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Engagement Markers: a Technique for Improving Writing Skills

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Abstract

Writers use metadiscourse markers to create and maintain relationship with their readers, influencing them by addressing them directly in various ways. The present study aimed at exploring the use of engagement markers as related to the quality of texts produced by IELTS student writers. To this end a quasi-experimental design was conducted through which 30 university level IELTS student writers were selected to comprise an experimental group which received instruction on the use of engagement markers. Another group of 30 students was selected to form the control group which received instruction on developing compositions only through a process method. The results indicate significant differences between the performance of experimental group and that of control group in terms of effectiveness of produced texts.

1. Introduction

We use language to have a kind of interaction through the employment of metadiscourse options we can articulate and construct these interactions. Metadiscourse, a term coined by Harris in 1956, stresses the fact that, as we write, we negotiate with others. Therefore, the writer is not simply presenting information but also influencing and considering his interlocutor's reception of it. Hyland (2005) furthers up the claim that the act of writing is not neutral but it affects those who interpret the meaning. Metadiscourse is one of the main

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means by which writers can have effect on the readers who at the moment constitute an audience for them.

The goal of our writing is the most fundamental aspect of our task. Most writers who have thought about their goal would agree that the "ultimate goal of writing is to communicate with [some intended] audience" (Cheng & Steffensen, 1996 p. 149). By audience we mean the real people to whom the written text is addressed. In examining the composition of EFL learners in academic writing classes, many writers present their opinion or information on a paper in a way that they do not consider their audiences.

Whether we like it or not, English is the international language in this world. As a result, many people who are not native speakers of English want to learn how to write and read in English. Being able to write and read in English is not only important in academia, but also in semi-professional or non-professional areas, writing newspapers, and communicating electronically (Adel, 2006). Obviously, linguistic competence does not suffice for them to do these tasks properly in English. They need something more than the knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and spelling. They need to have the knowledge of rhetorical skills in forming texts of various types, including, for example, knowledge of how to present facts effectively, how to argue one's case convincingly, and how to manage writer and reader visibility (Adel, 2006). We should not make the mistake of assuming that linguistic competence in the foreign language helps learners produce effective texts.

Metadiscourse is becoming a highly important topic in text, discourse and composition research. Researchers are beginning to explore it from a wide range of perspectives in linguistics, for example in contrastive studies (Mauranen 1993; Markkanen et al. 1993), historical stylistic change (Taavitsainen 2000), pragmatics (Verschueren 1999; Hyland 1998), and genre studies (Bäcklund, 1998; Bondi, 1999).

The methods used in these studies were primarily comparative and corpus-based. The comparative method was used in order to locate differences in the use of metadiscourse between learners and native speakers of English. However, one of the many areas in which studies of metadiscourse are lacking is whether writing actually improves as a result of explicit instruction in metadiscourse, which is where the present study enters the picture. In fact, while analyzing and comparing texts can help, students only learn to write effectively by providing them with opportunities to construct a text for an audience.

Since writing is an abstract cognitive process it is not an easy task to teach it. The process of writing is not like many other activities open to introspection. Instructors are not able to teach how to generate ideas. They are only able to teach certain rhetorical regularities in the writing task (Cheng & Steffensen, 1996).

Writing should be a dynamic process like reading. When a reader begins reading a text he is affected by the text as soon as he starts reading. In writing, the writer should also be able to affect his audience as soon as he starts to write. In an attempt to do so, the concept of an imagined audience was introduced (Crucius, 1989; Ede & Lunsford, 1984; Ward, 1994). In our study

we define audience as a "textual presence" rather than an "external presence" (Kinneavy, 1971; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). The writer should no longer be privileged because the audience also shapes the text through interaction and he is no longer considered a passive recipient (Cheng & Steffensen, 1996). Here, for our purpose of explicit teaching, we use Hyland's taxonomy (2005). Although the model owes a great deal to Thompson and Thetela's conception, it takes a wider focus by including both stance and engagement features (Hyland, 2001).

Hyland's interpersonal model of metadiscourse recognizes that metadiscourse is comprised of the two dimensions of interaction: *interactive* and *interactional* (2005). The requisite linguistic competence for being a successful writer is related to the former dimension while the requisite pragmatic competence is related to the latter.

In this model we are interested in engagement markers. Hyland (2005) sees the use of engagement markers as a text characteristic which is considered as writers' recognition of their potential readers, that is, when writing, writers should really feel the presence of their readers, pull them along with their arguments, focus their attention, regard them as discourse participants and finally lead them to the right interpretations. They generally fell into five categories delineated by Hyland (2005): *reader pronoun*, *imperative*, *questions*, *directives*, and *shared knowledge*. These metadiscourse features are largely a result of the writer's awareness of audience therefore, they are concerned with pragmatic competence in composition. Unfortunately, however, our students do not exactly know what is meant by audience. They consider audience a real person who gives a response or a teacher who gives feedbacks. Part of this is because our composition classes cannot develop into forums or discourse communities. Creating a discourse community in the classroom and making the students familiar with the sense of audience would be a challenge. In our study we explain how and why we used the concept of engagement markers as to the focus in the writing course to meet this challenge. The pragmatic value of these devices is to directly address the reader as a text participant. Our purpose, as such, was to examine the effects of instruction on pragmatic acquisition in writing.

2. Background

A review of the literature on metadiscourse makes it clear that, for the most part, scholars were concerned about the differences between the use of metadiscourse by learners and the use of metadiscourse by native speakers. In previous studies of metadiscourse, two main units have been used for measuring frequencies: the word (e.g. Hyland 1998) and the sentence (e.g. Mauranen, 1993). In measuring the amount of metadiscourse in a variety of texts in English, Hyland (1998) checks the density of metadiscourse per 1,000 words. He bases his examination on a word count, although the exact procedure is not described. Crismore and Farnsworth (1990) also count word occurrences, based on the number of words per instance of metadiscourse per 100 words. Similarly, VandeKopple's pioneering study (1988) uses the word level,

contrasting the number of non-metadiscursive ('propositional') words versus words in metadiscursive expressions, to compare the percentages of both kinds across texts.

Some scholars have discovered that both writing and reading are improved through appropriate and balanced use of metadiscourse. Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995), for instance, discovered a strong correlation between the use of metadiscourse and the quality of student writing. In planned essays written by twelve ESL students they found that the higher graded essays contained proportionally more metadiscourse and a greater variety of features than the poor essays. Barton (1993) observed that more experienced and successful writers made greater use of contrast conjunct transitions, while Crismore and VandeKopple (1988), found that students learnt more from texts which included hedges than from texts in which they were omitted.

Researchers of metadiscourse often have not been sure whether their findings might be useful to L2 learners of English. Very few studies have sought to discover whether writing enhances as a result of explicit instruction of metadiscourse. One of these studies is Cheng and Steffensen's (1996) which found that an experimental group wrote better composition in their in-class essays after being taught the function and use of metadiscourse for 16 weeks. This experimental group used more metadiscourse and used the markers more skilfully than a control group which had received only conventional process writing instruction, suggesting that teaching students to use metadiscourse was an important factor in improving writing skills. Shaw and Liu (1998) also discovered substantial improvements in students' essay writing after two months of EAP instruction which included key metadiscourse features. Studying 164 foreign language students from 17 different first language backgrounds, Shaw and Liu observed that the texts they analysed evidenced an increasing awareness of genre expectations and audience, characterizing the changes as a move from a spoken to a written style. In terms of the acquisition of metadiscourse items, this meant an increased use of transitions and engagement markers (*as you can see, we can note that),* small increases in attitude markers and boosters, and a reduction in self-mention. Xu (2001) found similar changes in a study of metadiscourse use by 200 students across four years of an undergraduate course in English at a Chinese university. Broadly, he found that students in the final two years employed more formally complex and precise interactive metadiscourse *(consequently, therefore, as a result)* than those in the first two years, who preferred forms such as *but, then* and *and.* In addition, they used fewer attitude markers, less self-mention and fewer 'validity markers' (hedges and boosters). The reasons for these changes are complex, but Xu attributes them to the weakening intrusion of Chinese criteria of good writing as the students gained greater awareness of English academic norms.

Regarding Hyland's taxonomy (2005) there is a paucity of research in the area of teaching effects on the acquisition of *interactional* dimension of this model. One study that has investigated the effects of explicit teaching on pragmatic acquisition in writing is Wishnoff (2000) that has looked specifically at the effects of instruction on acquisition of hedging devices in student's L2

writing. She has shown that appropriate use of hedges plays an important role in a successful text.

However, to the author's knowledge, almost no studies have examined the effects of direct teaching of engagement marker on student's writing. Therefore, the principle objective of the present study is to examine the effect of instructing engagement markers on the improvement of composition writing skills.

3. Engagement markers

According to Hyland (2005) engagement markers focus on reader participation with two main purposes:

1. The first acknowledges the need to adequately meet readers' expectations of inclusion and disciplinary solidarity, addressing them as participants in an argument with reader pronouns *(you, your*, inclusive *we)* and interjections *(by the way, you may notice)*.

2. The second purpose involves rhetorically positioning the audience, pulling readers into the discourse at critical points, predicting possible objections and guiding them to particular interpretations. These functions are mainly performed by questions, directives (mainly imperatives such as *see, note* and *consider* and obligation modals such as *should, must, have to,* etc.) and references to shared knowledge.

In research papers this generally takes the form of inclusive *we* and the use of imperatives to guide readers through the text, treating readers as equals with the writer by drawing them into the discussion and encouraging them to engage with the topic. Research writers typically address their readers as experts and use engagement markers to draw on shared understandings and emphasize solidarity. So while the patterns of engagement markers in the textbooks seek to clarify and inform, those of articles serve to exclude outsiders and negotiate agreement.

Obviously, ineffective and "lifeless" writing usually distinguishes non-native English speaking from their native English speaking counterparts. Unfortunately, for non-native writers of English, while researchers have found that the use of engagement marker in academic writing is necessary to increase readability, teachers of writing often give the impression that writing in English requires linear arguments that are unqualified by any *reader pronouns*. As a result, it is considered inappropriate for students to involve their readers in mutual acts of comprehension and involvement. On the other hand, for L2 learners of English mastery of rhetorical functions in English is requisite if they wish to publish their paper in journals (Hyland, 1998).Hyland sees the effective use of rhetorical devices as a critical feature of good ESL and native speaker student writing (1998).We used Hyland's definition of engagement marker for our analysis. Hyland also codes questions that are later answered by the writer in the text, and tag questions as engagement marker as they function to draw the reader into writer-reader relationship. Engagement markers are among the factors that make a text "reader friendly". Using engagement marker would

make students meet the needs of their readers and thus changing writer-based prose into reader-based prose (Flower, 1979).

Fortunately, many researchers believe that learners can learn how to use rhetorical devices effectively by direct instruction (Hyland, 1998).Besides, pragmatic is different from grammar in that it is something that we teach to young children in their L1. Similarly acquiring pragmatic fluency in L2 requires instruction (Bouton, 1994).

4. The Present Study

This study is organized around the concept of the effects of instruction on the use of pragmatics in academic writing. Our purpose was to raise the students' awareness of pragmatic devices with the intention of improving their pragmatic competence. Engagement markers were specifically targeted in this study. We explored teaching engagement markers to college level student writers to help them pay much more attention to the product and focus on the most important goal of writing, communicating with an audience.

The first question we studied was whether it was possible to teach engagement markers so that students would understand the concept, the functions, and the markers and then value it enough to use it in their own texts. The second question we investigated was whether such a technique would result in better texts.

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Four intact classes of university-level IELTS students at a private Language Institution Shiraz participated in this study. Each of the classes consisted of 15 students. Two of the classes were considered as the control group and the other two as the experimental group. All participants were advanced learners of English and all of them completed the course and the experiment. For all of the students, English was their second language. They had been studying English for 10 years on average.

5.2. Materials

The instructor of the experimental group presented the explanation on the function and appropriateness of engagement markers in academic writing. Pre- and post-treatment, were collected from the experimental group students and were analyzed and compared to control group.

5.3. Procedure

Before the data collection a Quick Placement Test was administered to all participants. Their proficiency level in English was established based on their scores on this test. The Quick Placement Test was an international proficiency

test and it was supposed to have good reliability and validity. Moreover, a questionnaire was administered to gather more background information about the participants. The questionnaire consisted of three questions about gender, age, and experience in English-speaking countries.

Prior to the instruction to the experimental group, baseline data on students' writings was collected from both the control group and the experimental group using samples of their writing.

Two weeks later the instructor presented the teaching materials to the experimental group. After the instruction they were asked to consider an imagined audience as a way of improving writing skills. We accomplished this by presenting various engagement markers made in academic writing and lots of other examples constructed by the researcher in order to completely clarify the point for the participants. Throughout the instruction, all students were actively engaged.

Most of the students commented on the relevance of the treatment to their understanding of language routinely used in academic research articles. I asked the student to write their opinion and comments about engagement devices on a piece of paper. Most of them thought this method had interesting points for them and the class devoted to engagement markers was worthwhile. The teacher of the four classes was the same. This had the advantage of controlling some extraneous variables, such as personality, teaching style and so forth.

5.4. Data Collection

Two sets of data were collected and analyzed statistically. For the first data set, both groups wrote a 45-minute in-class essay and for the second data set the experimental group students wrote another 40-minute in-class essay. This design allowed us to examine the performance before and after the instruction on engagement markers and assess the effectiveness of our method.

5.5. Data analysis

The pre-treatment data for both the experimental group and the control group, which included the first 45-minute in-class essay, was examined in order to make sure that the groups were equivalent. All papers were graded by two experienced composition instructors. The graders knew nothing about the experiment or the students involved. They were not familiar with the concept of engagement markers. The collected data were used to confirm whether the students were using more engagement markers than they did previously and, when used, whether the students were using them in a pragmatically appropriate context or over generalizing their use to inappropriate contexts.

5.6. Results

The engagement markers examined for this paper were used to convey information more clearly and to engage the reader as a fellow enthusiast. They

generally fell into the five categories delineated by Hyland (2005): Reader pronoun, imperative, questions, directives, and shared knowledge. The pre-treatment writing consisted of 30 papers written by the students ranging in length from approximately 400 to 500 words. The topics of the paper were *how and in what ways the developed countries can help the developing countries?* And *whether or not they are in favour of overseas studying?*

The post-treatment writing consisted of 30 papers written by the students in the experimental group, ranging in length approximately the same as the pre-treatment writing. The topics were the same in both the pre-test and the post-test for the experimental group.

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the writing scores for the control group and the experimental group. There was no significant difference in scores for the control group ($\underline{M}$ = 5.25, $\underline{SD}$ = 1.05), and the experimental group [$\underline{M}$ = 5.16, $\underline{SD}$ = 1.06; $\underline{t}$ (58) = .305, $\underline{p}$ = .762].

Table 1. Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
score	Control Group	30	5.2500	1.05659	.19291
	Experimental Group	30	5.1667	1.06134	.19377

Table 2. Independent Samples Test

	Levene's Test for Equality Variances		t-test for Equality of Means							
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
								Lower	Upper
Score Equal variances assumed	.051	.822	.305	58	.762	.08333	.27342	-.46398	.63065
Equal variances not assumed			.305	57.999	.762	.08333	.27342	-.46398	.63065

As predicted, on the post-tests the groups differed: The mean gain for the EG-Pre was 2.05, and for the EG-Post = 2.21, t = 2.31, p = .024, and the Mean Difference = .166 (see Figure 1).

Table 3. Group Statistics

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score	Control Group	30	2.0500	.24033	.04388
	Experimental Group	30	2.2167	.31303	.05715

Table 4. Independent Samples Test

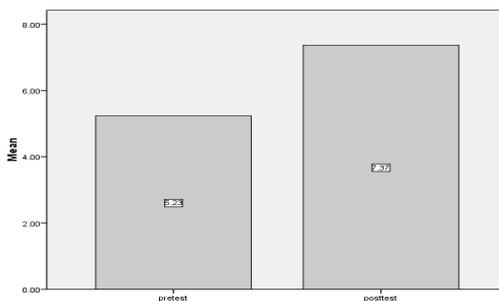|		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference		Lower	Upper
Mean gain	Equal variances assumed	13.482	.001	-2.313	58	.024	-.16667	.07205		-.31090	-.02244
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.313	54.372	.025	-.16667	.07205		-.31110	-.02223

Figure 1. Graphic Representation of the Achievement Difference on the EG-Pre and the EG-Post

These results indicated that the experimental treatment was beneficial because of the greater gain by the EG-Post. In fact, the EG writers used more engagement markers than CG writers. The higher use of the engagement markers in the EG papers was supported by the use of questions. On the other hand, the lower use of engagement markers by the CG resulted in a configuration that made their text unfriendly.

The EG writers reduced the amount of engagement markers in their introductory paragraph. As their paper developed, they used a wide variety of them appropriate for their assertion. In the following example the writer in her pre-test begins her essay with the third person singular pronoun, creating distance from the text and reducing interaction with the reader:

In my opinion it is not possible to live in such a world without caring other people. It is the duty of those people who live in developed countries to put so pressure on their government to help the ones who live in poor less developed countries. If it isn't done it may have some consequences like famine. One way through which this financial help can be formed is education.

After a semester of training in the use of engagement marker, and the resulting focus on the reader, we found some moderation in this EG writer's style. She uses in her essay some rhetorical questions. Expressions that anticipate the reader's response are one way for writers to show awareness of and interact with their imagined readers. In the following example the writer has formulated a question which is then commented on as a potential question posed by an interlocutor as if in a spoken dialogue. One may see this as an instance of the writer expressing her own train of thought, which simultaneously anticipates the reader's response to the preceding statements. Her use of the first person plural imperative, let's, is more of an invitation to the reader to join her in exploring a question than it was in her EG-Pre. Even though she continues to express her opinions and her level of conviction strongly, the reader does not feel excluded, as in the first paper. Throughout, the writer uses a variety of engagement markers, including other commentaries to engage her reader. Her new-found attention to her reader is perhaps best demonstrated when she writes:

Firstly, let's imagine two different countries, one with people supported by much wealth and another with people suffering from hunger. Morally speaking we surely will put so pressure on our government to help those people with trade and financial aids. But an important question comes to our minds once we think about this issue is that through which ways this financial help can be formed? Answering this question leads us to some essential factors which have a decisive role in solving this problem. Education is one way through which this financial help can be formed.

6. Discussion

In the world of applied linguistics today, it is argued that linguistic competence on the part of writers does not ensure an equal level of pragmatic competence. Obviously, as all participants were advanced learners of English, their linguistic proficiency used for this study was at a level that allowed them to make use of the direct teaching. In fact, the participants had the linguistic proficiency to understand the purpose of engagement markers and to use them in their composition. More to the point, engagement devices were probably structures that participants had already known about; they might not be aware that they could use them as strategies in their composition. Therefore, in this study we pointed to the importance of "metalinguistic awareness" and "pragmalinguistic competence" (Wishnoff, 2000). Actually, by noticing certain aspects of the language to convey the intended meaning, learners could acquire pragmatic competence.

The fact that the students in the EG used more engagement markers and received better grades than students in the CG raises some questions. When they wrote their second writing with an emerging attention to the reader's perspective, we believe this helped our EG writers make much more effective changes in their texts than the CG writers did. The use of engagement markers

was more extensive and more effective in the experimental group. More effective use of engagement markers would be expected as an effect of direct teaching. As the EG students became aware of the pragmatic function of engagement markers through direct teaching, they recognized the rhetorical functions of these specific forms.

An important question is whether teaching engagement marker was educationally significant. From the point of view of the students who received higher course grades, the method was effective. Furthermore, students felt that the method was useful. It is dangerous to attribute too much to the assessment that students make about the value of particular methods, but in their journals they certainly indicated that they believed that they learned something. The EG students had a sense that they had learned aspects of the composing process that improved their writing. We would argue that we taught our students engagement marker and showed them how to use it in their writing. Their improvement suggests we were teaching them something that they did understand, and that did help them write a more effective paper.

7. Conclusion

Direct teaching of genres was criticized in a recent issue of *Research in Teaching of English* (Cheng & Steffensen, 1996). Freedman (1993; quoted in Cheng & Steffensen, 1996) objected to the explicit teaching of principles of writing. She claimed that such teaching is dangerous because it may lead to "overlearning" or "misapplication". On the other hand, Hillocks argued that explicit teaching has a positive effect on student's writing and is an effective strategy for the classroom and always achieve results.

In our study, teaching students to use engagement markers skilfully helped them develop a sense of audience and engage with that audience appropriately. Since a great number of learners find it difficult to create a forum in their writings there would be a considerable value in direct teaching of the concept of engagement marker to them. Instruction which is explicitly directed to student awareness in this way is generally referred to as *rhetorical consciousness raising* (Swales, 1990; quoted in Hyland, 2005). This approach is more concerned with producing better writers than with producing better texts (Hyland, 2005).

More to the point, our study provides quantitative support for direct teaching. Besides, direct teaching of engagement markers had global effects. Actually, our method made the students aware of their audience and the ultimate goal of composition. Similarly, it changed the students' understanding of composition as an only a five-paragraph exercise. We have taken some steps that have changed the experimental group into those students who try to create a forum in their composition. Since composition is a process of communication, teaching the rhetorical functions of engagement markers was a beneficial step in that direction.

8. References

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