The Study of Metadiscourse Markers in Academic IELTS Preparation Courses

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Abstract

The current study is an attempt to identify the frequency of different types of meta-discourse markers that have been used by EFL learners in IELTS preparation courses. To this end, 60 papers of 14 EFL learners were selected through convenient sampling. The learners were asked to write for the second task of academic IELTS that necessitates the use of more than 250 words per paper. These papers were gathered through 5 sessions that were intermittently designed for writing task of IELTS. The topics of these tests were selected from the previous IELTS exams in order to simulate the real test. That is, these themes were education, media, science, technology, and transportation. Hyland's [5] model of meta-discourse was selected as the framework for the identification of types and categories of meta-discourse markers. The finding of the study showed boosters and frame markers were the most common type of meta-discourse markers that were applied by language learners to qualify their writings. Thus, this can be implied that Iranian EFL learners follow a fixed pattern in which they unconsciously use boosters to strengthen their claims even if their claims are not supported by the rest of sentences.

Key words: IELTS writing task, interactive meta-discourse, interactional meta-discourse, cohesive devices.

1. Introduction

Among the main four skills of learning a foreign language, writing represents the most reliable sign of literacy through the path of language learning experience. In the case of writing, learners first acquire how to write letters, and then they become familiar with the grammar and parts of speech. The utmost stage of development occurs in advanced level wherein learners gradually notice the purpose of written language. The process of enhancing writing skill incorporate complicated stages. This process comprises basic conventions in early stages, elaborating facts, ideas and examples in elementary level, and eventually establishing a link between writers and readers in an advanced medium. Since the era English became the most instructed and practiced language throughout the globe, multiple instruments have been constructed to measure EFL (English as Foreign language) learners' proficiency level, namely the IELTS exam. In the case of the writing section in IELTS exam candidates are scored on the basis of their performance by considering four criteria: grammatical accuracy, syntactic complexity, vocabulary richness, and cohesive devices. Indeed, cohesive devices shape the very preliminary foundations on which advanced writers step to link multiple sentences together in a sensible thread with the purpose of providing necessary means to meaningful texts. The next term very close to the cohesion in function, is coherence. However, coherence aims at linking propositional contents of a text so as to make reading of a fabricated text an easy task to follow, rather than embarking upon unconnected portions of written language. Moreover, the prime level of proficiency metadiscourse markers can be recognized as practiced by adept writers in order to boost the organization and evaluation of written texts in bridging

the gap between the authors and their potent audience. In sum, an advanced writer is assessed (in different testing measures like IELTS) for higher levels of proficiency not only by grammatical and syntactic capability, but also the ability to utilize cohesive devices, coherent patterns of propositions and conceivably a fine-tuned inventory of metadiscourse markers to assist readers through the texts.

Many research studies have been conducted in recent years to inform on the significance of metadiscourse markers in reaching for quite different objectives. A majority of these investigations delved into socio-pragmatic features of the texts and the use of metadiscourse markers to manipulate readership communities through different cultural backgrounds. However, the last couple of years have witnessed a shift from pragmatic scope of studies in metadiscourse to pedagogical and academic interdisciplinary investigations. Despite informative results obtained in previous studies, there is still dearth of research for examining the significance of metadiscourse markers instruction to EFL learners who aim for higher levels of language proficiency in different skills, such as writing. Although Tan and Eng [9] have studied the persuasive effect of metadiscourse use in writing, no research has been conducted yet to report on the importance of metadiscourse use in IELTS writing section. Adopting Hyland's [5] model for metadiscourse markers, this study is intended to unravel the persuasive efficacy of metadiscourse markers in high band scores of academic module of IELTS writing exam.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of metadiscourse

"The term "metadiscourse" was first made up by Harris to better describe the attempts of writers or speakers engaging the audience" (Hyland, [5], P. 3). In contrast to cohesion and coherence, metadiscourse signifies not only in-text realizations of written language, but also beyond text bound patterns of organizations to reach out to the readers and the purposes the authors follow for the communication. As Hyland [5] stresses, metadiscourse markers aid the authors first to establish interactions between themselves and the texts, and then form association between the texts and their community of readers. Hence, metadiscourse use leads in to more efficient comprehension of the texts' message. The incorporation of metadiscourse markers should be observable for the readers so that some expository clues could be left for them and help them to realize the purpose of the authors.

Vande Kopple [10] proposed a model in which he emphasized on discourse markers as informational materials rather than referential materials. Two main categories of his model are "textual" metadiscourse markers and "interpersonal" metadiscourse markers. The components of textual dichotomy are *text connectives, code glosses, validity markers, and narrators.* As for the other half of the model, i.e. interpersonal dichotomy, he remarks illocution markers, attitude markers, and commentary. Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen [1]made a revision to the Vande Kopple's model. They kept the two categories of metadiscourse markers, i.e. interpersonal and textual, yet reorganized and collapsed the subcategories. The authors intended to find a more elaborated patterns for the readers of the texts. In their models, they separated textual metadiscourse into two sub-categories; "textual markers" with *logical connectives sequencers, reminders, and topicalizers* as its components and "interpretive markers" with *code glosses, illocution markers, and nnnouncement* as the components. Interpersonal metadiscourse markers include *hedges, certainly markers, attributors, attitude markers, and commentary.* Hyland [5] provided the ultimate definition and classification for metadiscourse markers: "the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community" (p. 37). In a seminal article, Hyland and Tse [6] mentioned three key principles for metadiscourse which separated the model Hyland [5] offered from the previously proposed frameworks. The principles were: 1. Metadiscourse is separate from propositional facets of discourse. This statement mostly denotes that we should separate the roles of metadiscourse markers from cohesive devices and coherence patterns of discourse. 2. Metadiscourse refers to facets of the text that signify writer-reader interactions. This principle gives emphasis to the point that authors and their readership develop direct contact of interpersonal nature, thus all the metadiscourse is categorized under the sole component of interpersonal and there is not any textual component whatsoever. Likewise this principle rejects the Hallidayan textual and interpersonal levels of discourse in that in their view, Hyland and Tse [6] advocates that interpersonal metadiscourse subsumes readers' knowledge, needs, and textual experiences.3. Metadiscourse devices are distinct in that metadiscourse refers only to relations that are internal to the text.

2.2 Empirical studies

Adopting Hyland's [5] model, Tan and Eng [9] conducted a study similar to the current study. They

aimed at the occurrences and the forms of metadiscourse use in the writing of both the high (HEP) and the low (LEP) English proficiency Malaysian undergraduate writers. The results indicated that both groups demonstrated a better performance in using the interactional metadiscourse compared with the interactive dichotomy. In brief, the researchers concluded that the HEP group had got more comprehensive inventory of metadiscourse markers than the LEP group, thus indicated more frequent uses of metadiscourse markers. In another line of research, Estaji and Vafaeimehr [2] examined the differences in the use, type, and frequency of interactional metadiscourse markers in the introduction and conclusion sections of research papers across the two disciplines of Mechanical and Electrical engineering. This study followed quantitative framework, and applied Hyland's [5] model. The result revealed that there was no statistically significant difference across the disciplines.

Alipour and Jalilifar [7] conducted a metadiscourse study in which, they investigated the role of explicit instruction of metadiscourse on Iranian EFL learners reading comprehension. Results of the post-test indicated efficacy of form-focused instruction of metadiscourse markers. In addition, the researchers found that cohesive devices were much more related to the metadiscourse components, compared with the coherence patterns. Simin and Tavangar [8] investigated the role of proficiency level on the use of metadiscourse markers in their study. They divided the language learners into three proficiency levels. Based on the analyses of their writings on different argumentative topics over one semester, they found out that advanced language learners used more metadiscourse markers. Ahmadi-Fatalaki, Amini and Mirzaee [3] also applied explicit instruction of interactive metadiscourse markers to see whether this type of instruction affects the EAP learners' reading comprehension performance. They found out the instruction of meaning and uses of interactive metadiscourse markers have the beneficial role for the development of EAP learners' performances. Ahmadi-Fatalaki [4] conducted a study to identity whether there is difference between different genders with regard to the use of different types of discourse markers in EFL learners' speaking tests. He discovered that female language learners used more interactional discourse markers.

Research Questions

1. What is the frequency of the use of interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers' within the second task of academic IELTS' writings?

2. What are the most common types of meta-discourse markers in the second task of academic IELTS' writings?

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus

The corpus of the present study is the collection of 60 writings of 14 EFL language learners. The topics for these writing were selected from the previous academic IELTS tests. The selection of these topics was based on their thematic generality. These themes were education, media, science, transport and technology. The participants of the present study enrolled in academic IELTS preparation courses at Safir and Shoukoh language centers. And, they have passed several Mock tests successfully. The age range of the participants was between 20 and 37.

3.2. Data Collection Procedure

The participants in this study were asked to write 5 different papers that were based on different themes of academic IELTS. Their writings were related to the second task of academic IELTS that necessitates language learners to write 250 words per paper. The allotted time for writing of each paper was considered to be 40 minutes that simulates IELTS test and there was no preparation before their writing due to the researchers focus on the real performance of these learners. These tasks were covered through five sessions that were intermittently specialized to their writing skill. All of the participants gave in their writing and there was full cooperation due to their needs to be corrected by the instructor. At the end of the fifth session, their writing were corrected and returned. Researchers used these writings to identity the most common types of meta-discourse markers in their writings. The following table (table 1) shows different types of topics that were selected for this study:

Table 1.Topics of writings

Themes	Questions
Education	Education is not a luxury, but a basic human right and as such should be free for everyone irrespective of personal wealth. Do you agree or disagree?
Media	These days, we are seeing an increasing amount of violence on television, and this is having a negative impact on children's behavior.

	Do you agree or disagree?
Science	Genetic engineering is an important issue in modern society. Some people think that it will improve people's lives in many ways. Others feel that it may be a threat to life on earth.
	Discuss both opinions and give your opinion?
Technology	People use computers when they work or go banking, but some argue that it will make people isolated and decrease their social skills.
	To what extent do you agree with this viewpoint?
Transport	The rising levels of congestion and air pollution found in most of the world cities can be attributed directly to the rapidly increasing number of private cars in use. In order to reverse this decline in the quality of life in cities, attempts must be made to encourage people to use their cars less and public transport more.
	To what extent do you agree or disagree?

Sources:www.Ieltsbuddy.com

3.3. Framework for Data Analysis

Due to the focus of the study on the type of meta-discourse markers used in writing of EFL language learners, Hyland's [5] model of meta-discourse markers was used to identify the types of meta-discourse markers based on their categories and sub-categories. Hyland's model is consisted of two major categories, that is, interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers.

Table 2: Hyland's(2005) Model

Category	Subcategory
1.Interactive	Transitions
	Frame markers
	Endophoric markers
	Evidentials
	Code glosses
2.Interctional	Hedges
	Boosters
	Attitude markers
	Engagement markers
	Self-mentions

The corpus of the study including 60 papers was analyzed through concordance software in order to indentify the number of occurrence of different types of meta-discourse markers within the EFL learners' writings.

4. Result

In order to answer the first research question, the researchers calculated the frequency of interactive and interactional meta-discourse markers that have been used in the EFL learners' writings. This frequency was calculated through concordance software.

Table 3: Frequency of Interactive and Interactional Meta-discourse Markers

Meta-discourse Markers	No of Participants	Words	No of Meta-discourse Markers
Interactive	14	17,428	1,325
Interactional	14	17,428	1,071
Total	14	17,428	2,396

According to table 3, this is evident that EFL learners used more interactive meta-discourse markers in their writings. This may be due to the necessity of the use of interactive meta-discourse markers as the cohesive devices in English for academic purposes. Regarding interactional meta-discourse markers, it can be noted that the frequency of this type of meta-discourse markers is approximately similar to the use of Interactive one.

In order to answer the second research question, the researcher identified the frequency of meta-discourse markers within their major categories that is, interactive and interactional.

Table 4: Frequency of Subcategories of Interactional Meta-discourse

Interactional Meta-discourse	No	Words	No Meta-discourse
Attitude Markers	14	17,428	214
Self-mention	14	17,428	32
Boosters	14	17,428	321
Engagement Markers	14	17,428	257
Hedges	14	17,428	247
Total	14	17,428	1071

As table 4 shows, boosters are the most common type of meta-discourse markers that has been used in EFL

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learners' writings of academic IELTS. For instance, language learners used words such as exactly, definitely, for sure, and so on. The use of these meta-discourse markers is also identified in Iranian writing style. However, they used the sufficient number of hedges in comparison with other meta-discourse markers that shows that they got conscious of the use of hedges by native writers of English.

Table 5: Frequency of Subcategories of Interactive Meta-discourse Markers

Interactive Meta-discourse	No	Words	No Meta-discourse
Transitions	14	17,428	398
Frame markers	14	17,428	421
Endophoric markers	14	17,428	275
Evidentials	14	17,428	21
Code glosses	14	17,428	210
Total	14	17,428	1,325

Frequency of the use of interactive meta-discourse markers were depicted in table 5. Based on this table, EFL learners used more frame markers in comparison with other types of interactive meta-discourse markers. The use of this type of meta-discourse indicates that the connection between stages and sequences of writing is of utmost significance for the language learners. Evidentials were also used in rare cases because testees do not tend to use sources that they are not sure about.

5. Discussion

Some findings of this study revealed a difference in relation to some previous investigations. For instance, while Tan and Eng [9] found that more instances of the interactional discourse markers occurred in Malaysian undergraduates' writings compared with the interactive discourse markers, the researcher in the current study discovered quite opposite result. Although the frequency of occurrences between the two categories of the metadiscourse markers does not indicate a significant difference, but there remains some points worth to be discussed regarding the nature of the two studies, including samples and researchers' purpose for examining written productions of the EFL learners. The purpose of the present study was to examine metadiscourse markers employed by the EFL learners in the IELTS preparation courses, yet in the other study, i.e. Tan and Eng [9] conducted their research using different samples, undergraduate writers, thus researchers in the latter study obviously specified different objective. It can

be also inferred that IELTS courses demand the more use of interactive discourse markers than the simple task of persuasion used in the Malaysian context. The other probable explanation for the disaccord between the findings of the two studies lies in the patterns of rhetoric, and also the effect of first tongue on the EFL learners' L2 learning. The gathered sample populations for the present study were Iranian learners of English, yet in the other study Tan and Eng [9] gathered their data from native Malaysian writers of English texts. It might be concluded that the diverse patterns of rhetoric can influence the learners' resort to the inventory of metadiscourse markers.

The second task of the IELTS writing exam is designed to assess the candidates' academic writing. The findings of the current study suggested that candidates, when required used more cohesive devices or in another term interactive discourse markers. The major cohesive devices used by the candidates of the IELTS based on the results obtained, are frame markers, transitions, endophoric markers, and code glosses. The results of this study as juxtaposed to the results of the study undertaken by Ahmadi-Fatalaki et al. [3] yield insights into the positive outcome of strengthening learners' awareness and correct application of cohesive devices (interactive metadiscourse markers) by explicit instruction. Despite Ahmadi-Fatalaki et al. [3] main focus was on the reading skill, the results of their study can be extended and interpreted to guide the EFL teachers on how to improve writing skills of learners in higher levels of proficiency.

This study indicated the priority of the interactive metadiscourse markers over the interactional metadiscourse markers in the academic mediums of instruction. Nevertheless, Estaji and Vafaeimehr [2] focused their study on the interactional metadiscourse markers and did not consider interactive metadiscourse markers as the required inventory of university students. Therefore, it can be noted that the instruction and learning of each categories of the metadiscourse markers must be informed by the needs of the learners and their real purposes of writing. Another clue yielded is that papers and professional writings at university levels can be ranked higher academically compared with writing attempts made to compose essays of 250 words limit for the IELTS samples. Articles involve the readers in the texts. These texts are separated to various sections with different orientations; thus they need to advise their readers on the writers' perspectives. On the other hand, essays guide the readers through the texts that are limited to a page and are just separated to maximum five paragraphs. Hence, what counts most is to keep the texts cohesive and coherent as much as possible by the employment of interactive metadsicourse markers.

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