Metadiscourse Markers in a Corpus of Learner Language: The Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

Different issues have been probed in learner corpus research since the late 1980s.However, taking the importance of meta discourse markers (MDMs) in signposting academic discourse, their use in Iranian EFL learners" academic essays is an area of research in need of a more serious analysis. Contributing to this line of investigation, this paper reports a corpus-based study of the use of MDMs in the academic essays of Iranian EFL learners who have majored in English-related fields in Iran. For this, based on Hyland"s (2005)model of MDMs, the recently-compiled Iranian corpus of learner English was analyzed for instances of MDMs and compared with a sub-corpus of the British academic written English. The findings indicated overuse in categories (interactional and interactive) and overuse and underuse in types of MDMs (hedges, transitions, etc.) in Iranian EFL learners" essays relative to the English-natives" essays, with more instances of interactional MDMs in the former compared with more uses of interactive MDMs in the latter. Suggestions have been proposed for such profiling of MDMs among Iranians as rooted indifferences between Iranian and English cultures, previous instruction, and so forth. Implications of the results for English language teaching including explicit teaching of MDMs have been considered.

Keywords: Corpus, Genre, Learner corpus, Learner language, Meta-discourse markers (MDMs)

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, language corpora, compiled in different sizes and for different purposes, abound around. Sketching speech or writing either synchronically or diachronically, such digitally-stored collections of language samples have been compiled for such purposes as language

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teaching(e.g., Römer, 2011), translation(e.g., Pearson, 2014), critical discourse analysis(e.g., Prentice, 2010),reference publishing(e.g., McEnery & Xiao, 2011), language assessment(e.g., Taylor & Barker, 2008), and so forth. One of the most significant influences of corpora on the realm of language teaching has been the application of corpus techniques to the study of learner language(Hunston, 2006).Learner language, as a key concept in the so-called learner corpus research (LCR), has been the center of researchers" focus since the late 1980s(Paquot & Plonsky, 2017).Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p. 4) define learner language as "the oral or written language produced by learners" and call its collected samples the primary type of data in English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) learning studies. This is because, contrary to the experimental data that might include "artificial interlanguage forms" (Granger, 2008, p. 337), learner language can

provide researchers with bona fide information about language learners" underlying competence whose description has been the goal of researchers for so long(Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005).

Generally, corpora are compiled based on a number of design criteria(Atkins, Clear, & Ostler, 1992).In the case of learner corpora, they include learner and task variables(Ellis, 1994). This is because a haphazard compilation of learner data is not regarded as a leaner corpus(Granger, 2012).Granger (2003b),in designing the international corpus of learner English (ICLE), provides an in-depth description of such variables, where the categorization of learner and task variables has been frequently referred to as a well-established paradigm for corpus builders to follow along (Lozano & Mendikoetxea, 2013). More than 20 learner and task variables have been followed in ICLE. An illustration of the ICLE design criteria is provided in Fig. 1.
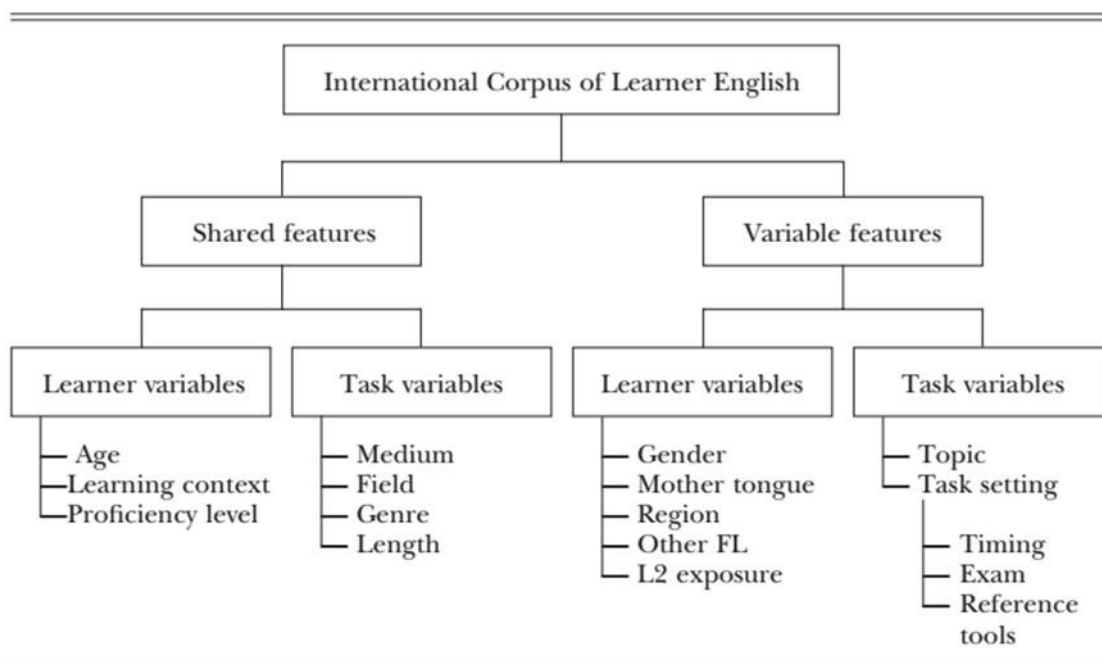

Figure 1. Task and learner variables in ICLE design(Granger, 2003b).

After compiling a learner corpus, it can be analyzed in line with corpus-informed, corpus-based, or corpus-driven analysis procedures

(Callies, 2015). In corpus-informed analysis procedures, a learner corpus is analyzed in search for the existence, non-existence, or possi-