

The Impact of Explicit Instruction of Metadiscourse Markers on EFL Learners' Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

According to Hyland (2000), metadiscourse is recognized as an important means of facilitating communication, supporting a writer's position, and building a relationship with an audience. This study aims to investigate the impact of explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers on EFL learners' listening comprehension. The participants of this study were 50 undergraduate students majoring in English Translation at the University of Khorasgan. To elicit the relevant data, participants were given a pretest of listening comprehension to check their initial knowledge and unprompted use of metadiscourse markers. The participants were divided into two groups randomly. Students in the experimental group were taught metadiscourse markers in addition to a process method, while those students in the control group were thought only a process method. Finally, a post test measuring their listening comprehension with metadiscourse markers in focus was administered. The results indicated generally that explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers significantly improves EFL learners' listening comprehension. The findings call practitioners to pay more serious attention to metadiscourse markers in making EFL curricula.

Keywords: Explicit Instruction, Language Proficiency, Metadiscourse Markers, Listening Comprehension

Introduction

Metadiscourse markers are aspects of a text which exclusively guide readers toward the meanings intended by the author. Metadiscourse markers, also sometimes called 'transitions', are a good way to show the reader how ideas in a sentence are connected to ideas in a previous

sentence. One can think of metadiscourse like street signs that are telling the reader whether the text is continuing in the same direction it was going, or in a new direction.

This paper explores the role of textual and interpersonal metadiscourse markers in improving the listening comprehension of EFL learners. Metadiscourse will be employed as an analytical framework since it is one of the devices that help a piece of written text to be more effective by directing readers through the text so that the writer's stance and the text are better understood.

As Hyland (2005) states in his book on metadiscourse, "the term metadiscourse was coined by Zelling Harris in 1959 to offer a way of understanding language in use, representing a writer's or reader's attempts to guide a receiver's perception of a text"(3). The concept has been further developed by writers such as Williams (1981), Vande Kopple (1985) and Crismore (1989).

Metadiscourse was first defined by Williams (1981) as "writing about writing". Vande Kopple (1985) also referred to metadiscourse as "discourse about discourse or communication about communication". Hyland (2004) maintained that metadiscourse help authors interact with their audience in order to communicate successfully with them. Moreover, Hyland (1998) contended that metadiscourse markers are integral to the text. In other words, they cannot be removed or changed at will. In a quantitative study, Hyland (1998) examined metadiscourse markers in 28 research articles and found 373 instances of metadiscourse in each research article. In another textual analysis, Hyland (1999) explored metadiscourse markers in 21 textbooks and found 405 instances of metadiscourse markers in each text, around one per 15 words. Hyland has concluded that metadiscourse play an important part in communication. Crismore (1984) has defined metadiscourse as "discoursing about spoken or written discourse" (p.66). She has added that metadiscourse provides readers or listeners with direction rather than information.

Indubitably, the advantages of metadiscourse are many. For instance, discourse structuring functions of metadiscourse guide readers through a text and help them organize content while reading, thus creating global comprehension (Crismore, 1989). Metadiscourse has been recognized as one of the major rhetorical features and strategies in the production of a text (Hyland, 1998). In fact, it "is not indispensable stylistic device which authors can vary at will. It is integral to the contexts in which it occurs and is intimately linked to the norms and expectations of particular cultural and professional communities" (Hyland, 1998).

According to Vande Kopple (2002) metadiscourse refers to elements in texts that convey meanings other than those that are primarily referential. As Hyland (2004) states the importance of metadiscourse lies in its underlying rhetorical dynamics which relate it to the contexts in which it occurs.

Hyland (1998), in a study on research articles in four academic disciplines, sought to show how the appropriate use of metadiscourse crucially depends on rhetorical context. The study identified taxonomy of metadiscourse functions and suggested that metadiscourse reflects one way in which context and linguistic meaning are integrated to allow readers to derive intended interpretations, also metadiscourse provided writers with a means of constructing appropriate contexts and alluding to shared disciplinary assumptions.

Olivera et al. (2001) investigated metadiscourse devices used by copywriters to construct their slogans and headlines in selected women's magazines. The results showed that both textual and interpersonal metadiscourse help copywriters to convey a persuasive message under an informative mask.

Dahl (2004) investigated writer manifestation in three languages, English, French and Norwegian, and three disciplines, economics, linguistics and medicine, in research articles, to see whether language or discipline is the most important variable governing the pattern of metatext in academic discourse. The findings suggested that the language variable is the most important one within economics and linguistics, where English and Norwegian show very similar patterns, using much more metatext than French; within medicine, all three languages display a uniform pattern of little metatext.

Afros and Schryer (2009) investigated strategies and exponents of the promotional (Meta) discourse in natural and social science articles. The inquiry demonstrated that the distribution of promotional elements across article sections and moves in the two disciplines differed. On the whole, the study reconfirmed the advantage of specificity in teaching academic literacy advocated by many applied linguists and provided actual patterns that can be incorporated into the writing curriculum.

Dafouz-Milne (2007) explored the role of metadiscourse markers in the construction and attainment of persuasion. 40 opinion columns, 20 in English and 20 in Spanish extracted from two elite newspapers, the British *The Times* and the Spanish *El País*. Findings suggested that both textual and interpersonal metadiscourse markers are present in English and Spanish newspaper columns, but that there are variations as to the distribution and composition of such markers, specifically in the case of certain textual categories (i.e. logical markers and code glosses).

Duen (2007) analyzed the use and distribution of self-mentions in 24 English and Spanish business management research articles. The results revealed greater use of self-mentions in English. The different results also suggested that the use of self-mentions in research articles is not only conditioned by the discipline to which the authors belong but also by the specific cultural context in which research articles are produced and distributed.

Hyland (2004) divides metadiscourse markers into two broad categories, each one with a set of subcategories, interactive (textual) and interactional (interpersonal):

I. Interactive Markers: They enable the writer to manage the information flow so as to provide his preferred interpretations. They include the following subtypes:

1. Transitions: These markers mainly indicate: additive, contrastive, and consequential steps in the discourse. Some examples are: *in addition, but, thus, and*, etc.

2. Frame markers: They indicate text boundaries or elements of schematic text structure, like: *my purpose here is to, finally, to conclude*, etc.

3. Endophoric markers: They refer to information in other parts of the text and make the additional material available to the readers. Some examples are: *in section, see figure, noted above*, etc.

4. Evidentials: They refer to sources of information from other texts, such as: *X states, (Y, 2010), According to X*, etc.

5. Code glosses: They help readers grasp functions of ideational material. They show the restatements of ideational information, like: *namely, such as, in other words, e.g.*, etc.

II. Interactional Markers: They involve the reader in the argument. They 'focus on the participants of the interaction and seek to display the writer's persona and a tenor consistent with the norms of the disciplinary community' [Hyland 2004, p.139]. The interactional resources include:

1. Hedges: They withhold writer's full commitment to proposition. Examples: *might, about, perhaps, possibly*, etc.

2. Boosters: They emphasize force or the writer's certainty in proposition. Examples: *it is clear that, in fact, definitely*, etc.

3. Attitude markers: They indicate the writer's appraisal or attitude to propositional information. Some examples are: *unfortunately, surprisingly, I agree*, etc.

4. Engagement markers: They explicitly refer to or build a relationship with the reader. Examples: *consider, you can see that, note that*, etc.

5. Self-mentions: They explicitly refer to authors' presence in terms of first person pronouns and possessives. Examples: *I, we, our, my, your*, etc.

Following what was mentioned above, the present research aimed at investigating the impact of explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers on EFL learners' reading comprehension.

Research Question and Hypothesis

Q: Does explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers have any significant impact on EFL learners' listening comprehension?

H0: Explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers doesn't have any significant impact on EFL learners' listening comprehension.

Methodology

As I stated above, the current research aimed mainly at investigating the impact of explicit instruction of metadiscourse on EFL learners' listening comprehension. In this section, therefore, a brief profile of the participants, the instruments used, the procedures and measures applied for eliciting the necessary data will be presented.

Participants

The participants in this study were 50 translation students, both male and female, and aged between 20 to 23 years. They were majoring in English Translation at the University of Khorasgan. They were divided into two groups, randomly. One of these groups was as a control group and the other as an experimental one. The control group was not taught any explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers, but the experimental one was.

Materials

The materials used in this study comprised a) a pretest to assess their initial knowledge and use of metadiscourse markers, and b) a posttest to measure the participants listening comprehension after explicit instruction.

Procedures

As to the procedures employed in this study, the population was randomly divided into two groups. Then, a pretest on listening comprehension was given to all participants. In this test, the two groups were asked to listen to some scientific texts read by a Native American speaker and answer to some questions derived from them. Each participant was actually required to listen to the texts and answer to the questions completely in order to determine the extent of their initial knowledge and their degree of homogeneity in this regard.

One of the groups was then exposed to explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers in six successive sessions. They were initially provided and familiarized with a list of definitions and examples of the two categories of the taxonomy (i.e. textual and interpersonal metadiscourse) proposed by Hyland (2004). They were then repeatedly, and under the instructor's guidance, given opportunity during the instruction sessions to give synonyms for different types of metadiscourse and generate sentences using them and listen to texts containing metadiscourse markers. Participants were also frequently given sentences with deleted metadiscourse markers and were asked to supply the markers. They were given passages with metadiscourse markers time and again and were required to first identify them and then write down the function of each marker on a sheet of paper. The reinforcement of all such activities formed the "explicit instruction" meant in this study.

Finally, the listening comprehension posttest (i.e. listening to some scientific texts read by a native speaker and answering to the questions derived from them) was administered to check the participants' achievement in terms of metadiscourse markers after having been exposed to explicit instruction. The participants' scores on the pre-test and post-test were then compared to find the degree of improvement of each group. The analysis and comparison of the test results are presented below.

Data Analysis and Results

This section presents the results from the analysis of the obtained data. However, to bridge the results and the hypothesis of the research, below is a restatement of the null hypothesis mentioned earlier:

H₀: There is no significant relationship between explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers and EFL learners' listening comprehension.

The null hypothesis

The null hypothesis states that explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers doesn't have any impact on EFL learners' listening comprehension. Regarding this hypothesis, a Paired Sample T-Test was conducted to compare the means of the two sub-test results.

Each group in the study took a pretest and posttest on listening comprehension. The post-test was taken after the participants went through the necessary explicit instructions. Each student listened to some scientific texts read by a Native American speaker and answered to the questions derived from them. The mean score for each test was calculated to see how each learner

performed on his/her pretests and after the 6 sessions of explicit instructions on the posttests. The results of the participants' pre-test and post-test were compared through Paired Sample T-Test.

Paired Sample T-Test is used to see a group's performance on two different tests. Table 1 below presents the mean score of the pretest and posttest of the experimental group.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the experimental group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair pre-test	14.0000	25	1.33907	.24448
1 post-test	15.5500	25	1.24810	.22787

Looking at table 1, one can clearly understand that the mean score on the pretest has improved. This obviously shows that explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers has affected the listening comprehension of students.

By scanning the statistics of the Paired Sample T-Test, we should see whether this difference is considerable or not. Table 2 below clearly illustrates the significance of the resulting difference.

Table 2: Paired Sample T-Test experimental groups performance

						T	df	Sig (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% confidence interval of difference				
				lower	upper			
Pair pretest 1 posttest	-1.55000	.62076	.11334	-1.7818	-1.3182	-13.676	29	.000

As was mentioned before, this test was performed to discover the possible impact of explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers on listening comprehension of the students. However, the mean difference between the two tests has come out to be almost noticeably different.

Table 3 presents the results of control group's performance in their posttest.

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of the control group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair pretest	8.5625	25	2.47487	.43750
1 posttest	9.515	25	2.7193	.48072

In this table, we can see that the mean difference between the two tests for the control group was equal to -1.86.

Table 4: Paired Sample T-Test, control group's performance

						T	df	Sig(2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the difference				
				lower	upper			
Pair pretest 1 posttest	-2.85938	.63797	.11278	-3.08939	-3.62936	-25.354	31	.000

The mean difference between the two tests in the control group is not significant and is mostly for the instruction of the process method mentioned earlier, not metadiscourse markers. However, the mean difference between the two tests in the experimental group is more significant. That is due to the instruction of metadiscourse markers. All together, explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers does have an effect on the EFL learners' listening comprehension. In other words, the listening comprehension of the EFL learners was significantly related to the explicit instruction they received on metadiscourse markers; thereby the null hypothesis of the research was rejected.

Discussion and Conclusions

With regard to the analysis of the data in the previous section and the results thereof, the following significant conclusions can be drawn and discussed:

The experimental group's performance on listening comprehension has improved significantly.

The control group did not have any significant improvement in listening comprehension.

The above conclusions for the two groups in the study confirm the major claim of this research that explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers in Iranian EFL courses is quite successful for improving learners' listening comprehension. This strongly corresponds to Crismore's (1985) point of view that metadiscourse awareness has been very effective in foreign/ second language teaching classrooms and with various parts of language skills and components.

The findings support Simin and Tavangar's (2009) statement that, "metadiscourse instruction has a positive effect on the correct use of metadiscourse markers" (230), although there is no report in their study of explicit teaching of metadiscourse markers to their participants. The findings are also in line with Perez- Llantada (2003), who conducted research on the effect of metadiscourse techniques on learners' communication skills in university courses of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and observed that students became successful communicators with regards to metadiscourse strategies.

A final word is that, first of all, this research can be a call to teachers, practitioners and researchers in language teaching and learning to pay more attention to metadiscourse as an important aspect of language. Secondly, the findings can guide teachers for improving EFL learners' listening comprehension.

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