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Interactional Metadiscourse Analysis of ESL Learners' Essays

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Abstract

This study analysed interactional metadiscourse markers on 40 expository essays by ESL learners from hard and soft science courses based on metadiscourse table of Hyland (2005). The study aimed to examine whether both groups used the same amount and type, and whether learners in different course groups differed in their selected metadiscourse. There were some differences in the amount and types used by both groups. Soft science learners produced more metadiscourse features and they were more interpretative meanwhile hard science learners were very assertive in their writings. This study indicates the importance of using metadiscourse in ESL writings.

Keywords: Interactional Metadiscourse; Expository Writing; ESL Learners.

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1.0 Introduction

Metadiscourse is one language feature that helps writers to maintain the reader-appealing consistency in their essays. All writers write for their audience, and they can reach them effectively through their metadiscourse skills.

The writers usually write on two level. The first level is to deliver the propositional content. In a simpler word, it is the logical content or statement. The second level is metadiscoursal. It is here where the differences occur between different types of writers. The engaging part where the writers try to connect their readers to the propositional content is obviously very crucial. Some writers manage to gauge the attention and interest of the readers more than the others.

Because writing an essay involves only one-way interaction between the writer and audience, English Second Learners (ESL) learners find writing effectively and coherently as a major challenge. Metadiscourse is an interesting area of research that is believed to be important to the process of arranging and producing writing and speaking. In fact, metadiscourse is considered as a social act because it involves interaction between all participants. For example, in writing and composing, there is a dialogue between the author and the reader. ESL learners usually face complexity. It is not just one-sided idealism. Hyland (2004) sees metadiscourse as "introspective verbal expressions relating to the developing text, the author and the imaginary readership of that text". Understanding writing and speaking as social and open togetherness. In any case, it is interesting to look at these and see how ESL learners developed meta-discourse features in their writing. Meta-discourse in writing and speech helps readers and writers recognize its importance and ensures that both parties understand the content. Hyland (2005) acknowledges that teaching learners metadiscourse markers has three main advantages. First, learners can discern the thinking expectations that the scriptures require of them and how they can assist them in the writing process. Second, teaching metadiscourse gives them enough intention to stick with their ideas. Thirdly, the writer will be able to confirm the rest to the reader. In summary, it helps a lot in the learning process.

Currently, the researcher observed in her own teaching context that learners faced a lot of problems in using metadiscourse markers. Previous research studies (Asghar, 2015; Mu *et al.*, 2015; Lu, 2011; Dafouz-Milne, 2008; Hyland, 1999) also showed that students have

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limited knowledge of metadiscourse markers, in which they preferably used certain metadiscourse markers only which are transition markers and self-mentions (Zali *et al.*, 2020). For that purpose, this research was conducted to investigate the use of metadiscourse markers by ESL learners. As suggested by Kashiba (2018), examining the role of metadiscourse markers in other written genres relating to ESL students such as expository writing, to accentuate their significance for second language writers is needed. Moreover, using a larger corpus which focus on Malaysia may yield more generalizable results in relation to the findings of this study.

In relation to that, this study was conducted to investigate the frequency of metadiscourse features usage (based on Hyland's (2005)'s table) which are produced in essays and compare its usage between two different groups of ESL learners. Currently, research on metadiscourse and writing is still in its early stages, with a focus on teaching English writing, especially ESL writings, to the English teaching community. In the past 10 years, studies focussing on ESL writers in the Malaysian context is hardly found and not much been done, for example Tan and Eng (2014) have identified metadiscourse use in persuasive writing, Aziz *et al.* (2016) studied on gender identities in argumentative essays, Mohamad Noor, and Mohamed Alam (2017) focussed on the academic projects, Lo *et al.* (2020) and Lo *et al.* (2021) explored the patterns of boosters in drafts of doctoral research proposals, Zali *et al.* (2020) looked on evaluative writing by comparing two different courses, hard and soft science, Rahmat *et al.* (2020) studied on gender differences and Mohamed *et al.* (2021) stressed on good persuasive essays. Referring to the previous research related to academic writing that rarely can be found in this area, thus we intend to investigate and analyse one type of metadiscourse which is interactional metadiscourse in expository essays written by ESL Malaysian learners.

1.1 Objectives of Study

The study was conducted to seek the answers for:

- 1) The frequency of features of interactional metadiscourse produced by learners in their writing.
- 2) The differences of interactional metadiscourse features produced by two different group of learners.

1.2 Conceptual Framework

Referring to figure 1, there are two variables use in the stud, independent variable (IV) and dependent variable (DV), specifically IV is expository essays produced by ESL learners from two different groups: hard science and soft science course meanwhile dependent variable is the interactional metadiscourse based on Hyland's 2005 which are *Attitude Markers*, *Self-mentions*, *Engagement Markers*, *Hedges* and *Boosters*. This study was conducted to look at whether both groups used the same amount and type, and whether learners in different course groups differed in their selection of metadiscourse features.

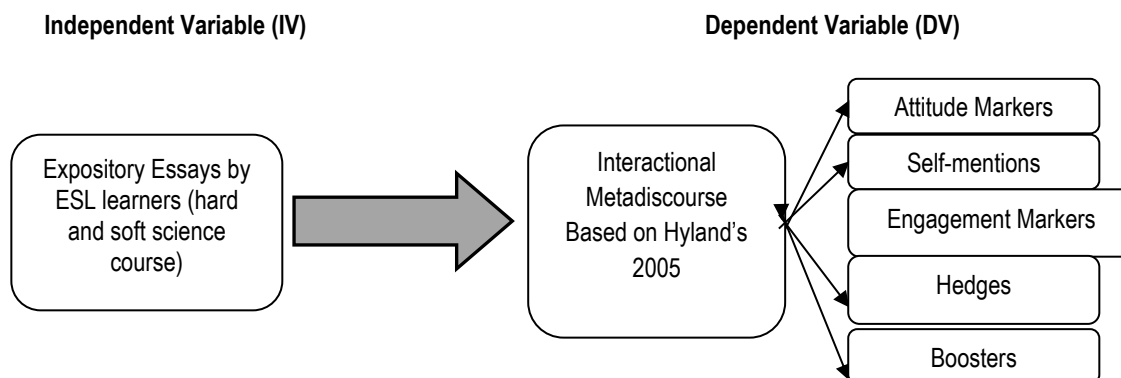


Fig.1: Conceptual Framework of Study

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Interactional Metadiscourse

Hylands (2005) proposed a model involving two kinds of metadiscourses; interactional and interactive. This current study has focused on interactional metadiscourse only. Interactional metadiscourse allows authors to comment on their messages. Hyland refers to this author's current behavior as a printed "voice" (Hyland, 2005). An interactional metadiscourse engages the reader and presents the author's perspective on the propositional content (Hyland, 2004). This can be recognized by the first individual pronouns and the possessive descriptive words "I, I, mine, ours, mine, and us." Different highlights that can be used for *self-mentions* are "writer, essayist, novelist, novelist". Kuo (1999) states that the use of *self-mention* in writing gives authors space to claim authorship by highlighting their contributions to the field and seeking recognition for their efforts. *Hedges* are used to "recognise alternative voices and perspectives and keep the promise of proposals" (Hyland, 2005). Support presents the writer's data as emotions or possible thoughts rather than reality. For example, "from my point of view, as I would like to think, possibly." Different highlights are *boosters*. Unlike *hedges*, *boosters* help ensure that scientists get what they have to say. The model is "actually safe and defiant". *Engagement markers* are used by authors to target readers

and engage them in discussions. This is made possible through the comprehensive use of “we, us, us”, reader pronouns “you and you”, and question marks. Hyland (2005) draws attention to the fact that “the most obvious manifestations of an essayist’s dialogue consciousness occur when the subject clearly alludes, asks questions, makes suggestions, and legitimately cares about the reader”. A final interactive highlight is the *Attitude Marker*. They “show the emotional as opposed to the essayist’s epistemological and suggestive”. Previous research has shown that good essays contain more metadiscourse than weak ones (Jalilifar and Alipour, 2007). Nevertheless, the utilization of interactional metadiscourse relies upon the writer’s writing ability which most of them are not fully expert, if their papers are to be contrasted with the expert authors or local speakers (Amaal and Radzuwan, 2017).

2.2 Previous Studies

A study by Sehwat (2014) which examines the quantitative changes occur in the use of metadiscourse in persuasive texts (ESL essays) found learners frequently produced hedges in their writings. Hyland (2000) found hedges too as the most frequent used in corpus of postgraduate dissertations. In Hyland’s (2009) study states that soft sciences disciplines (social sciences and humanities) are more interpretative than hard sciences (science and technology) in writing. Furthermore, the use of hedges and self-mention are frequently used in soft discipline.

Ramoroka (2016) examined the use of interactional metadiscourse highlights in two college classes, Media Studies, and Primary Education at the University of Botswana. 40 written corpora were analysed and the examination of interactional metadiscourse highlights in the two corpora demonstrated the occurrence of interactional metadiscourse markers. This was discovered that there are differences in the use and distribution of these highlights.

Abdi (2002) with a focus on research genres that highlight the metadiscourse used in academic settings, has reviewed the diversity of the field. Analyzing 60 scientific research papers in social sciences (SS) and natural sciences (NS), Abdi (2002) used interactive metadiscourse to help analysts character. On the other hand, social science writers frequently use interactional metadiscourse, and it has been noted that emotional sense existed on their sentence structure. Abdi therefore argues that the determination of the metadiscourse of interaction is this field of study.

In Malaysian context, the study on L2 writers by Heng and Tan (2010) had revealed that Malaysian undergraduate learners produced more interactional metadiscourse markers than interactive metadiscourse markers in their argumentative essays. Interestingly, Mahmood et. al (2017) also found that Pakistani undergraduate learners were more inclined in using interactional metadiscourse markers instead of interactive ones in their corpus of argumentative writings.

Recently, the research field of metadiscourse are prone towards comparative studies. As the world is getting further developed, comparative studies between ethnicity, nations and societies are increasing. For instance, a study done by Ariannejad *et al.* (2019) researched on the utilization of metadiscourse in English and Persian structural exploration articles. Like others in general, they made their examination based on Hyland’s (2005) model of metadiscourse. Their examination explores the work of *Hedges*, *Boosters*, and *Attitude Markers* in a corpus made from the post-technique areas of 100 exploration articles (50 English and 50 Persian) in the field of engineering.

Overall, it was found that there are measurably noteworthy contrasts between the frequencies of *Hedges*, *Boosters*, and *Attitude Markers* utilized in English and Persian sub-corpora

Based on Hyland’s Interactional Metadiscourse Table (2005), Mat Zali *et al.* (2019) compared Metadiscourse Study’s corpus of 200 assessment essays written by Malaysian ESL learners from hard and soft science courses. The aim of study was to find out whether both groups of students used the same amount of meta-discourse, and whether students in different course groups differed in their choice of metadiscourse, and which metadiscourse feature is the most common or least common by both courses. The analysis showed that students in soft science courses applied more metadiscourse features than students in hard science courses. It was also noted that students used self-mentions prominently and found few attribution markers in their writing. Then, MM Zali *et al.* (2020) also compared interactive and interactive metadiscourse studies on how L2 learners created metadiscourse functions and their use. A corpus of 200 evaluative essays by UiTM undergraduate computer science and business students was analyzed based on the framework of Hyland (2005). The aim is to find out to what extent and what types of meta-discourses are used and whether students in different course groups make a difference in their choices. Analysis revealed that in both courses, students used more interactive than interactive metadiscourse. The most prominent features are self-mentions, and the least are attitude markers. The same distinguishing feature in both courses are the transition markers. Business administration courses are the least specific in terms of evidence, whereas computer science frame markers.

3.0 Methodology

The study involved. 40 learners from Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Terengganu taking ELC231 which is an English course for semester three were chosen. Using purposive sampling method; 20 expository essays each from Soft Science (Hotel Management) and Hard Science (Electrical Engineering) course were selected in this quantitative and qualitative research. The essays are a part of their on-going assessment and manually analysed for the frequency of interactional metadiscourse. Using one centralized topic as the focus (*Ways to Overcome Bullying Problems among Teenagers*), the learners were asked to write the essays within four weeks. Using Hyland (2005) metadiscourse model which was used by other researchers before like Kashiba (2018), Ariannejad *et al.* (2019), Mat Zali *et al.* (2019) and Zali *et al.* (2020), the interactional metadiscourse like *Attitude Markers*, *Self-mentions*, *Engagement Markers*, *Hedges* and *Boosters* were examined as to its usage frequency. Data obtained after being analysed manually was charted. The list of search items compiled were based on Hyland’s (2005, pp. 218–224) list of metadiscourse items as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. Interactional Metadiscourse Model based on Hyland, 2005

No.	Interactional Metadiscourse	Examples
1.	Attitude Markers - indicate the writer's opinion or assessment of a proposition.	I agree, I am amazed, appropriate, correctly, dramatic, hopefully, unfortunately.
2.	Self-mention refers to explicit authorial presence in the text and gives information about his/ her character and stance.	I, we, the author
3.	Engagement markers - explicitly address readers to draw them into the discourse.	We, our (inclusive), imperative mood.
4.	Hedges - indicate the writer's decision to recognize other voices, viewpoints or possibilities and be (ostensibly) open to negotiation with the reader,	Apparently, assume, doubt, estimate, from my perspective, in most cases, in my opinion, probably, suggests
5.	Boosters - allow the writer to anticipate and preclude alternative, conflicting arguments by expressing certainty instead of doubt.	Beyond doubt, clearly, definitely, we found, we proved, it is an established fact.

4.0 Findings and Discussion

The results and discussion of the study are explained according to the objectives of the study:

4.1 The frequency of features of interactional metadiscourse produced (the most prominent and the least metadiscourse features)

Table 2 shows the frequency of metadiscourse features produced by Soft Science (Hotel Management) and Hard Science (Electrical Engineering) learners. Based on the table, Hedges was the highest metadiscourse feature used by Hotel Management (HM) with 53.05 percent. While Self-mention appeared to be the highest metadiscourse feature by Electrical Engineering (EE) with 57.81 percent. Hence, we can conclude that the Hard Science learners were certain in constructing their writings compared to Soft Science learners. They applied Self-mention frequently with the use of the author, I, we and our. This study is in line with the study by Mat Zali et al. (2020) and MM Zali et al. (2021). The strategic application of Self-mention in writing provides an opportunity for authors to assert their authorial persona by stating their strong beliefs and ideas, putting emphasis on their contribution to the field, as well as seeking recognition for their endeavour (Kuo, 1999). However, the Soft Science learners preferred to imply when developing the content in their writings. According to Hyland (2005), entities in soft sciences are utterly more specific, but less exactly evaluative, and less clear-cut.

Table 2: The Frequency and Percentage of Metadiscourse Features Produced by Learners from Soft and Hard Science Courses

INTERACTIONAL METADISOURSE	HM		EE	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Hedges	139	53.05	104	40.63
Boosters	1	0.38	0	0.00
Attitude markers	3	1.15	4	1.56
Engagement markers	3	1.15	0	0.00
Self-mention	116	44.27	148	57.81
Total	262	100.00	256	100.00

Table 2 also reveals the least frequent of metadiscourse features for Soft Science learners which are *Boosters* meanwhile the least occurrence of metadiscourse for Hard Science learners are *Boosters* and *Engagement Markers*. From the results, there was no *Booster* at all in Hard Science and very little in Soft Science because at diploma level, the learners were not exposed to do analyzing and criticizing just yet. They were required to write expository essays only as stated in the syllabus and the nature of the writing was descriptive. In addition, *Boosters* normally can be found in persuasive and evaluative essays. Apart from that, Soft Science learners were likely to use *Attitude Markers* and *Engagement Markers* in their writing with 1.15 percent respectively as they tend to explain explicitly as compared to Hard Science learners that applied *Engagement Markers* in their writings.

4.2 The differences of interactional metadiscourse features produced by both groups.

Table 3 and Figure 2 show the comparison of the metadiscourse features of the two groups (HM and EE). HM learners used most Hedges (139) and followed by Self-mention (116). On the contrary, the EE learners used most Self-mention (148) and followed by Hedges (104).

Table 1: The Comparison of Metadiscourse Features Produced by Both Groups

INTERACTIONAL METADISOURSE	HM	EE	Total
Hedges	139	104	243
Boosters	1	0	1
Attitude markers	3	4	7
Engagement markers	3	0	3
Self-mention	116	148	264
Total	262	256	518

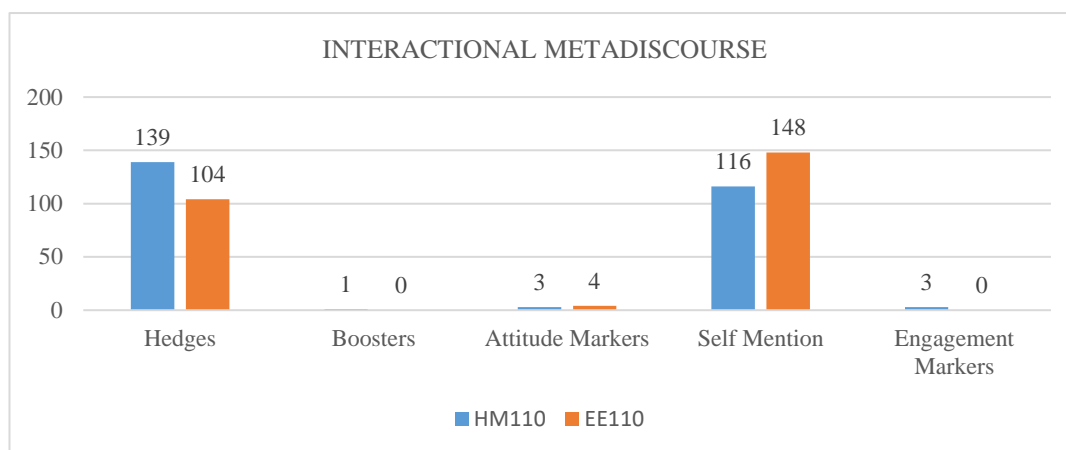


Fig.2: The comparison of metadiscourse features produced by both groups

If compared with both groups, *Self-mention* was the most preferable feature produced by Soft Science and Hard Science as the total for this feature was 264 if compared with other features. The result is similar to study conducted by Mat Zali *et al.* (2020) and MM Zali *et al.* (2021). However, the least preferable feature was *Boosters* as the total for this feature was 1 only. Hence, we can conclude that Hard Science was very assertive in their writings if compared to Soft Science learners.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Metadiscourse plays a significant role in producing written materials. They help writers to produce well organized and constructed writing. They try to give expression to their experience, to interact with their audience, and to organize their expressions into cohesive discourses so that their addressees can make coherent sense.

Commonly, in analysing the interactional metadiscourse features in their writing, the Soft Science (HM) learners used most Hedges followed by Self-mention contrary to the Hard Science (EE) learners who preferred using most Self-mention followed by Hedges. This showed that Hard Science learners demonstrated assertion in their writings compared to Soft Science learners.

For learners to compose a good written discourse, they need to be aware of and employ appropriate metadiscourse devices within the written discourse. Metadiscourse is a vital linguistic means that helps writers to direct the undertaking of their written ideas. Thus, universities should be made aware of learners' writing and should place more emphasis on the concept of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse is a construct that plays an important role in both writing and reading research. This works well for university level learners. Because many novice writers focus only on the written text itself, the product, and do not pay enough attention to the main purpose of writing - communicating with the audience.

Limitations encountered in this study should be investigated in future studies. First, the limited corpus material of this study. These resulting forces are likely to be more accurate with larger samples. Second, there was not enough information about authors or participants. Access to relevant information from participants helps researchers to conduct more thorough comparative analysis of results.

For future research, it is proposed to conduct a comparative study on metadiscourse writing between secondary schools and colleges to comprehensively compare learner levels and the use of metadiscourse traits in writing. increase. For this reason, it may be useful to see if secondary school learners use metadiscourse in their writing and whether this influences their writing assessment when studying at the university level. Next, having a wider scope, larger number and different genre of corpora might be more interesting and produce different angle of metadiscourse study among ESL learners and may yield to the importance of teaching metadiscourse in ESL classroom.

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Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This paper makes relevant contribution by filling the literature gap in the use of interactional metadiscourse in expository essays as previous studies have not widely analyzed the metadiscourse produced by ESL learners in Malaysian context.

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