior (Swales, 2001). As English writing is process-oriented, writers are audience-oriented and tend to be in a dynamic state of social interaction, a writer has a set of cognitive schema or a network of text principles of audience, unity, cohesion, and coherence demanded for text quality. However, Chinese writing tends to be product-oriented and writer-oriented with few ideas of audience and their expectations. One can easily find that the Chinese writer tends to produce incomprehensible copy due to less consideration of clear social context and audiences, having no knowledge of comparable differences in syntax and text, and therefore has a poor understanding of their expectations of required forms. All of these have a distinct influence on the target language either in reading or writing and on their choices of cohesive and coherence strategies due to the mother culture and language. Repetition as another cohesive strategy that Chinese EFL writers preferred in their abstracts is a good illustration of

the great impact of different language and culture on the target language writing process.

Another cognitive factor is socio-cognitive influence of the L1 in the production of abstracts in the target language, which is regarded as the “binding power” even though the power of L1 influence is far from absolute (Cook, 1988). The binding in terms of contact settings, cognitive capacities to notice and to categorize is more associated with the cognitive inhibition of the mother language. Cook views the EFL learning as the attainment of a new perspective but not as an escape from the conceptual world, and therefore binding power, of the native language. The Chinese EFL transfer of the cohesive and coherence strategies and overgeneralization of the rules of the target language might be the reasons for neglecting the linguistic and cultural traits in the target language. This transfer, however, can also be attributed to the root reason of the binding power from the L1 language to notice, to categorize, and to choose to use. Up to the present, some Chinese EFL student writers still unconsciously choose the topic-prominent structure or concentration progression pattern for cohesion and coherence. We can say that it is because Chinese EFL writers are shaped cognitively in terms of syntax and text, as they grow up with their syntactical structure and cohesion and coherence strategies; therefore they produce the same structure and employ the same strategies in the target language or L2 mainly because of the binding power of L1. Also, their choices of repetitive strategies due to the binding power and shaping influence of L1 on the L2 are accepted in the context of L1 but rejected in the context of L2. The power and influence of L1 binding can trigger language and conceptual transfer and later the fossilization of the habitual thoughts and acts. The incorrect production of abstract cohesion and coherence for engineering discourse in L2 is actually the result of the L1’s binding and influence. This shaping influence and power displaced in either native language or cross-cultural communication (Scollon & Scollon, 2000a) is the manifestation of socio-cognitive influence which indicates that even highly-proficient Chinese EFL writers may never free themselves entirely from the binding power of the L1 and its shaping influence.

The last factor concerning the textual problems is the fact that Chinese culture is collectivistic, looking highly on others and mutual face concern; therefore, indirectness, implicitness, low illocutionary clarity, and loose logic are accepted and even encouraged in Chinese culture but not in Western culture (Jia, 1997). Much research has verified these cultural features, and the choice of an indirect way to achieve cohesion and build coherence is a good manifestation of this cultural difference presented in the current study. However, the way L1 Chinese writers arrange sentences in L2 English to build coherence is confusing for readers of native English, unfulfilling their expectations and causing misunderstanding and miscommunication, as native English bears the culture of directness, linear development, high illocutionary, clarity, and tight logic judgment, which is very different from Chinese culture. Most of the indirect background information concerning coherence problems made by Chinese respondents listed in Table 5 accounts for approximately 32%, and the indirect statements presented in each section shown in Table 6 accounts for up to 69% of concentration progression patterns. In fact, background information sections containing indirect and empty openings are therefore regarded as incoherent presentation, and this indirect and loosely-related opening can slow down or even cut off effective communication, and therefore are regarded as less logical and less informative. However, these strategies are

believed to be the safe way in Chinese contexts both for the speaker and for the listener, for it is less imposing. This can be well illustrated by Oliver's (1994, as cited in Bublitz, Lenk, & Ventola, 1999) observation that one primary function of Chinese discourse is to promote harmony. This indirect, empty, and implicit, less-closely related background information with loose logic presented in English language is intolerable. As coherence is very subjective (Hoey, 2000), the concept is believed to be culturally determined, and there will be an implicit and explicit presentation of textual property, especially of the coherence. Connor (1997) and Scollon and Scollon (2000b), two important researchers, suggest that there is close interaction between language and culture, and the linguistic differences derived from this cultural diversity and the knowledge of the differences will be crucial for effective communication cross-culturally.

Conclusions

This paper studies cohesive and coherence errors commonly located in Chinese EFL abstracts with contrastive analysis of textual differences, using comparative analysis and textual analysis approaches, Halliday and Hasan's cohesion theory (2001), Hoey's lexical cohesion theory (2000), and Zhu and Yan's thematic theory (2001) as the framework. The objective of this research is to arouse the attention of the researchers to the textual problems of Chinese EFL genre-based abstracts from a social cognitive perspective. Another objective is to promote EFL teaching for both the researchers and the learners in terms of the abstract writing process and production through the exploration of general existing problems related to textual cohesion and coherence. The results show that there are great differences concerning the structural cohesion, nonstructural cohesion, lexical cohesion, and coherence between the Chinese and English languages, and that four major differences stemming from language, pragmatics, cognition, and culture destroy textual property, ruin the expectation of the readers, and reduce effective communication.

What is worth noticing is that coherence, however, is not built just by cohesion like conjunctions. As cohesion and coherence are hard topics in terms of their relationship for many discourses, coherence is a facet of the reader's evaluation of a text; in other words, coherence is more subjective. Thus, we believe that coherence is culturally determined as well, and that whatever relationship exists between cohesion and coherence, cohesive ties are not by themselves critical in building coherence. Genre-based abstract discourse, in terms of cohesion together with coherence, should be directed to effective communication from a social-interactive perspective in research and teaching, and should take into its consideration the audiences, their expectations, information flow, and the cultural differences between the writers and the readers. We hope that this research can help Chinese EFL learners to improve the textual quality of cohesion and coherence required for abstract discourse for an explicit and effective presentation of their research work, as those textual properties are the key factors in successful academic performance, and that this work could shine a light on the pedagogic implications in terms of genre-based textual cohesion and coherence in EFL context.

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