

Metadiscourse across Three Varieties of Argumentative Essays by University Students: Native English, Iranian EFL Learners and Native Persian

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Abstract

The understanding of attitude and ideas of interlocutors could be as essential to a successful communicative act as the message itself. Many devices are used for the purpose of negotiating these aspects which are covered under the umbrella term of metadiscourse markers. Current study attempts to compare the use and variations in application of metadiscourse markers in the writing of argumentative essays among Iranian university students and their native English speaker counterparts. The researchers collected and analyzed three corpora of university students' argumentative writing samples, each consisting of 51 samples. The corpora included the CEENAS corpus of English native speaker writing samples, Persian argumentative essays written by Iranian university students, and finally English argumentative essays written by Iranian university students. The collected samples were classified based on the Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse framework and analyzed using Chi-Square statistical test. In addition, to get a deeper understanding of differences, the data was further analyzed from the point of view of qualitative characteristics. The results indicated that there are marked differences in the approach that Iranian students and native English speakers take regarding the use of these elements in their academic writing.

Keywords: metadiscourse markers, qualitative analysis, CEENAS corpus, argumentative essays, academic writing.

1. Introduction

Effective communication takes place generally if there is a mutual understanding regarding the goal and desired effect of the messages between the interlocutors. In case of written text, not only are the syntactic and semantic features highlighted but also care should be given to the discourse of a text. Besides, according to Kaplan (1966), the more we consider the conventions, culture and thinking of the audience for whom we produce a written text, the more communicatively acceptable and effective piece of writing is produced. He further elaborates on the use of different devices by writers from different cultural backgrounds when it comes to presenting information or establishing relationships. Ideas put forward by Kaplan inspired the emergence of the contrastive rhetoric, an area focusing on the investigation of the differences and similarities of the texts across cultures.

The comparison and contrast of types of text within and across social groups and languages tie with the notion of discourse, which is beyond the syntactic and lexical aspects of language. One area that is comparable across languages is the metadiscourse of the text. metadiscourse is defined as: “reflexive linguistic expressions referring to the evolving text itself or its linguistic form, including references to the writer *qua* writer and the imagined reader *qua* reader of the current text” (Ädel, 2003). In other words, in addition to the exchange of information, metadiscourse deals with the ideas and attitudes of the interlocutors toward the text and highlights the fact that while connecting to others we are concerned with the kind of effect we would like to have on our audience.

2. Background

2.1. What is contrastive rhetoric?

Quite unlike autonomous linguists, who chose to consider language from a narrow and limited angle of separate syntactic features; contrastive rhetoric has tried to look at language from a broader viewpoint in the sense that language is a naturally occurring discourse and can be investigated from different cultural, educational and social aspects. Since its emergence more than 40 years ago, inspired by Robert Kaplan (1966), studies have focused on the cultural and

linguistic differences of the written text by ESL/EFL students. Kaplan claimed there is a close tie between the rhetorical patterns of language and culture, which brings about difficulties for ESL writers. His claim for contrasting patterns was later proved by the investigations on writing samples of non-native English speaking students.

The early focus of contrastive rhetoric was on applied linguistic and linguistic text analysis. During 1980s, linguistic text analysis was considered as a means for explanation of the conventions of writing in English together with creating analytical techniques to compare students' writing in L1 and L2. For instance, Kaplan and Connor (1987) , emphasized text analysis specifically on cohesion, coherence and the discourse superstructure of text.

However, some contrastive rhetoricians criticized the mere reliance on text-based analysis. Consequently a new phenomenon for analysis by Hinds (1987), described the distribution of responsibility between readers and writers plus the use of transitions and other features of metatext to make texts coherent. Hence, Hinds considered Japanese text as *reader responsible* (i.e. saying that the reader has a duty to understand the intended message by the writer) in contrast to *writer responsible* text (i.e. the claim that the writer is responsible for the clarity his/her text to the reader). On the notion of metadiscourse, a recent study by Ädel (2008), considered argumentative essay writing by university students. The study focused on three varieties of English using two corpora of native speaker writing (British and American) and one corpus of advanced learner writing (L1 Swedish). The result showed that there were significant differences in the use of metadiscourse both between the learners and native speakers as well as between the British and American writers.

In the Iranian context, Shokouhi and Talati Baghsiahi (2009), investigated metadiscourse functions in sociology article in Persian and English. The results indicated that metadiscourse elements in the English texts outnumbered Persian samples. Text connectors were shown to be the most frequent in both languages. Overall, there was a greater use of textual metadiscourse markers than the interpersonal markers in both languages. These studies further highlight the importance of metadiscourse and metadiscourse markers in the organization of written text and the variation among writers from different cultural backgrounds in the use of metadiscourse.

2.1.2. Metadiscourse “text about the text”

Zellig Harris (1959) coined the term metadiscourse as a way to refer to a writer or speaker's effort to formulate the receivers' understanding of a text. In addition, Vande Kopple (1985), defines metadiscourse as the linguistic material which signals the presence of the writer. Furthermore, Valero-Garces (1996), considers metadiscourse as including elements beyond the propositional content. Hyland (2005), argues that omission of metadiscourse features leads to a less personal and less interesting text. In contrast, considering such features clarifies the position of writers, speakers, and their alignment with their audience in a specific context. He claims that : "Metadiscourse thus offers a framework for understanding communication as social engagement." (p4).

Several taxonomies have been offered regarding the categorization of metadiscourse features. Vande Kopple's categorization (1985) includes seven types of metadiscourse markers sorted into textual and interpersonal. These categories are text connectives, code classes, validity markers, narrators, illocution markers, attitude markers, and commentaries. Although many researchers have adopted this framework for their studies, it has been proved vague and difficult to apply. Major revision by Crismore et al. (1993) and Hyland (1998, 1999), led to a taxonomy including textual and interpersonal metadiscourse markers collapsing and combining some categories of earlier Vande Kopple's taxonomy.

Hyland (2005), revised his earlier categorization suggesting a functional model of metadiscourse (table 1) asserting that rhetorical features of metadiscourse are closely connected to the context in which they occur. In other words, in the analysis of metadiscourse the related context and community practices should be considered. This functional framework views writers as the conductors of the interaction with interlocutors. He excludes the textual function of metadiscourse mentioned in the previous taxonomies by arguing that metadiscourse is about interaction. Therefore, considering the reader's knowledge, textual experiences, and processing needs, metadiscourse provides the writer with required rhetorical functions to achieve its purpose.

Table 1

Hyland's (2005) Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse

An Interpersonal model of metadiscourse

Category	Function	Examples
Interactive	Help to guide the reader through the text	Resources
Transitions	express relations between main clauses	in addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	finally; to conclude; my purpose is noted above; see Fig; in section 2
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	according to X; Z states
Evidentials	refer to information from other texts	namely; e.g.; such as; in other words
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings	
Interactional	Involve the reader in the text	Resources
Hedges	withhold commitment and open dialogue	might; perhaps; possible; about
Boosters	emphasize certainty or close dialogue	in fact; definitely; it is clear that
Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to proposition	unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Self mentions	explicit reference to author(s)	I; we; my; me; our
Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader	consider; note; you can see that

Several studies in the Iranian context have attempted to investigate metadiscourse use in the writing of Iranian writers (Bahrami, 2012; Pooresfahani, Khajavy, & Vahidnia, 2012; Rahimpour & Faghieh, 2009; Shokouhi & Talati Baghsiahi, 2009; Zarei & Mansoori, 2011; Zarei & Mansoori, 2007, 2012) . However, most of these studies focus on samples published in academic journals and written by scholars and professionals in their fields thus, there is a lack of investigations that concentrate on learners' language and written essays. Nevertheless, the area of learners' language is arguably more important and has a stronger implication for language learning in ESP and EAP environments. In addition, the studies in Iranian context usually select their corpora from writing of Iranians in Persian and compare it with a comparable native English speaker corpus and there is a dearth of studies that include Iranian writers' L2 writing samples. The analysis of L2 writing samples can result in findings about the effect of Persian language patterns of writing on the L2 writing of the students and the relationship with texts produced by English native speakers.

Following Hyland's (2005), interpersonal model of discourse the present study attempts to investigate the difference regarding the use of metadiscourse categories and the distribution of their use among three corpora of native English speaker university students' argumentative essays, Iranian university students' argumentative essays in English and Persian argumentative essays written by Iranian university students. For the purposes of this study, researchers have developed the following research questions:

- 1- What is the difference between Iranian university students' L1 argumentative writing and Native English speakers' argumentative writing with regard to distribution of different categories of metadiscourse?
2. What is the difference between Iranian university students' L1 argumentative writing and their argumentative writing in L2 with regard to distribution of different categories of metadiscourse?
3. What is the difference between Iranian university students' L2 argumentative writing and Native English speakers' argumentative writing with regard to distribution of different categories of metadiscourse?

3. Methods

3.1. Material

The focus of this study is on metadiscourse, which is considered as micro-level features of text rhetoric. For the purpose of this study, three corpora of university students' argumentative writing samples each consisting of 51 samples were used. These corpora include the CEENAS corpus of English NS writing samples, which consists of samples of argumentative essays written by English native speakers. This corpus is part of The Corpus of English Essays Written by Asian University Students (CEEAAUS) (Ishikawa, 2008). The second corpus that was used is Persian argumentative essays written by Iranian university students. Finally, the third corpus consists of English argumentative essays written by Iranian university students who participate in a weekly general English class and whose proficiency in English is considered to be the Upper-intermediate level. The length of essays in all three corpora is between 150 to 250 words.

The rationale behind choosing these corpora is to analyze metadiscourse markers across two varieties of English (NS,NNS) and students writing samples in L1(Persian) and determine

whether there is a difference in the frequency and distribution of different categories of metadiscourse across these three varieties of students' written language.

3.2. Procedure and Data Analysis

Using Hyland's (2005) model of discourse markers including interactive and interactional categories, the researchers tended to analyze all the essays in the three corpora. The researchers focused on finding instances of words that function as metadiscourse markers and other functions of multi-functional words such as modality markers (e.g. can, might, etc) were ignored by the researchers. The researchers scrutinized the texts in search of metadiscourse markers and the frequency of each category's elements was counted. Furthermore, in order to find whether there is a significant difference in the distribution of discourse markers in the three varieties; a chi-square test was applied.

4. Results

The researchers counted the instances of metadiscourse markers use across three varieties of students' argumentative essays (Iranian EFL learners L1 essays, Iranian EFL learners' L2 essays, and Native English speakers' essays) based on the framework proposed by Hyland (2005).

Through statistical analysis of obtained data, the researchers derived the following descriptive statistics (Table 2).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistical Data

Group	Interactive metadiscourse markers	Interactional metadiscourse markers	Total
L1 Persian	305	360	665
L2 English	701	950	1651

Native	798	904	1702
English			

The results suggest that in general, the use of metadiscourse markers in argumentative writing samples of university students is more frequent in English language compared to Persian. In order to find out whether the differences in total use of metadiscourse markers across different varieties is significant or not, the researchers analyzed the obtained frequency data using Chi-square test for independence. The result of the chi-square test is presented below (Table 3).

Table 3

Chi-square Test of Total Use of Metadiscourse Markers among Three Varieties

GROUP	CHI-SQUARE	Sig.
L1(PERSIAN)-L2(ENGLISH)	419.77	.00
L1(PERSIAN)-NS(ENGLISH)	454.7	.00
L2(ENGLISH)-NS(ENGLISH)	.77	.37

The results of Chi-square test for independence indicate that, there is a significant difference in using metadiscourse markers between essays written in Persian and English by Iranian university students, $X^2(1, N=51)=419.7$, $P<.05$. Also there is a significant difference regarding the use of metadiscourse markers between essays written in Persian by Iranian university students and essays written in English by native English speakers, $X^2(1, N=51)=454.7$, $P<.05$.

However, a chi-square test of the data for Iranian students essays in English and native English speakers' essays showed no significant difference in the use of metadiscourse markers across the two groups, $X^2(1, N=51)=.77$, $P>.05$. This result prompted the researchers to explore the obtained frequency data of the three varieties of writing samples further in order to get a clearer picture of the differences across the groups. For this purpose, the researchers broke down the data regarding total number of metadiscourse markers in the essays into two categories based on the Hyland's (2005) framework: Interactive metadiscourse markers and interactional metadiscourse markers. The researchers employed several Chi-square tests to gauge the

differences in the use of each of the metadiscourse categories (Interactive, Interactional) across the three varieties. The following table (Table 4) shows the results of this phase of analysis.

Table 4

Chi-square Results in the Use of each of the Metadiscourse Categories (Interactive, Interactional) across the Three Varieties

GROUP		CHI-SQUARE	Sig.
Interactive	L1(PERSIAN)-L2(ENGLISH)	155.88	.00
	L1(PERSIAN)-NS(ENGLISH)	220.35	.00
	L2(ENGLISH)-NS(ENGLISH)	6.27	.012
Interactional	L1(PERSIAN)-L2(ENGLISH)	265.72	.00
	L1(PERSIAN)-NS(ENGLISH)	234.12	.00
	L2(ENGLISH)-NS(ENGLISH)	1.14	.28

The results are similar to what we saw for the chi-square test for the total number of metadiscourse markers except for the case of the use of interactive metadiscourse markers between the English essays written by Iranian students and native speakers ($X^2(1, N=51)= 6.27, P<.05$). This suggests that unlike the analysis of total number of discourse markers we can observe a significant difference in the use of interactive metadiscourse markers between the two groups

4.1. Qualitative analysis

Going beyond the statistical analysis of the data, and looking at the qualitative characteristics of the Iranian students' L1 and L2 reveals some interesting details. The following example (example.1) presents the typical style of writing that was common in Iranian L1 writing samples.

(1) به نظر من انجام کار پاره وقت در زمان دانشجویی بسیار لازم و ضروری می باشد که با انجام آن دانشجو تجربه بسیار خوبی بدست می آورد.

This example provides us with several interesting facts about the Iranian students' Persian argumentative essays. First, the Persian essays are usually personal which is exhibited by using pronouns such as *I* and *my*. The other interesting point is the frequent use of boosters in the Persian argumentative sentences. Regarding the above sentence, the writer uses two booster metadiscourse markers in the same sentence whereas this is rarely seen in the English argumentative essays of the Iranian students and almost completely absent in the English native speakers corpora.

Furthermore, Hedges were one of the least used metadiscourse markers in Persian essays. This lack of hedging markers in addition to the overuse of boosters in Persian essays gives these essays a mood of certainty in contrast to the writing samples of English native speakers or even the English essays written by Iranian students themselves which are more conservative in their tone (example.2).

(2) *A job can make students more experienced and help them to become more active and responsible about their future.*

On a closer look some interesting and finer differences start to emerge between L2 writing samples and native speakers' writing samples. After researchers reviewed a random number of samples, they could ascertain that there is a visible and significant difference in how L2 and native speakers frame their discussions in writing. Native speakers tend to classify and organize different parts and paragraphs of their writing using targeted and proper interactive discourse markers while L2 learners, though they also make use of interactive discourse markers even more variously, would use the markers somewhat haphazardly. In other words, L2 learners do not use the interactive discourse markers as systematically as native speakers do. For instance, one of the common ideas expressed in both L2 learners' and native speakers' writing samples was the fact that having a job would make the students financially independent. However, as we see in the following excerpts, native speakers tend to clearly mark their ideas (excerpt 3) while this feature is absent in Iranian L2 learners' writing samples (excerpt 4).

(3) Firstly, having been a college student myself, I am aware of the financial pressures.../On the one hand, having a part-time job enables students to earn money.

(4) Part-time jobs make students financially independent. / Because they earn money, students can pay for their education...

5. Discussion

Metadiscourse is defined in various ways by different scholars who have worked in this field of language study. However, one thing that they all agree on is when we look at a text under the lens of metadiscourse, we would see that writing like other kinds of communication is basically a form of social engagement. In other words, it's an evolving interaction between the writer and the audience in which the writer tries to engage the audience by presenting his ideas in a way that convinces the audience and is accepted by them. Therefore, like any other social interaction it is deeply rooted in the cultural background of the writer and readers of a text. In this study the researchers attempted to analyze the genre of academic writing across the Persian and English languages based on a metadiscourse framework and define the underlying features of the texts and what they might tell us about the writers and their audience.

Based on the results, one could argue that the use of lower number of metadiscourse markers by Persian students in their L1 could be tracked in the cultural differences between speakers of the two languages.. Culture is defined as patterns of behavior and perceptions of the world shared by a community and relying on Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1954), our perceptions of the world and our surrounding environment affect the use of language. Therefore, one cannot neglect the role culture in language use. Kramsch (1993) argues that culture is inextricably tied to language use. He states that our cultural values are reflected through the way we use language in everyday life and as such have a direct effect on how we produce language. Hofstede (2002) categorizes different dimensions of national culture namely, power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short-term orientation, and the concept of uncertainty avoidance. The latest concept explains the extent to which a member of the community feels uncomfortable with a sense of uncertainty and ambiguity. In other words, societies which possess high uncertainty avoidance tend to shy away from taking risks and ambiguous concepts and therefore try to be as certain and clear as possible through setting rules and limiting concepts. Interestingly, Iran is a society with a high uncertainty index (Hofstede, 2010). This might explain why the significantly smaller number of metadiscourse markers used

by Iranian students in their academic L1 writing and their heavy reliance on metadiscourse devices such as boosters could point to the way they perceive the world around them and their cultural attitude toward the writing. Iranian university students in their argumentative essays written in Persian tend to treat the arguments in text as facts directly related to the world outside and attempt to galvanize this assumed relationship using metadiscourse markers that express writer's certainty and his unwillingness to consider alternatives.

However, the role of education could not be neglected as it seems Persian writers are quite aware of the use of metadiscourse markers when it comes to writing in English. This further highlights the role of education rather than the language itself. The insignificant difference between the English native speakers' samples number of discourse markers and those of Iranians writers written in L2 which was clearly illustrated in the referential part of this study's data analysis indicates that the rhetoric system of writing in Persian does not transfer to L2. In other words, Persian writers when writing in L2 tend to copy the routines and rhetoric of the target language rather than borrowing from their own language. Nevertheless, scrutinizing the data across the two types of samples from a qualitative point of view shows some important differences in the structure of writing between English native speakers essays and those of Iranian L2 writers. This might indicate the point that although education and specifically the EAP courses that university student in Iran should participate in as part of their academic syllabus has affected the content of their English writing however structural aspect of academic writing in academic English has not been as effectively mastered by them. Shokouhi (2007) offers a similar picture of writing education in Iran. He argues that in Iran, writing instruction is mainly concerned with the quality of text content and role of structure in English writing is largely ignored by writing instructors and educational system.

The researchers also sought to analyze the writing samples based on two distinct categories of interactive and interactional discourse markers. According to Hyland (2005), interactive markers refer to the means that writers use to show their awareness of reader background knowledge, ideas, abilities, and interests and accommodate these reader characteristics in writer's work. Furthermore, he defines interactional markers as the elements that enable writers to interact with their writing by commenting and reflecting on its content. Considering the interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers separately across the three varieties, it is observed that the significant difference between Persian essays and the other two

varieties is a further proof to the impact of cultural differences and the effect of the target language on L2 learners' writing. It is worth mentioning that in the use of interactional metadiscourse markers, Iranian students' L2 essays are nearly identical to those of the English natives though Iranians have yet to reach the same level with regard to the use of interactive metadiscourse markers in their L2. This might indicate that although Iranian L2 writers are comfortable with emulating the interactional markers which assist them in refining their own writing they're still relatively uncomfortable of completely breaking away from the high uncertainty avoidance tradition of their native culture and risk including the unpredictable patterns of audience characteristics into their writing.

5. Conclusion and implications

In this study, the researchers attempted to investigate the variations existing in the writing samples of the Iranian university students compared to native English speakers from the point of view of discourse markers use between these groups. The results indicated a marked difference in the approach that Iranian students and native English speakers take regarding the use of these elements. Thus, though English natives feel the need to use metadiscourse markers regularly in their essays for the better clarification of their texts, Iranians, on the other hand, might tend to make use of other elements to this end besides metadiscourse markers. Also, Iranian participants tend to use a style of writing which is significantly different from that of the native English speakers. The researchers hypothesized that these differences could be assigned to underlying cultural differences and the role of education.

One of the implications of this study refers to the need for the reformation of the writing educational system for second language users in Iran. An efficient piece of writing should enjoy proper grammar, content and structure. However Iranian L2 learners have shown to reach a satisfactory level regarding the use of grammar and content in their writing, it seems they need further education on how to observe a proper and more systematic structure. In addition, the cultural norms of the target language and the specific genre should not be neglected when it comes to education. This could widen the perceptions of Iranian L2 learners about the target

language and consequently they would make use of the metadiscourse markers more systematically rather than superficially.

This study only focused on one feature of the writing system and rhetoric of languages; further studies need to be done exploring the role of other elements in the effective communication through writing.

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