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Metadiscourse Markers Misuses; a Study of EFL Learners’ Argumentative Essays

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Abstract

The present study was conducted to investigate the misuses of two main categories of metadiscourse markers used by a group of university students. To this end, 50 EFL learners of intermediate language proficiency level were chosen by means of administering a TOEFL proficiency test. The participants were female junior students majoring in English literature at Kerman Azad University. These learners were regarded as intermediate ones scoring 400-550 in the proficiency test. Then, the learners were provided with an argumentative topic to write a 250-word essay in 45 minutes. The number of misuses of metadiscourse markers were counted with regard to their use of textual and interpersonal markers of this kind, and the subcategories of textual (logical connectives, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses), and the subcategories of interpersonal metadiscourse markers (hedges, emphatics, attitude markers, relational markers, and person markers). Moreover, different classifications of misuses were explored. The results of Chi-square analysis indicated that misuses of metadiscourse makers can be due to overuse of these markers (e.g. logical connective and person markers), punctuation, interlingua, and intralingua errors. Finally, using a Pearson correlation to investigate the correlation between the participants’ TOEFL score and essay score, it was concluded that language proficiency has a positive relationship with the uses of metadiscourse markers and essays quality.

Keywords: metadiscourse markers; language proficiency: overuse; interlingu errors; intralingu errors

1. Introduction

Hyland (1998) defined metadiscourse as a general term to include many different kinds of features which help relate a text to its context by helping readers to connect, organize, and interpret material in a way preferred by the writer and with regard to the understandings and values of a particular discourse community. It also refers to "the linguistic
devices writers employ to shape their arguments to the needs and expectations of their target readers" (Hyland, 2000, p.109).

The ability to compose a piece of argumentative text is considered important for "academic success and for general life purposes" (Crowhurst, 1990, p. 349). It is often assumed that argumentative writing contains a great deal of metadiscourse. Crismore (1989), for example, stated that metadiscourse is "quite relevant" in argumentative writing, since "authors refer quite frequently to the state of the argument, to the reader's understanding of it, or to the author's understanding of his own argument" (p. 93).

On the basis of a modified version of Crismore et al.'s (Crismore et al. 1993) classification, taking a broad approach, the study analyzed misuses of metadiscourse markers used in argumentative texts written by EFL undergraduate university students. Table (1) sums up the broad approach (Hyland, 1999, p. 7).

Table 1: Metadiscourse Schema

| Category | Function | Examples/Signals |
|----------|----------|-----------------|
| Textual Metadiscourse | Logical Connectives | Express semantic relations between main clauses | in addition/but/therefore/thus |
| Frame Markers | explicitly refer to discourse shifts or text stages | first/finally/to repeat/to clarify |
| Endophoric Markers | refer to information in other parts of the text | noted above/see Fig 1/section 2 |
| Evidentials | refer to source of information from other texts | according to X, Z states |
| Code Glosses | help readers grasp meanings of ideational material | namely/e.g./in other words/i.e./say |
| Interpersonal Metadiscourse | Hedges | withhold writer’s full commitment to statements | might/perhaps/it is possible |
| Emphatics | emphasize force or writer’s certainty in message | in fact/definitely/it is clear |
| Attitude Markers | express writer’s attitude to propositional content | Surprisingly/I agree/X claim |
| Relational Markers | explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader | consider/imagine recall/you see |
| Person Markers | explicit reference to author | I/we/my/mine/our |

The present study is an attempt to examine the various kinds of misuses of metadiscourse markers found in EFL learners' argumentative essays. In the view of the facts stated above, the research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

Q1. Is there any significant difference between uses of textual and interpersonal metadiscourse markers in EFL learners' argumentative essays?
Q2. Is there any significant difference between uses and misuses of textual metadiscourse markers in EFL learners’ argumentative essays?
Q3. Is there any significant difference between uses and misuses of interpersonal metadiscourse markers in EFL learners’ argumentative essays?
Q4. What kind of misuses of metadiscourse markers can be found in EFL learners’ argumentative essays?
Q5. Is there any significant relationship between EFL learners’ essay scores and the scores gained in TOEFL?

This paper maintains that priority should be on how to effectively teach the functions of each metadiscourse marker in English classes carried out in Iran.
2. Literature Review

Several studies investigated L2 writers’ uses of metadiscourse features in reference to audience awareness. Specifically, Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) found that the good essays exhibited significantly higher numbers of metadiscourse items as well as a greater variety of types than did the poor essays. Moreover, they found that the good essays contained proportionally more total metadiscourse than the poor essays and more correct metadiscourse. Simin and Tavangar (2009) showed that the more proficient learners are in a second language, the more they use metadiscourse markers. Also it would appear that metadiscourse instruction has a positive effect on the correct use of metadiscourse markers. Moreover, they concluded that there is a significant correlation between the OPT scores and the students' scores on their final essay exam.

Ying (2007) demonstrated that there is a big difference between native speakers and Japanese non native speakers and between native speakers and Chinese non native speakers; however, from the statistical results, there is no obvious difference between JNNS and CNNS. In addition, the misuse of metadiscourse markers is frequently found in the essays written by JNNS and CNNS.

On the whole, review of these studies shows that one of the many areas in which studies of metadiscourse are lacking is misuses of metadiscourse markers in L2 writing, which is where the present study enters the picture.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design
The design of the study was descriptive and correlational. In the quantitative part, types and frequency of metadiscourse markers were investigated applying Chi-Square to analyze the data obtained. Pearson correlation was also employed to explore the relationship between TOEFL scores and essay scores.

3.2. Participants
To accomplish the objectives of the study, 50 EFL learners of intermediate language proficiency level were chosen by means of administering a TOEFL proficiency test. The participants were female junior students majoring in English literature at Kerman Azad University. These learners were regarded as intermediate ones scoring 400-550 in the proficiency test. They had all passed the prerequisite courses in English writing such as Advanced Writing and Essay Writing. They had no other special training in English writing.

3.3. Materials
To ensure the homogeneity of the subjects, they were tested on a TOEFL proficiency test. A list of six argumentative topics was developed and given to 50 EFL university students similar to our subjects to rate their knowledge of and interest in each topic. Adhering to the format of IELTS task two essay, the participants were given the topic to write a 250-word argumentative essay. To determine a profile of the participants, an 8-item demographic questionnaire was employed in this study.

3.4. Procedure
A TOEFL proficiency test, including three parts of listening comprehension section, structure and written expression section, and reading comprehension section, were administered to EFL learners. On the basis of language proficiency exam results 50 learners were selected scoring 400-550.

The present study was text-oriented and involved focusing on the actual written production of a group of university students, majoring in English Literature. For this purpose, an argumentative topic was chosen on the basis of the students’ interests and knowledge. The topic in question was selected with a view to fulfilling the requirements for the research questions. We developed a list of six argumentative topics from TOEFL and IELTS practice tests and asked 50 EFL university students who came from similar background of the main participants of the study to rate their knowledge of and interest in each topic. The topic selected for was based on the highest combined score for the ratings of topic knowledge and topic interest. The participants were given the topic to write a 250-word argumentative essay in 45 minutes: “Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? One should
never judge a person by external appearances. Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.”

Misuses of metadiscourse markers were regarded as the obtained data in order to be analyzed statistically to find out whether different types of metadiscourse markers misuses in the participants’ argumentative essays.

3.5. Data categorization

In order to make sure that data identification and coding system will be consistent and reliable, ten percent of the whole data were categorized by a PhD in applied linguistics. The essays were analyzed in the light of the metadiscourse taxonomy outlined by Crismore et al. (1993) with an interrater reliability (r=0.834). The required data was misuses of metadiscourse markers in the two main categories and their subcategories.

To provide some clarity to the misuses of metadiscourse markers used by non-native students of English, some samples have been listed here:

- **Misuse 1:** Actually, we don’t mean that the external appearance is not important; since each person has a special social life and attitudes. (Punctuation)
- **Misuse 2:** There are lots of examples in which one judged a person unfriendly, however, (punctuation) the person is really kind, sympathetic and faithful and maybe he/she cannot express ..... (Punctuation)
- **Misuse 3:** At last we should never decide about someone because of his external … (Punctuation)
- **Misuse 4:** In conclusion nowadays unfortunately human judge people by their cover… (Punctuation)
- **Misuse 5:** In according with the internal characteristics (, deletion) we should not focus on. (Punctuation)
- **Misuse 6:** Although we cannot deny the importance of one's external appearance, but I do agree with the idea that one shouldn't be judged according to his appearance. (Inerlingua)
- **Misuse 7:** Anyhow, one should never judge others superficially just by external appearances. (Inerlingua)
- **Misuse 8:** In other hand you could see a man whose appearance is like a middle class, but… (Intralingua)
- **Misuse 9:** We always say that we should never judge a book by its cover but believe me we sometimes can. (Overuse of person markers)

4. Results and Discussion

As it is evident in figure 1, the percentage of metadiscourse markers was 49.9 for textual and 50.1 for interpersonal markers in intermediate learners’ argumentative essays.

![Figure 1: Percentage of Uses of Textual and Interpersonal Markers](image-url)
The result Chi-square test provides evidence that we can accept the first null hypothesis at 0.05 level of significance. It can be concluded that there was no significant relationship between use of textual and interpersonal markers in the participants’ essays while Krause and O’Brien’s (1999) and Hyland (1998) reported more textual markers than interpersonal markers in their participants’ argumentative essays.

Table 2: Frequency of Uses of Textual and Interpersonal

|                  | Observed N | Expected N | Residual |
|------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Textual markers  | 347        | 347.5      | -.5      |
| Interpersonal markers | 348        | 347.5      | .5       |
| Total            | 695        |            |          |

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 347.5

The second research question in this study is concerned with the frequency of use and misuses of metadiscourse markers in these essays. It was hypothesized that there is no difference between uses and misuses of these markers. In order to investigate the second null hypothesis, the Chi-square was run. Figure 2 demonstrates total distribution of uses and misuses of these markers employed in the writings of the learners.

Figure 2: Percentage of Uses and Misuses of Textual markers

As table 3 below shows, out of 454 textual metadiscourse markers used in the essays, 347 (76.4%) belonged to the uses and 107 (23.6%) belonged to the misuses of metadiscourse markers. Therefore, the second null hypothesis is rejected and it can be concluded that there is a significant difference between uses and misuses of textual metadiscourse markers in the participants’ argumentative essays.

Metadiscourse features used most often among the textual category is the logical connectives. These findings are consistent with those of Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995). Frame markers, which contribute to the “clearness and legibility” of their text, were actually the second most prominent textual metadiscourse feature. Lower densities of endophoric markers and evidentials revealed that they don’t have enough knowledge to refer to information in other parts of the text or other text respectively. Low frequency of code glosses in the essays of low language proficiency level learners can be explained by the fact that beginning writers often assume that readers have adequate background to understand what they are saying.

Table 3: Frequency of Uses and Misuses of Textual Markers

|                  | Observed N | Expected N | Residual |
|------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Uses             |            |            |          |
| Misuses          |            |            |          |
The third research question in the present study is concerned with examining the way the group of EFL learners used textual metadiscourse category. It was hypothesized that there is no difference between uses and misuses of these markers.

![Figure 3: Uses and Misuses of Interpersonal markers](image)

| Uses  | 347 | 227.0 | 120.0 |
|-------|-----|-------|-------|
| Misuses | 107 | 227.0 | -120.0 |
| Total  | 454 | 227.0 | -120.0 |

### Test Statistics

| Textual markers | Chi-Square | Df | Asymp. Sig |
|-----------------|------------|----|------------|
| Emphatics       | 126.872    | 1  | .000       |

a 0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 227.0.

Data for the mentioned category also show substantial differences. A chi-square test was run in order to investigate the third null hypothesis. According to the data given in table 4 and the results of the test, there is a significant difference between the participants of uses and misuses of interpersonal markers. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

Hedges are more frequently used than *emphatics* in the argumentative essays while Krause and O'Brien (1999) found the number of emphatics more than hedges in Chinese English learners’ argumentative essays. High frequency of *person markers* and *relational markers* showed that the learners explicitly referred to themselves and build relationship with reader. The categories including *attitude markers*, *relational markers*, and *person markers* allow us to identify the active participants in the argumentation. However, the learners were not able to express their attitudes to propositional content due to low frequency of attitude markers.
Table 4: Frequency of Uses and Misuses of Interpersonal Metadiscourse marker

|                  | Observed N | Expected N | Residual |
|------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Uses             | 348        | 242.0      | 106.0    |
| Misuses          | 136        | 242.0      | -106.0   |
| Total            | 484        | 484        | 0        |

0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 242.0.

The forth research question in this study dealt with frequency of kinds of misuses of textual metadiscourse markers. Figure 4 shows the percentage of different kinds of misuses in this category.

![Figure 4: Kinds of Misuses of Textual Metadiscourse Markers](image)

Kinds of Misuses of Textual Metadiscourse Markers

Misuses of textual markers were mostly related to the overuse of these markers (72%). The rest belonged to the punctuation (19.6%) and interlingua errors (8.4%) respectively.

The categories including relational markers, and person markers allow us to identify the active participants in the argumentation. However, the learners were not able to express their attitudes to propositional content due to low frequency of attitude markers. The reasons for the interlingua errors may be because of interference of their native language (Persian). As Brown (2000) explained, before the system of the second language is completely familiar, the native language is the only reliable previous linguistic system for the learner. Low frequency of endophoric markers, evidentials, and attitude markers may be explained in terms of underuse not been dealt with in the study.
Table 5: Kinds of Misuses of Textual Metadiscourse Markers

| Kinds of Misuses | Observed N | Expected N | Residual |
|------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Interlingua      | 77         | 35.7       | 41.3     |
| Punctuation     | 21         | 35.7       | -14.7    |
| Total            | 107        | 35.7       | -26.7    |

0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 35.7.

Figure 5 shows the percentage of different kinds of misuses in the interpersonal category.

As tabulated, almost all misuses of interpersonal markers belong to the overuses of these markers. Few cases were seen in these essays that can be due to the influence of the foreign language (English). *Intralingua* errors indicate some kind of improvement in the learners’ process of learning. They overused person markers subcategory more than the other four ones in this main category.

Table 6: Kinds of Misuses of Interpersonal Metadiscourse Markers

| Kinds of Misuses | Observed N | Expected N | Residual |
|------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| Overuses         | 135        | 68.0       | 67.0     |
| Interlingua      | 1          | 68.0       | -67.0    |
| Total            | 136        | 68.0       |          |

0 cells (.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 68.0.
In this study, the relationship between TOEFL score and essay score is also investigated. The objective was to see whether there was a significant relationship between the learners’ language proficiency and the quality of their essays. It was hypothesized that there is no significant relationship between EFL learners’ language proficiency and the quality of their essays.

A Pearson correlation was applied to investigate the correlation between the TOEFL scores, language proficiency, and the essay scores (Table 7). According to the correlation results, it can be concluded that there is a significant correlation between the learners’ TOEFL scores and the scores on their essays.

Table 7: Correlation: TOEFL Score & Essay Score

| TOEFL Score PEARSON Correlation | TOEFL Score | Essay Score |
|---------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Sig. (2-tailed)                 | .720        | .000        |
| N                               | 50          | 50          |

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Figure 6 shows a positive correlation between them. Therefore, the more proficient learners are in their English language skills, the higher their scores will be on essay writings. Thus the last null hypothesis is also rejected.

Overuses of metadiscourse markers make the essays less coherent. The learners overused person markers in their English essays as they do this writing composition in their L1 when they are not proficient L1 writers. Iranian learners didn’t tend to use endophoric markers, evidentials, attitude markers, and relational markers. The fact shows that they were not able to refer to information in other parts of the text or from other texts. Here, the learners were not conscious of the way for expressing their attitudes to propositional content through using attitude markers and build relationship with readers using relational markers. The participants had almost no problems in using frame
markers, hedges, and emphatics. The learners have already been taught frame markers in writing a process analysis (how-to) essay. They had been familiar with hedges in the grammar courses previously taught and conscious about emphatics learned in the speaking courses. That is why the learners were more able in using these metadiscourse markers rather than the other types.

6. Conclusion

Analyzed the reasons behind the misuses provide suggestions for foreign language teaching in this respect. According to the results of the study, the learners must be taught the punctuation rules deductively. The punctuation errors have been observed in almost all subcategories of interpersonal and textual markers. Teachers can directly attract the students’ attention to these markers. The errors can be analyzed in class by teacher and learners. In addition, they can compare the makers in two languages in order to make the differences clearer. The students may be asked the reasons of making the errors and asked to discuss them. It can help the teachers when teaching and learners when writing and speaking. In addition, familiarity with learners’ native language can help the teacher in detecting and analyzing such errors. Intralingua errors indicate the learners’ improvement in language learning. In this case, one structure of a language affects another structure of the same language appearing an error. Falk (1978) stated that: “interlanguage errors are due to the emerging system that the language learner is constructing… errors are reflections of the students’ developing linguistic competence in the foreign language” (p. 360).

The findings indicate that metadiscourse is a topic that deserves attention in L2 writing research, and perhaps most importantly, identifies some specific directions for further research. In fact, it would seem that underuses of certain metadiscourse markers are more frequent than others in the essays of the participants. It would be worthwhile to set up more articulated experiments to explore this area.

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