

How does Explicit and Implicit Instruction of Formal Meta-discourse Markers Affect Learners' Writing Skills?

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Abstract

Discourse markers improve both the quality and comprehension of a written text. This study aimed at investigating the effect of explicit and implicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers on writing skills. The quantitative data were collected from 90 upper-intermediate students at Shiraz University Language Center. Two experimental groups went through an instruction, while the control group did not receive any instruction on formal meta-discourse markers. A pretest-posttest method of assessment was employed. After an eight-session treatment, a posttest was administered to compare the participants' performances. The results revealed that the instruction of formal meta-discourse markers had a positive effect on the learners' writing skills. Moreover, the results showed that learners who received explicit instruction of meta-discourse markers could perform better in writing than learners who received implicit instruction. The findings can have pedagogical implications for EFL educators and materials developers to enhance learners' writing skill. Furthermore, the findings provide important insight into the impact of teaching discourse markers and raising learners' awareness through explicit instruction in order to make pupils produce more cohesive and coherent written texts. Besides, it sheds light on the effect of different types of instruction on learning metadiscourse markers and its application in writing skills.

Keywords: Explicit instruction, Implicit instruction, Meta-discourse markers, Writing skill

INTRODUCTION

Chow (2007) stated that writing as a fundamental instrument that helps learners to realize and learn the concepts and ideas better. Such being the case, the use of rhetorical devices known as meta-discourse markers are

considered as one of the significant features of writing (Hyland, 2004).

Discourse is the social means of conveying broad historical meanings, which is recognized by social situations (Henry & Tator, 2002). Meta-discourse can be defined as "linguistic material in texts, written or spoken, which does not add anything to the propositional con-

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tent but that is intended to help the listener or reader organize, interpret and evaluate the information given” (Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993, p.40). Conclusively, the efficient use of discourse markers (DMs) is essential in academic writing and its shortage is considered as a novice error among the second language writers.

As Karaata et al. (2012) argued DMs are building blocks that facilitate the textual flow for the reader. Due to the significance of the appropriate use of meta-discourse markers in academic written texts and the critical role of using formal DMs in conveying meaning, the issue of meta-discourse markers is particularly significant for EFL students. Consequently, the present era of language-teaching learning not only needs instructors who are completely aware of the importance of DMs in the improvement of writing skill, but also it requires learners who can get benefit from meta-discourse markers in different contexts masterfully to maintain the cohesion and coherence of their writings as much as possible.

One interesting area of research in second language writing is to see how DMs are tackled by non-native writers of English in writings and compositions. Theoretically, DMs are a group of both verbal and non-verbal devices which provide contextual coordination of the ongoing talk (Schiffrin, 1987). Concerning the literature on explicit and implicit instruction of formal meta-discourse, most researchers do not specifically mention their alignment with particular theoretical frameworks. Xu (2001), for example, made a clear-cut distinction among various types of DMs once categorized by Hyland (1998). Yet, it is indicative of the fact that most studies related to EFL learners’ writing skill improvement through the instruction of both explicit and implicit formal meta-discourse have remained quite neglected particularly in the Iranian context.

Studies on DMs can be generally divided into two categories including a) a descriptive analysis of DMs in a specific language spoken by its native speakers b) the acquisition of

DMs of the target language by non-native speakers. It is pivotal to mention that teaching DMs is never taken into account as a part of the education curriculum in Iran and little pragmatical work has been done on the explicit instruction of DMs and making learners aware through explicit instruction as well as implicit instruction and its contribution to improving learners’ writing ability. DMs have been evaluated in different skills of reading, listening, and speaking but little attention has been paid to writing skill. This problem can be more when an EFL context is considered, in which writing plays a very crucial role, specifically in academic settings, though it is not considered as a part of the educational syllabus. Therefore, the current study aimed to fill the gap in the review literature by investigating the following research questions:

RQ1: Does instruction of formal meta-discourse markers have any significant impact on EFL learners’ writing performance?

RQ2: Is there any meaningful difference in the writing performance of those who receive explicit instruction on formal meta-discourse markers and those who receive implicit instruction?

Theoretical Background

The critical role of improving English skills as the major path of connectedness and communication among nations especially in the globalized world today and the crucial role this language plays as the major way of globalization in the plurality of discourse communication, expansion, and development of English, in general, and producing writing as a solid way of connection, in particular, has gained wide recognition and acceptance. Although speaking and listening are natural skills and may not have to be learned, writing, on the other hand, is not natural, and it must be learned (Martin, 2009).

English learners may receive instructions in paragraphing, discourse structuring and text organization, sentence construction, vocabulary, narrative or argumentation conventions,

cohesion development, revising, and editing, as well as linguistic aspects of texts (Silva & Brice, 2004). However, in many countries like Iran, as Reichelt (2009) mentioned, writing is viewed as an out of date curricular activity and the prevalently used traditional pedagogical practices which are the main focus in writing courses. Writing has been seen as an essential, useful, integral, and challenging part of any language syllabus (Frodesen, 2001). Silva and Brice (2004) stated that writing in a foreign language helps learners to improve their grammatical, strategic, sociolinguistic, and discourse competences in the target language. Further, it seems crystal clear that writing is an active, productive skill, and students who want to master it, especially in a foreign language, face multiple challenges (Zhang & Liu, 2010).

Meta-discourse Markers and Relevance Theory

“The term meta-discourse was coined by Zellig Harris in 1959 to offer a way of understanding language in use, representing a writer’s or speaker’s attempts to guide a receiver’s perception of a text” (Hyland, 2005; p. 141). Hyland (1998) held the view that “based on a view of writing as a social and communicative engagement between writer and reader, meta-discourse focuses our attention on the ways writers try to project themselves into their work to show their communicative purposes” (p. 71). Schiffrin (1987) defined DMs as “sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk” that signal relationship between immediately adjacent „units of talk“ and which, as a result, have a coherence building function on a local coherence level. Redeker (1991) defined DM as „a word or a phrase that is uttered with the primary function of bringing to the listener’s attention a particular kind of linkage of the upcoming utterance with the immediate discourse text“.

Closely tied to the notion of DMs is *Relevance Theory*. Within the past decades, there has been rising attention in the theoretical aspect of DMs, focusing on what they are, what they mean, and what functions they represent.

In order to have an understanding of the matter, and their functions, the relevance-based approach to DMs needs to be taken into account which has been developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995). *Relevance Theory*, by definition, is a pragmatic model that has been trying to explain how speakers interpret utterances. It is based on a cognitive-based hypothesis about how human beings process linguistic information. This hypothesis suggests that the men's main processor is highly effective in handling the information because it is specifically oriented towards the search for relevance.

Further, the principle of Relevance entitles the addressee to understand that an utterance comes with a sort of guarantee of its related optimal relevance. Blakemore (2002) adopted this theory and claimed that these markers have „procedural meaning“. Blakemore (2002) maintained that they are limited to specific contexts and referred to them as discourse connectives, segments“ interrelation, and discourse processing. As a result, it is rare for meta-discourse to be whether explicitly instructed or adequately applied in writing materials in a way that either indicates the systematic effect of the important communicative nature of discourse (Fung & Carater, 2007). It seems vital for the students to receive appropriate instruction on meta-discourse using models of argument which allow them to practice writing within the socio-rhetorical context of their target communities (Hyland, 2005). Meta-discourse markers, though akin to cohesive devices, need to be treated separately and differently, since they do not lead to a search for a referent or meaning.

Cohesion and Coherence in Writing

Cohesion and coherence are considered as two essential wings of comprehensive writing (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). They were of the opinion that in any language, cohesive devices are divided into reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction, and lexical cohesion. These five main categories, as it was stated, comprised „texture“ which is the feature of being a

text. Several studies have worked on using these cohesive devices by native versus non-native users, among which Hinkel (2001) can be mentioned. The results of the majority of them indicated that non-native speakers did not use a wide range of DMs as their native counterparts did. Even advanced non-native speaker writers did not use the wide range of these devices as native ones in her study (Hinkel, 2001) asserted. According to Sanders and Spooren (2008), coherence is the essential element of a well-organized text. Sanders and Matt (2006) asserted that the cognitive presentation of discourse is the element that brings organization to the text rather than the discourse itself. Coherence, as the cognitive representation of the text, is the decisive element that makes the text unique to it by making ties and referential connections.

Hinkel (2001) asserted that as far as cohesion deals with the surface structure of discourse, it is more obvious than coherence. Cohesion is a means for reaching coherence. As summarized above, not using these significant elements could lead to the lack of unity in writing, and hence learners do not have a clear mental picture of how to begin, maintain, and end their writing and how to connect their ideas. These complexities and confusions of learners can be solved through a process of explicit and implicit instruction to make them more meaningful to learners. Although the task of making students change a set of propositions or even simple sentences into coherent discourse is relatively straightforward, the processes that the writer must go through are much more complex. Consequently, as mentioned by Sanders (2006), to produce coherent discourse, writers and materials developers must exploit what they already know about the subject at hand and combine it with information from other sources. In other words, they must draw on the way that grammar and discourse work together, and they are needed to use cohesion appropriately.

Explicit vs. Implicit Instruction

The impact of explicit instruction is outstanding in both scholars' works and empirical studies. Some researchers, DeKeyser (1995), Schmidt (2012), and De Graaff (1997), pinpointed that explicit instruction, which is defined as giving learners enough explicit knowledge and information about the target language structure during the learning process, facilitates the learning aspect of the second language.

On the other hand, taking the implicit way of instruction into account, it can be generally reminded that the knowledge underlying appropriate use of language is not grammar as abstract rules, but it is rather a complex collection of memories of previously experienced utterances and speeches. Linguistic regularities appear as key tendencies in the conspiracy of the database of memories for utterances (Ellis, 2002). Furthermore, closely tied to the implicit instruction and regarding the role of conscientiousness during language use, we are conscious of establishing communication rather than counting (DeKeyser, 2008). Hence, as argued by Ellis (2002), we normally communicate and learn the frequency of language elements and notice transitional dependencies. What seems more necessary to note is the fact that much of what is being taken into account in implicit learning is on artificial grammar and these experiments indicate that the underlying patterns and rules of sequential dependency can be acquired automatically from the related experience of sequential behavior.

All the above-mentioned examples and many others are implicitly working on native speakers. The question remained unanswered, thus, is, „What about second language learners who are exposed to learning in an artificial setting of the classroom? How is this frequency of utterances going to be applied?“ Unfortunately, as obvious in the teaching and learning atmosphere, teachers are not aware of the importance of DMs and have no clear strategy for instructing them. Besides, textbooks do not provide the condition to do so, as well. As a result, it makes teaching and learning DMs a

very sophisticated task for both teachers and language learners.

METHODS

Participants

Participants of the present study included ninety male and female upper-intermediate learners (according to Google, at this level, learners' vocabulary is around 3,000-4,000 words. They can speak and understand English without difficulty), at Shiraz University Language Center in Iran who were chosen non-randomly based on convenience sampling. They were almost at the same level of language proficiency. The learners had already completed two courses in grammar and writing. All groups (both control and experimental ones) attended a writing class two hours a week, for eight weeks.

Design

The current study employed a quantitative research methodology to seek the impact of teaching formal meta-discourse markers through both explicit and implicit instruction on upper-intermediate EFL students' written performance. With respect to the experimental nature of the current study, the present research involved the non-random assignment of participants into different experimental and control groups in order to determine the causal effect of explicit and implicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers on the pupil's writing ability performances through employing the appropriate treatment during an eight-week intervention period. The study adopted a pretest-posttest design. Besides, quantitative data collection methods were used to gather the required data.

Materials

Three instruments were used in this study to collect the data regarding the variables in the study. First, an Oxford placement test (OPT) was carried out in order to make sure of participants' proficiency level was congruence, and homogeneity. Respecting the content of OPT; it included items to measure test takers' ability

to understand a range of grammatical forms and the meaning they convey in a wide range of contexts. It also measured the extent to which learners can use these linguistic resources to communicate in English language situations.

Further, a pretest of writing was utilized to determine the participants' initial knowledge and their knowledge in the use of meta-discourse markers. Lastly, a posttest of writing was administered to compare the performance of learners in the control group with those in experimental groups.

The DMs selected to be taught were based on the classifications presented by Hyland (2005). Therefore, the way DMs categorized was kept with the same format, except for a few changes to match the purpose of DM usage in writing for the current study. Firstly, it should be noted that the writing test was in the form of essay writing based on an assigned topic in both the pretest and posttest phases of the study. Furthermore, the instructor provided the learners with the definitions and examples of the above categories. Ultimately, the learners were required to write down sentences using them.

Learners' performances on the use of correct formal DMs were rated on a scoring scale of 0-10 for each item in their essays in both pre and posttests to ascertain the reliability and validity of various traits.

Procedures

The participants were divided into one control group (N=30) and two experimental groups (N=60). One of the experimental groups received the explicit instruction on formal meta-discourse markers and the other one received the implicit instruction. At the outset of the study, a proficiency test was administered to examine learners' homogeneity in terms of their language proficiency as well as their general knowledge of DMs. To this end, several different items and exercises were predicted in the OPT test so that learners could get familiar with the function of formal meta-discourse markers.

Next, the learners were given several examples of DMs in the same category and were asked to work on them. After working on the exercises and answering the questions, participants were given time to write a three-paragraph essay and then the teacher provided the students with several examples to assist them get a clear picture of the usage and function formal of DMs.

The target formal meta-discourse markers addressed in this study were: *Moreover*, *Finally*, *In general*, *Recently*, *With regard to*, *For instance*, *As a result*, *meanwhile*, *Likewise*, and *However*. The formal meta-discourse markers were instructed to group „A“ through explicit method while group „B“ learned meta-discourse markers through an implicit way of teaching. In addition, it needs to be recalled that the control group did not receive any type of instruction in the field of DMs to help the researcher increase the reliability of the study. Subsequently, the pretest of writing was given to the control and the experimental groups. Learners were asked to write a three-paragraph essay on the topic entitled “The effects of tourists on an area.” The purpose of administering the pretest was to examine if the learners were homogeneous regarding the correct application of formal meta-discourse markers in their writing.

Then, the experimental group „A“ was exposed to the explicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers during eight successive sessions. The explicit way of DMs instruction included giving various examples and exercise activities on them and providing participants with different examples and giving them classroom activities to do in pairs or in groups with the focus on the DMs. Based on the Hyland’s (2005) meta-discourse markers framework, a handout including a list of definitions and examples of formal and informal meta-discourse markers was given to the learners. The instructor provided the learners with the definitions and examples of the above categories. Besides, participants were provided with the definition of some key concepts. This was done to refresh their minds. It also helped the researcher

to break the ice and attract the participants’ confidence. Then, the Experimental Groups underwent the specific treatments designed for each of them.

After having been exposed to instruction on each meta-discourse marker, participants were required to write down sentences using them. Furthermore, the target participants were given exercises with deleted formal meta-discourse markers and consequently, were asked to employ the appropriate markers. Learners in the experimental group „B“ were exposed to the implicit instruction on formal meta-discourse markers for eight successive sessions. In the first session, the target formal meta-discourse markers were introduced to the learners. Then, in the following sessions, students were taught the formal DM simplicity through lexical cues and using learners’ background information. It should be noted that during the treatment sessions, they were repeatedly exposed to several writings by their instructor. Finally, as the posttest, a three-paragraph writing test was administered to all three groups to compare the participants’ performance on the use of formal meta-discourse markers. The participants were asked to write an essay on the same topic as the pretest. The focus was only on the application and use of the meta-discourse markers.

It should be added that, since the scoring process of participants’ writings was subjective, two independent raters scored the writings to increase the validity. The raters were two teachers with more than 10 years of experience in teaching different levels of English courses. They focused on the number and the appropriate use of meta-discourse markers, the extent of cohesiveness that students made between sentences in their writing, and the clear and close relationship among ideas.

Data Analysis

The *t*-test was employed to investigate whether the instruction of meta-discourse markers leads to the improvement of the writing skill. The ANOVA was run to investigate the effect of explicit or implicit instruction of meta-discourse markers on the participants’ writing,

and to explore which method of instruction is more profitable. Typically, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) is undertaken in order to check whether the difference in mean scores and gain scores of treatment groups are significant or not.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics for Learners' Performance in Pre-test and Post-test

Group	Pre-test			Post-test	
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental-explicit	30	15.6	3.48	21.60	3.988
Experimental-implicit	30	14.96	3.57	16.67	3.273
Control	30	14.23	4.31	14.93	4.417

Based on the above table, the Experimental-explicit mean score in the pre-test was 15.6, which increased to 21.6 in the post-test. The mean score of the experimental implicit group mean score was 14.96 in the pre-test and 16.67 in the post-test. Besides, the control group mean scores in pre-and post-test were 14.23 and 14.93, respectively. It is worth mentioning that the scores were out of 30.

Table 2.
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Homogeneity of the Pre-test

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-test	.085	89	.130	.980	89	.179

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As the above table signifies, there were no significant differences ($\text{sig}=.385$) among these three groups before receiving instruction. In other words, it can be inferred that the participants were homogeneous at the outset of the study with regard to their writing ability.

The Influence of Instruction of Formal DMs on the Pupils' Writing Performances

The first research question concerned if the instruction of formal meta-discourse markers

At the outset of the data analysis, the descriptive statistics were used in order to reveal the performances of the participants. The following table reports the learners' performances in the pre and post-test. This descriptive table presents the participants' performance in each group (experimental-explicit, experimental-implicit, and control).

Comparing Learners' Writing Performances in the Pre-test

To ensure the homogeneity of all groups before the intervention sessions, their mean scores in the pre-test were compared through ANOVA analysis, which is reported in the following table.

has any significant effect on EFL learners' writing achievement. To address this question, an independent samples *t*-test was run on participants' post-tests mean scores who received instruction (the experimental groups) and who did not receive any instruction (control group) to check if the instruction of formal meta-discourse markers has any significant effect on EFL learners' writing achievement. The related result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3.**Independent Samples t-test on Writing Post-Test Mean Scores**

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				95% Confidence Interval of the Dif- ference			
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Dif- ference	Std. Error Differ- ence	Lower	Upper
Equal variances as- sumed	5.205	.025	-6.61	88	.000	-5.56667	.84102	-7.23801	-3.89532
Equal variances not assumed			-6.06	46.63	.000	-5.56667	.91773	-7.41329	-3.72005

An examination of the data indicated that according to the table above, there was a significant difference for the participants who received instruction ($M = 20.5$, $SD = 3.39$) and those who did not receive any instruction ($M = 14.93$, $SD = 4.417$) ($t = -6.61$, $p = .000$, $df =$

88). The magnitude of the difference in the means was large ($\eta^2 = .995$).

Additionally, the performances of all three groups were analyzed both at pre-test and post-test. The following tables are dedicated to reporting the related results.

Table 4.**Multivariate Tests for Participants' Performances during Pretest and Posttest**

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Time	Pillai's Trace	.153	15.717 ^b	1.000	87.000	.000	.153
	Wilks' Lambda	.847	15.717 ^b	1.000	87.000	.000	.153
	Hotelling's Trace	.181	15.717 ^b	1.000	87.000	.000	.153
	Roy's Largest Root	.181	15.717 ^b	1.000	87.000	.000	.153
Time * Group	Pillai's Trace	.079	3.730 ^b	2.000	87.000	.028	.079
	Wilks' Lambda	.921	3.730 ^b	2.000	87.000	.028	.079
	Hotelling's Trace	.086	3.730 ^b	2.000	87.000	.028	.079
	Roy's Largest Root	.086	3.730 ^b	2.000	87.000	.028	.079

The preliminary analyses showed no violation of homogeneity of variances (Pretest = .448 > .05, Posttest = .148 > .05) and equality of covariance matrices ($p > .001$). As Table 5 depicts, there was a substantial main effect of time [Wilks' Lambda = .847, $F(1, 87) = 15.717$, $p = .000$]. The results show that pretest and posttest are significantly different from each other (Time 1 & 2). The partial eta squared was .15 indicating a small effect size.

Put it differently, the participants performed better in the posttest, but the difference was not too much. There was also a significant interaction effect between group and time [Wilks' Lambda = .139, $F(2, 87) = 3.370$, $p = .028$]. It suggests that three groups (experimental-explicit, experimental-implicit, and control) performed differently before and after receiving treatments.

Table 5.**Pairwise Comparisons of Participants' Performances in Pretest and Posttest**

(I) Time	(J) Time	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. ^b	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	2	-2.022*	.510	.000	-3.036	-1.008
2	1	2.022*	.510	.000	1.008	3.036

Moreover, as shown in Table 5, the pretest and posttest results were significantly different from each other.

Table 6.
Between-group Subjects' Effects of Participants' Performances in Writing Tasks

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	50333.889	1	50333.889	2837.458	.000	.970
Group	818.811	2	409.406	23.079	.000	.347
Error	1543.300	87	17.739			

Further, as Table 6 represents, a substantial main effect was observed for the group variable. Indeed, the overall mean scores of the groups combined, significantly differ from each other ($p = .000$). It can be inferred that participants in each group performed differently from each other. Accordingly, participants who received instruction on formal meta-discourse markers, whether implicitly or explicitly, performed better than those who did not receive any instruction on formal meta-discourse markers. In the same vein, participants who received explicit instructions performed differently on the posttest than those who got implicit instruction on the mentioned structures.

Comparing Explicit and Implicit Instruction of Formal Meta-discourse Markers

The second research question concerned whether there is any meaningful difference in the writing performance of those who received explicit instruction on formal meta-discourse markers and those who receive implicit instruction. To address the question, an independent sample *t*-test analysis was run to compare the performance of experimental groups' participants in the post-test. The result is reported in Table 7 below.

Table 7.
Independent Samples t-test on Writing Post-test Mean Scores of Experimental Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of 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
Equal variances assumed	4.95	.03	3.09	58	.003	2.53	.818	.89509	4.17158
Equal variances not assumed			3.09	52.1	.003	2.53	.818	.89114	4.17553

Table 7 reveals that there was a significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group who received explicit instruction (mean=21.76, SD=3.66) and the experimental group who received implicit instruction (mean=19.23, SD=2.58) post-test (sig 2-tailed= .003<.05).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Improving writing skill, as an everyday social phenomenon, has been among the main purpose of education in general, and language teaching in specific (Sanford, 2012). Chow (2007) confirmed the importance of writing skill in education and considered it as an essential writing tool, which contribute in boosting pupils' comprehending concepts and ideas. Learning writing is more complicated than

usual learning speaking since it requires an organized instruction and practice. It is far more than just concerning written speech, it is also about expressing ideas and meaning. According to Rhetorical Structure Theory, writing skill requires focusing on text organization, especially, the relationship of the joining parts of a text (Taboada & Mann, 2006). Sanford (2012) declared that DMs provide „sentence meanings“, „communicative competence expressions“, and „realistic message efficiency“. Besides, DMs contribute in helping both reader and writer comprehend the text (Eslami & Eslami, 2007). This is also supported by Dergisi (2010), who indicated that good writing is not only about grammar, but it is also about coherence and cohesion as well. He also emphasized teaching DMs in English writing rather than being ignored.

Due to the importance of DMs, the present study tried to investigate the effect of formal DMs instruction on writing skill improvement. More specifically, it aimed at finding the possible effect of implicit and explicit instruction of DMs on writing skill improvement of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners.

To find answer to the first research question, which asked, “*Does instruction of formal meta-discourse markers have any significant impact on EFL learners’ writing performance?*” both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized. The descriptive statistics revealed that although all these three comprising groups have experienced an improvement in their post-tests compared to those of their pre-tests, the experimental groups, who have received explicit and implicit instruction on the target formal DMs, outperformed the control group. In order to investigate whether this improvement from pre-test to post-test was statistically significant or not, an independent sample *t*-test was run which revealed that the improvement of the experimental groups and the control group were statistically different. In other words, this implies that formal DMs instruction leads to the EFL learners’ performance improvement.

The study results are the same as the previous studies focusing on the effect of DMs instruction on EFL learners’ writing skill improvement (e.g., Fung & Carter, 2007; Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007; Jones, 2011; Rezvani, Abdullah, & Baki, 2012; Yoon, 2017; Zhang, 2010). The obtained results are in line with the previous studies working on the instruction of DMs, for instance, Xu’s (2001) study who found the same results and revealed that after DMs instruction, the Chinese students used more formally complex and exact interactive DMs. The present study results are also confirmed by the results of Simin and Tavangar’s (2009) research who investigated the EFL learners’ writing improvement after meta-discourse instruction. They found the same results and clarified that the instruction of meta-discourse markers could be facilitative concerning the writing quality and the appropriate use of DM items. Additionally, the positive effect on DMs instruction is also confirmed by Tavakoli, Bahrami, and Amirian’s (2012) study; they found the significant effect of instruction of meta-discourse markers on L2 language learners’ writing skill improvement.

The researcher ran some other inferential statistical analysis to find an answer to the second research question, which was “*Is there any meaningful difference in the writing performance of those who receive explicit instruction on formal meta-discourse markers and those who receive implicit instruction?*” The descriptive statistics results indicated that the experimental group performance in writing has been found to be better than that of the control group, besides the experimental group who received explicit instruction on the target formal meta-discourse markers outperformed the participants who received implicit instruction. In order to scrutinize whether this difference is statistically significant or not, a mixed between-within subjects ANOVA was run to compare the performance of participants before and after intervention sessions. The results allowed the researcher to confirm the positive effect of DMs instruction in general; also it was confirmed that the explicit instruc-

tion method could be more helpful and beneficial in learners' writing skill performances. The obtained results, moreover, lend support to Dastjerdi and Shirzad's (2010) study, which explored the effect of explicit instruction of meta-discourse markers on EFL learners' writing ability and found that explicit instruction of meta-discourse makers has a positive effect on EFL learners' writing improvement. Further, the results of the current study are in accord with the findings of Norris and Ortega (2000), and Jeon and Kaya (2006). The results of these studies showed an advantage for explicit approaches over implicit ones with respect to the instruction of meta-discourse markers, which concurs with the findings of this research. A possible explanation for the effectiveness of explicit instruction over implicit one might rest in the components of the instructional approaches as discussed in Norris and Ortega (2000). A typical explicit treatment often included combinations of multiple instructional components, such as rule presentation, focused practice, and feedback, whereas implicit treatment simply involved one type of implicit exposure to target features. They declared that these instructional components could have affected the observed result that implied the fact that explicit method of teaching DMs was more influential than implicit instruction.

The findings of this paper are supported by other papers related to this topic, such as "Discourse Markers in English Writing" by Li Feng (2010), who concluded that DMs function as one of the most prominent cohesive ties between words and sentences of any writing. Accordingly, the research writers' prediction that in comparison to implicit instruction, the explicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers would lead to a better understanding and more appropriate use of these cohesive ties is confirmed and this is reflected in the learners' written performance.

To recapitulate, the analysis of the gathered data of the current study revealed the strong positive effects of the formal DMs instruction. However both explicit and implicit instruction

in this study helped the learners' use of DMs in their writings, these positive effects were more noticeable in the explicit instruction compared to the implicit one. Then, it seems crucial that language teachers be more aware of the importance of the explicit instruction of formal meta-discourse and aid learners in enhancing their writing tasks by using these pivotal and precious linguistic elements.

The main concern of the present study was to investigate the possible effect of the explicit and implicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers on the writing skill improvement of Iranian upper-intermediate L2 learners. Taken together, the major findings revealed that firstly, both the explicit and implicit instructions of formal meta-discourse markers have significant effects on the writing performance of the EFL learners. In addition, the results obtained from the data analysis section indicated that, on the whole, the explicit and implicit instructions of formal meta-discourse markers were the key elements in the superiority of the experimental group over the control group in terms of writing skill performance and improvement. In other words, based on the findings of the current paper, it is concluded that explicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers led to a far greater improvement concerning the learners' writing performances in the conducted pre and post-tests. As Simin and Tavangar (2009) stated, the instruction of meta-discourse markers had a facilitative effect on the writing quality and the appropriate use of meta-discourse items. Furthermore, as Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010) asserted, the explicit instruction of meta-discourse makers significantly increased EFL learners' writing ability. This implies that the explicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers can be one of the basic processes in the development of EFL learners' writing ability, and students can profit from it quite efficiently.

The findings of the present study can also have different pedagogical implications. The implementation of both explicit and implicit instruction of formal meta-discourse markers

in the Iranian EFL context has created a good number of issues that deserve researchers' attention. First and foremost, the results can shed light on the effectiveness of explicit instruction of formal DMs in the improvement of learners' writing skill. Secondly, this research can be a call to all instructors, practitioners, and researchers in language teaching and learning to focus more on meta-discourse as a pivotal part of the language. Next is that it provides a useful road map to materials developers by making texts more coherent since cohesion and coherence are factors that should be taken into account while applying the markers effectively. Hence, the syllabus designers should believe that including these important elements in textbooks and materials is an indispensable factor in the EFL learning and teaching domain. Last but not the least, looking at the issue from the instructors' point

of view, it seems quite inevitable to focus more on these text markers which are used frequently and are prevalent in texts of any field. As the research by Innajih (2007) asserts, explicit instruction of DMs seems to influence all language skills since they are pivotal components of language.

Besides, the results of this study can be fruitful for researchers, teachers, and practitioners to pay more attention in their language teaching and learning to meta-discourse as an essential point in language, especially when the writing skills are concerned.

This study, also, illuminates the effect of different types of meta-discourse instruction on EFL learners. Therefore, teachers are required to implement different types of meta-discourse instructions methods to boost their learners' ability to compose more coherent and cohesive written texts.

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