Do learners rely on metadiscourse markers? An exploratory study in English, Catalan and Spanish

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Abstract

This study explores to what extent multilingual learners’ production of metadiscourse markers (MMs) may be related in three languages present in their school curriculum, and how instructional input influences their choices and production of accurate forms. Twenty-two secondary school students wrote opinion essays in English, Catalan, and Spanish. MM use was analysed following Hyland’s (2000) classification. Our results showed that the same categories of MMs were used in the three languages, although there was more variety in Catalan and Spanish. Moreover, learners mostly relied on the forms present in the input, and 90% of these forms were accurately used in the three languages.

Keywords: metadiscourse; discourse markers; teaching metadiscourse; teaching discourse competence.

1. Theoretical background

In the last decades, Hymes’ notion of communicative competence has been applied to language learning, contributing to the emergence of models of communicative competence (e.g. Alcón, 2000; Celce-Murcia, 2007). In these models, “discourse competence” is seen as the structuring competence, since it is “where everything else comes together: It is in discourse and through discourse that all of the other competencies are realized” (Celce-Murcia and Olshain, 2000, p. 16).

Although not explicitly stated in the models of communicative competence proposed to date, one of the core properties of discourse is its ability to refer to itself, that is, it involves a metadiscourse dimension. Taking a broader
perspective, Hyland (2005, p. 16) argues that metadiscourse does not only include a textual dimension but also an interpersonal or pragmatic dimension, since it “describe[s] not only how we organize our ideas, but also how we relate to our readers or listeners”. Thus, among the existing models of communicative competence, we have followed the one proposed by Alcón (2000) (see Table 1) because it does not limit the concept of discourse competence to textual competence, but it takes a more holistic view, relating it to linguistic competence (the knowledge of all levels in the language system in addition to grammar), textual competence and pragmatic competence (the use of language in context).

| Discourse competence | Linguistic competence |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
|                      | Textual competence     |
|                      | Pragmatic competence   |

| Psychomotor abilities and competences | Listening |
|--------------------------------------|-----------|
|                                      | Speaking  |
|                                      | Reading   |
|                                      | Writing   |

| Strategic competence | Communication strategies |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
|                      | Learning strategies       |

Most research on metadiscourse has focused on adult academic discourse (see, for example, Hyland, 2005 and the special issue by Ådel & Mauranen in 2010). However, very few studies have examined metadiscourse in teenager written production. Among these, it is important to mention the research conducted by Martín-Úriz et al. (2005), who analysed metadiscourse in the English written production by secondary school students, and Moreno (2005), who examined the influence of different types of input and feedback in teenagers’ production of textual metadiscourse. These studies have focused on one language, not considering the participant’s linguistic background. Taking into account that research has shown that multilingualism enhances metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness (Alcón, 2012; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Jessner, 2006; Safont-Jordà, 2005), and the existence of a potential transfer between languages in the Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 2005), the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (Herdina & Jessner, 2002), and “Focus on Multilingualism” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, 2013; Cenoz, 2013), in this study we would like to go a step further and determine how the production of textual metadiscourse is related in the three languages of instruction by multilingual learners of English, and the role of instructional input.

Our research questions are as follows:
- To what extent do learners use MMs in their L1, L2 and L3 written production?
- If so, do they rely on instructional input?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research environment and participants

This exploratory study was conducted in a bilingual region of Spain, the Valencian Community, where Catalan and Spanish are co-official languages taught at school, being English the foreign language taught in most schools. The participants were 22 students in the first year of non-compulsory secondary school (primero de bachillerato), speaking either Spanish or Catalan as their mother tongue. Their English level ranged between the levels A2-B1 of the CEFR, as established by the standardized Quick Oxford Placement Test (UCLES, 2001).

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected in December 2012 as part of a larger project. The learners were asked to write three opinion essays, one in English, one in Catalan, and one in Spanish, about three topics related to the school.
Once the data were collected, the compositions were typed to have three corpora in an electronic format: the English corpus (EnC), the Spanish corpus (SpC), and the Catalan corpus (CatC). After that, the three corpora were analysed manually, taking Hyland’s (2000) classification of textual metadiscourse as a reference (see Table 2).

| Category              | Function                          | Examples                          |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Logical connectives   | Express semantic relation between main clauses. | *in addition/but/thus/and*        |
| Frame markers         | Explicitly refer to discourse acts or text stages | *finally/to repeat/here we try to* |
| Endophoric markers    | Refer to information in other parts of the text. | *noted above/see Fig/in section 2* |
| Evidentials           | Refer to source of information from other texts. | *according to X/(1990)/Z states*   |
| Code glosses          | Help readers grasp meanings of ideational material. | *namely/e.g./such as/i.e.*        |

Following previous studies (see Martín Úriz et al., 2005, pp. 71–75), the categories found in the manual analysis were labelled in a word processor (<T1> “logical connectives”, <T2> “frame markers”, <T3> “endophoric markers”, <T4> “evidentials”, <T5> “code glosses”). Then, we searched the labels with the concordance programme AntConc (Anthony, 2010) to determine which particular words or expressions performed a metadiscourse function in each category, their frequency and whether they were accurate or not according to the context.

The criteria used to consider MMs as inaccurate were:
- Misspelling (e.g. And the other hand <T2> I think that we don’t need people who control us, because<T1> we are very intelligent for make the best thing for us. I hope that you think about things that I said.).
- Use of a marker in a different language: (e.g. Además<T1> the teachers and parents won’t go with the students.).
- Mispunctuation (e.g. One<T2> is go to Paris in a holiday trip because Paris is one of the most popular places to travel and<T1> in winter this city will be precious, in the other hand<T2>, we would to travel to England, this trip will be a cultural trip and<T1> will be very useful to practise this language). Once the analysis was done, the number of MMs per number of words was calculated.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results and discussion related to RQ1: a comparison of the three corpora

As can be seen in Table 3, the total number of words in the three corpora and the mean number of words per essay was similar, although the highest number of words was found in the SpC, followed by the CatC.

| Table 3. Corpora details. | EnC | SpC | CatC |
|---------------------------|-----|-----|------|
| TOTAL N. ESSAYS= 66       |     |     |      |
| (n=22 essays)             |     |     |      |
| NUMBER OF WORDS IN THE CORPUS | 2933| 3697| 3377 |
| MEAN WORDS/ESSAY          | 133 | 168 | 153  |

As shown in the table below (Table 4), the proportion of discourse markers in relation to the total number of words is similar in the three languages (5.48% in the English corpus, 5.51% in the SpC, and 5.55% in the CatC).
Table 4. Percentage of discourse markers in relation to the total number of words.

| %DMs/TOTAL N. WORDS | ENGLISH | SPANISH | CATALAN |
|----------------------|---------|---------|---------|
| T1 Logical connectives | 4.94%   | 4.27%   | 3.68%   |
| T2 Frame markers      | 0.41%   | 0.81%   | 0.86%   |
| T3 Endophoric markers | 0.1%    | 0%      | 0.18%   |
| T4 Evidentials        | 0.03%   | 0%      | 0%      |
| T5 Code glosses       | 0%      | 0.43%   | 0.83%   |
| TOTAL %DMs/TOTAL WORDS| 5.48%   | 5.51%   | 5.55%   |

Although the use of discourse markers is higher in the SpC (n=204), followed by the CatC (n=188) and EnC (n=161), this slight difference is consistent with the number of words in each corpora and evidences the command in the majority language (Spanish), minority language (Catalan) and foreign language (English) in the sociolinguistic context of the study. In addition, this consistency is maintained when looking at each category in particular. Thus, as illustrated in Fig. 1, the categories that predominate in frequency in a language, show a proportional frequency in the other two languages.

In agreement with previous research (e.g. Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Martín Úriz et al., 2005), students seemed to rely mainly on “Logical connectives”, followed by “Frame markers” in the three languages. However, the frequency of “Frame markers” was much lower than the use of “Logical connectives”.

The use of “Endophoric markers” and “Evidentials” is low or absent. This could be due to the length (130-150 words) and type of text analysed, an opinion essay. In contrast to academic genres, where references to other parts or sections of the text are commonly used, these references are not expected in this type of compositions. The underuse of evidentials in opinion essays could also be due to the fact that it is a common category found in academic genres. Taking these results into account, an exploration of the input received by the students in the three languages and classroom observations led us to conclude that teachers and textbooks do not insist on this type of resources evidencing the source of information, whereas more importance is given to the use logical connectives and frame markers.
The most striking result concerns “Code glosses”, given that, in spite of receiving special attention in the input available to the learners, no examples were found in the EnC. Nevertheless, the instances found in the other two languages (n=16 in the SpC and n=28 in the CatC), which constituted the third most frequent category, may indicate that a significant number of examples will also be found in the EnC when analysing a larger sample.
As regards the actual markers used, the conjunction and (En)/y (Sp)/i (Cat) is the one that predominates in the three languages. One may conclude that learners have a similar preference for a few markers in particular, e.g. within the category of logical connectives, in the three corpora (see Fig. 2, 3, and 4). However, some aspects need to be noted in this respect. When having a closer look at the variety of metadiscourse resources, a richer use of metadiscourse is observed in Catalan and Spanish with respect to English. For example, in the SpC, aunque (En. although) is used as an alternative to pero (En. but), whereas in the EnC but is used in cases where although could have been used to avoid repetition and introduce subordination:

My classmates and me have been talking about this, and<T1> some of us think that the cities mentioned before are the best places, but<T1> some others want to go partying to Ibiza or Madrid,

Similarly, in the CatC, ja que (En. given that) is used in addition to perquè (En. because), whereas this semantic relation is conveyed only with the form because in the EnC.

The participants’ ability to use alternatives to avoid the overuse of a particular marker in both Spanish and Catalan may imply that instruction on how MMs function in English is needed. If learners’ attention is drawn to how MMs function in discourse, they may be able to use a wider range of discourse markers or avoid the overuse of some of the MMs found in the present study. Of course, this tentative hypothesis needs to be further tested in empirical studies.

Summarising, the answer to RQ1 would be that there seems to be a transfer of discourse competence in the languages known by speakers of English, Spanish and Catalan. Thus, we could state that, if learners develop this competence in one language, they will develop it in the other two languages at the same time. However, these findings need to be carefully taken. We have observed a lack of variety of MMs, especially in English, which shows the need to train students in the use of these linguistic resources. In particular, learners seem to strongly rely on logical connectives in the three languages under study. When we analysed learners’ production holistically, we observed an overuse of logical connectives, linking ideas at a clause-level, in comparison to frame markers. In this regard, it could be stated that learners approached the text as a combination of sentences and clauses (hence the overuse logical connectives), but not as a unit conveying a global message (as further use of frame markers would evidence). These findings also show that discourse competence still needs to be developed even in the learners’ mother tongues.

Fig. 4. Frequency of MMs in the CatC.
3.2. Results and discussion related to RQ2

In order to answer RQ2, concerning the degree to which learners rely on instructional input of MMs, we compared the list of metadiscourse items found in each language corpus with a list of MMs provided in students’ textbooks, which are marked with an asterisk in Fig. 2, 3, and 4.

Overall, the results show that, when students produced metadiscourse expressions, in most cases they did it accurately (n=142 accurate forms vs. n=19 inaccurate forms in the EnC; n=194 accurate forms vs. n=10 inaccurate forms in the SpC; n=173 accurate forms vs. n=15 inaccurate forms in the CatC).

Examined carefully (see Table 5), our data show that almost 90% of the metadiscourse expressions used in the three languages were present in the input available, and, from those, more than 90% were accurately used in the three languages. These results reinforce the findings discussed in RQ1. This also means that, when learners used metadiscourse, they tended to rely on instructional input, and, when relying on instructional input, their output was accurate in most cases.

Table 5. Metadiscourse words and expressions in the input and the output.

| LANGUAGE | TOTAL METADISCOURSE EXPRESSIONS IN THE INPUT & OUTPUT | ACCURATE FORMS | INACCURATE FORMS |
|----------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------|------------------|
| ENGLISH  | 147 (91% of total)                                   | 138 (94%)      | 9 (6%)           |
| SPANISH  | 188 (92% of total)                                   | 180 (96%)      | 8 (4%)           |
| CATALAN  | 166 (88% of total)                                   | 153 (92%)      | 13 (8%)          |

However, there is more variety of MMs in Catalan and Spanish than in English. Thus, in the EnC, out of 20 different metadiscourse expressions used by the learners, 8 were provided in the students’ input (i.e. 40%), while this figure is 28 out of 44 (i.e. 64%) in the SpC, and 24 out of 38 (i.e. 63%) in the CatC.

As stated before, the category “Frame markers” deserves special attention. Our data from the EnC show that learners use them less frequently than in the other languages and, in most cases, they do inaccurately (Respec the end exam, In/and the other hand). On the basis of the metadiscourse expressions found in the other languages known by the learners, i.e. Spanish and Catalan (see Fig. 3 and 4), one tentative hypothesis to explain these results is that the participants’ discourse competence in English needs to be developed.

4. Conclusions, further research, and pedagogical implications

This study has explored to what extent learners’ production of textual MMs is related in English, Catalan, and Spanish. The study also addresses how instructional input seems to influence learners’ choices and production of accurate forms.

Our results showed that learners tended to use the same categories of MMs in the three languages, although there was more variety in Catalan and Spanish. Regarding the influence of instructional input, it was observed that learners mostly relied on the forms present in the input available, rather than looking for more creative alternatives, and, in 90% of cases, the forms taken from the input were accurately used in the three languages.

We acknowledge that the length of the corpus and the number of participants may be a limitation to generalise the results. Nevertheless, this study was taken as an exploratory study to give insights on the direction that further research may take in the study of discourse competence and how this competence is interrelated in three different
languages known by multilingual learners. Thus, further research is needed to determine whether training discourse competence in one language will affect the other languages known by the learners and in which direction (see Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, 2013; Cenoz, 2013). In this study we have focused on participants’ use of textual MMs, but further analysis of the data may shed light on how textual and interpersonal markers are used by teenagers in different languages.

Findings from the present study also led us to suggest some pedagogical implications. First of all, if learners’ discourse competence is related in the different languages known by learners, pedagogical innovations on how to integrate the teaching of discourse competence in different languages are needed. These new approaches to teaching may help learners to transfer knowledge on the use MMs in one language to the accurate use of these linguistic devices in other languages. Secondly, given the fact that learners seem to rely on instructional input for gains in knowledge of MMs, teachers need to select materials in which learners are exposed to a wider range of discourse markers. Finally, teachers may draw insights from second acquisition research when dealing with metadiscourse. Using consciousness-raising tasks, together with collaborative tasks, are two alternatives to draw learners’ attention to the use of MMs and their function in discourse.

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