

Metadiscourse in ESL Writers' Persuasive Writing

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Abstract

Metadiscourse is one of the features that contribute to coherence. The present study examines the quantitative changes occur in the use of metadiscourse in persuasive texts written by the cross-sectional groups of students learning English as a second language in the environment of their mother tongue. A reader-based approach is used to identify the various characteristics of the principled form of organisation. The analysis reflects that quantitative changes occur in the use of metadiscourse in students' writing as they progress to higher grades.

Introduction

Metadiscourse is one of the linguistic features which contribute to coherence in a text. Every writer writes for an audience and the writer can effectively reach his audiences through metadiscourse. The term metadiscourse was coined by Harris (1970) and has received wide attention through Williams's book *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*. Williams defined it as "writing about writing, whatever does not refer to the subject matter being addressed."⁶⁴ He further explained that metadiscourse provides a way of talking to the reader and consists of several categories: Sequencers and topicalizers (*therefore, in the first place, finally*) show the organisation of the text and make the structure easier to perceive; emphatics and hedges encode the writer's certainty about the truth of the content and range from *it is quite true that* to *it is unlikely that*. Another category, attributors and narrators, gives the source of ideas and facts. This source may be the writers themselves (*on the basis of my experience*), others (*according to Chomsky*), or society at large (*it has been observed that*). These metadiscourse features signal writers' intentions and make it easier for the reader to construct textual meaning.

Metadiscourse is of interest because it allows writers to address their audiences and engage them in a developing dialogue. It has a second important function of allowing writers to explicitly mark the structure of the text, which increases the cohesion of a text as it makes the relationships between sentences, paragraphs, and other textual units explicit. Furthermore, when writers fully understand the meaning and rhetorical function of metadiscourse markers, they are able to identify infelicities in their developing text, which allows them to increase the clarity of their writing. Metadiscourse thus increases the readability of an essay and makes it more likely that the message will be understood.

When most students begin to write, they write to what Porter (1992) characterized as a real audience, a flesh-and-blood person who gives a perceptible response to their writing. Unfortunately, the student's real audience is often an impoverished one, a teacher who is considered a stickler for grammar and mechanics, not someone fundamentally interested in the ideas in the text or the development of the essay, and certainly not someone to be engaged in dialogue. However, as students develop as writers, they become more sophisticated about

their audience. They strive to express their ideas more clearly and they pay some attention to whether their potential readers will understand what they are trying to say. These students developing as writers have some concern about writing text that is more considerate, which is more readable because it conforms to principles identified as increasing the readability or efficiency of a text as observed by Anderson et al. (1980) and Armbuster (1984). Mature writers have become members of a discourse community and reflect community values in their writing.

The case of second language (L2) writers is a particularly difficult one. Not only are L2 writers learning the language, struggling with unfamiliar morphology, syntax and lexicon, but they are also faced with the task of learning the conventions of an L2 discourse community. A high level of control of the virtual system-the rules of grammar – is necessary but is certainly not sufficient for effective writing. Just as L2 speakers must learn both how to generate well-formed sentences and how to use these sentences appropriately in their speech community, writers must be able to write good English and must know the rules of discourse that prevail in their discourse community. Effective oral and written communication both depends on a reasonable level of communicative competence.

It is, therefore, of interest to discover the progress that young language users are making in the use of metadiscourse which assists readers in processing a text.

Material and Method

The structured persuasive texts written by 400 students of different developmental groups on the topic “The desirability of monitoring the use of computer for school going students/college going students” were used for the analysis of features of text organisation.

The study is motivated primarily to explore the idea of creativity as a marker of linguistic competence and to probe it vis-à-vis growth and development of textual organisation in English as a second language. The study, thus, set forth with the aim to investigate the developmental patterns underlying the features of language used, contributing to the organisation of the text as a coherent material. The study has largely sought to examine various characteristics of textual organisation such as logical, inferential, topical, sequential, etc. with regard to the developmental samples of the data in English texts written by the students of different developmental groups in the study. Such an inquiry also draws its

rationale from the continued focus on language through literature. Subsequently, all the texts in the sample (n = 400) are analysed to identify the development patterns in the use of each of the features.

Further, in the study a reader-based approach is used to identify the various characteristics of the principled form of organisation (Lawe Davies, 1998; Galloway 2002). Each text was read by two people and they rated these texts coherent and non coherent. The texts that are rated coherent are examined to identify metadiscourse features that needed to be present if the texts are to be perceived as coherent.

In this paper we considered the analysis of metadiscourse features used in students' persuasive texts. The specific question addressed is the following: Are there quantitative differences in the averages of metadiscourse features in persuasive texts written by students of these classes? We consider the following metadiscourse features prevailing among the persuasive texts of students of six different classes comprising the sample: Emphatics (E), Hedges (H), Connectives (Co), Logic Markers (LM), Illocutionary markers (IM), Narrators (N), Attitude Markers (AM), Commentaries (C) and Code Glosses (CG).

The main interest was to see whether a particular metadiscourse feature on the average remains same or differs significantly among the students of six different classes. For this purpose the average of each metadiscourse feature, used by the students in their writing of a persuasive text, was computed separately with respect to each class. The averages with respect to each metadiscourse feature of different classes are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Averages of Metadiscourse Features used by students in their Composition.

Sr. No	Metadiscourse Features	VIII (43)*	X (78)*	XII (79)*	I year (58)*	II year (94)*	III year (48)*
1	Emphatics (E)	0.023	0.051	0.392	0.103	0.314	0.229
2	Hedges (H)	0.162	0.461	0.392	0.672	0.776	0.395
3	Connectives (Co)	2.790	3.846	4.354	2.034	3.119	2.437
4	Logic Markers (LM)	1.976	2.089	1.607	1.431	1.534	1.395
5	Illocutionary markers (IM)	0.232	0.307	0.139	0.051	0.138	0.041

6	Narrator (N)	0.000	0.064	0.101	0.051	0.051	0.062
7	Attitude Markers (AM)	1.046	0.948	0.987	0.620	1.010	1.125
8	Commentaries (C)	0.023	0.000	0.000	0.034	0.127	0.125
9	Code Glosses (CG)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.017	0.021	0.000

* Figures given in brackets represent the no of students (sample size or texts) taken from respective classes.

In order to see the developmental patterns of different metadiscourse features as the students grew older, that is, students progressing from lower classes to higher classes, we have plotted the averages of all metadiscourse features found in each class using a divided bar diagram against each class. A similar coloured portion of divided bar diagram indicates the extent to which the corresponding metadiscourse feature is used.

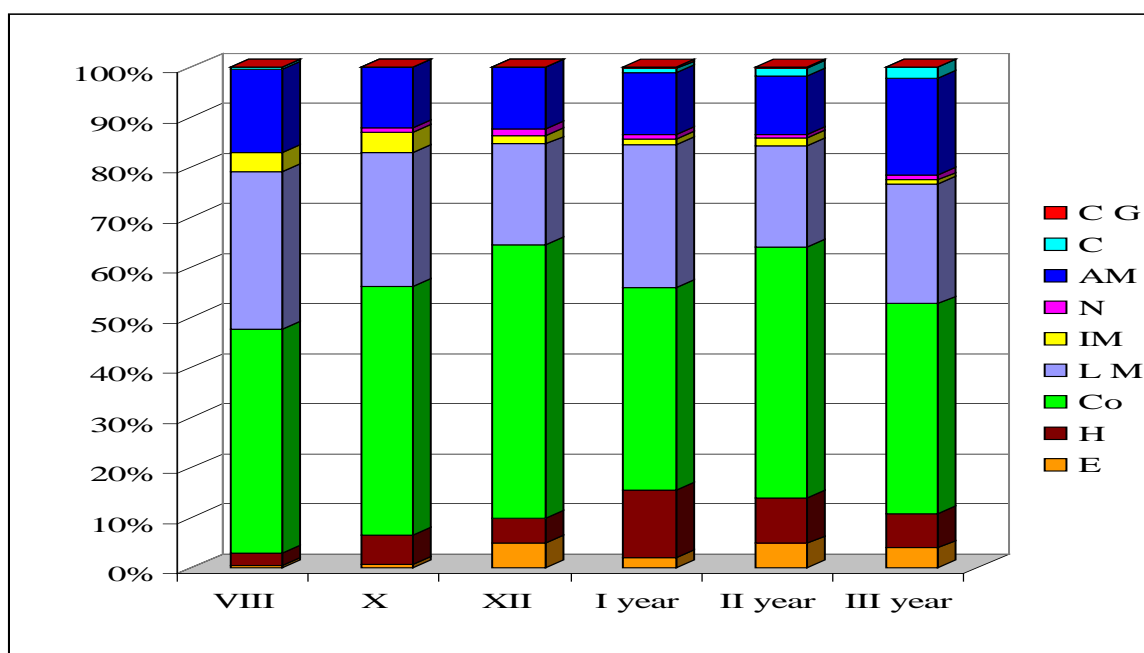


Figure 1: Development Patterns of Metadiscourse Features

Using the average number of total metadiscourse features, we found that there was an increasing trend in the average number of all metadiscourse features used by the school students under the study in their persuasive texts as they progressed from lower to higher classes. Further, with regard to these classes, an increasing trend of using emphatics, hedges,

connectives and narrators was seen in comparison with a decreasing trend of using attitude markers and commentaries. An increase in the use of logic markers is observed at X class but it declines at XII class and continues in the undergraduate classes. As a matter of fact, even a single student at the school level did not use code glosses. This is indicative of the fact that at later stage stability comes in the average number of total metadiscourse features used by students at the undergraduate level if we remove the English (Honours) students from the sample of II year since their presence suddenly increased the average of all metadiscourse features. It is because of increased length of their text and use of longer sentences in comparison with the length of text and sentences of other students. Interestingly, connectives, is the most frequently used category in all the classes. This finding may be attributed to the fact that connectives are considered an important textual feature and are usually taught in ESL classes. Second, it may be the case that connectives are used to provide structure to texts when syntax and overall organisation are weak.

The differences in the use of metadiscourse features at the school level and the undergraduate level thus suggests different levels of awareness of the forms of rhetorical organisation and audience's needs and differing abilities to generate text that is accessible. Such an interpretation is supported by the distribution of the broad categories of textual and interpersonal features. It is not unreasonable to expect more narrators, emphatics, hedges, attitude markers, and commentaries at the undergraduate level, reflecting more attention to developing the interactive function of the text and more connectives at the school level.

In all the texts hedges, logic marker and illocutionary markers were used frequently. There was rare omission of these metadiscourse features in these texts. Students at the school level used more attitude markers in comparison with the undergraduate students. Narrators, commentaries and code glosses are used rarely in these texts. Modals are a semantically complex system and add to the length of the sentence auxiliary, factors probably contributing to their greater number in the undergraduate students' texts. The texts showed not only different levels of control of lexical items in the use of metadiscourse features but also different levels of syntactic development.

A similar distribution is found in the use of commentaries and was limited to *sir*, *concerned senior citizens*. Similarly, code glosses were found in the texts of the

undergraduate students and were restricted to *such as*, and *in other words*. Examining the range suggests that the writers were aware of the appropriate functions to encode in their texts but were limited in their range of expression.

In both groups of texts, connectives were used correctly, most frequently, followed by logic markers. Attitude markers, emphatics, illocutionary markers and code glosses. Those categories that have a transparent function for the writer occur more frequently than those forms that demand an objective perspective on the reader's attitudes and needs. Using these criteria, the high frequency of connectives is no surprise. Connectives perform the important textual function of explicitly linking ideas in order to form a cohesive piece of prose.

There is also developmental evidence in the study of McClure & Steffensen (1985) that the connectives *and* and *but* are the first connectives used correctly in writing by both native and non-native children, so it is not unreasonable to expect them to be among the first learned and used by undergraduate students. Finally, if there are any metadiscourse forms that do show the effect of teaching, connectives are surely that category. Coordinating conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs, such as *however*, *therefore*, and *nevertheless* are typically included in English textbooks and in grammar and writing courses, with the result that many students have had practice with them.

Attitude markers also increase the interpersonal component of the text, in this case by revealing writers' feelings about their assertions. A simple future tense describes what will happen, but the same sentence with the deontic modal *should* or *must* encode the writer's personal belief that something is necessary or required. Because of the relatively high frequency of these two attitude markers, the texts, in several instances, convey strong personal feelings.

Hedges are valued because they encode information about the probability of the proposition being true and provide an "out" in case the assertions prove to be incorrect. When hedges are used appropriately, they raise the ethical level of the text because the writers must consider what they know to be true and what they must support with evidence. In addition, these markers perform an important interpersonal function: they allow the writer to avoid absolute statements, which makes the text more polite by giving readers the opportunity to form their own judgments. This involves the reader more deeply in the processing of the text.

The remaining categories occur less frequently. However, in spite of their importance for creating rapport with the reader, commentaries occur with low frequency. This may be because to use them, the writer must adopt the reader's perspective, something that requires a high level of objectivity and skill. Or it may be a reflection of the common pedagogical directive against personal involvement, except in expressive writing, and the failure to realize that expressive writing is an important facet of successful persuasion.

Emphatics, like hedges, involve the validation of content. However, they contrast with hedges because they strengthen the writer's commitment to the proposition but do not change the truth-value of the assertion. According to palmer² emphatics may be used when a statement is challenged or is expected to be challenged. The lower frequency of emphatics indicated that potential challenges to the argument presented had not been anticipated.

Narrators, which provide information about the source of propositional content, are often used in a persuasive essay to convince the reader that the argument is based on evidence. A reader is more likely to believe a claim that can be attributed to an authoritative source than the one that is simply asserted: *According to me* the students should be monitored....

When writers are not highly skilled, when they are writing in an L2, and when they are under time constraints, presenting content and effectively organizing the argumentative structure are the most important considerations. Increasing the likelihood of actually persuading the reader by referencing an authority is a level of rhetorical sophistication that does not occur with high frequency in the texts (letters).

Code glosses and illocutionary markers both represent rather sophisticated rhetorical functions. The low frequency of code glosses can be related to the concept of audience. Beginning writers often assume that readers have adequate background to understand what they are saying or, more likely, do not even recognize that their audience's need for elaboration differs from their own. Illocutionary markers are ideally redundant if the text is reasonably well written. It should be obvious what rhetorical act one is performing without spelling it out. However, a certain amount of redundancy is necessary in writing, and telling the reader that you are about to summarize, for example increases the efficiency of text processing.

To summarize there are several specific explanations that may be proposed. If the forms help a writer organize the text or are commonly taught (connectives), or are necessary as a way of saving face in case the assertions are wrong (hedges), or are a way of expressing control (attitude markers), they occur frequently. On the other hand, if the forms are largely redundant or rest on insight into reader's needs and beliefs (emphatics, illocutionary markers, code glosses, commentaries), they occur with less frequency. Changing this distribution is a matter of gaining rhetorical sophistication and recognizing that writing is a transaction between the writer and the reader, not simply an opportunity to express oneself.

Conclusion

The analysis of the use of metadiscourse features showed an increasing trend in the average number of all these features used by the school students under study in as much as their persuasive texts in the successive classes is concerned. Further, with regard to these classes, an increasing trend of using emphatics, hedges, connectives and narrators was seen in comparison with a decreasing trend of using the attitude markers and commentaries. As a matter of fact, code glosses were not used even by a single student at the school level. This is indicative of the fact that at later stage stability comes in the average number of total metadiscourse features used by students at the undergraduate level.

The difference in metadiscourse features at the school level and the undergraduate level suggests different levels of awareness of the forms of rhetorical organisation and audience needs, and differing abilities to generate text that is accessible to the readers. Such an interpretation is supported by the distribution of the broad categories of textual and interpersonal features.

In all the texts, various metadiscourse features such as attitude markers, hedges, logic markers and illocutionary markers are used frequently. Thus omission of these features in these texts is no doubt very rarely. Students at the school level use more attitude markers in comparison with the undergraduate students. Two deontic modals *should* and *must* are also used by students to convey their personal belief that something is necessary or required. Because of the relatively high frequency of these two attitude markers, the texts, in several instances, convey strong personal feelings. Logic markers, illocutionary markers were found equally in the texts of both the levels. The high frequency of hedges was found in the texts of

two levels. The texts show not only different levels of control of lexical items in metadiscourse features but also different levels of syntactic development.

The remaining categories emphatics, narrators, commentaries and code glosses occurred less frequently in these texts. The lower frequency of emphatics indicated that potential challenges to the argument presented had not been anticipated. However, in spite of their importance for creating rapport with the reader, commentaries occur with low frequency. It is limited to *sir* and *concerned senior citizens*. This may be because to use them, the writer must adopt the reader's perspective, something that requires a high level of objectivity and skill. Or it may be a reflection of the common pedagogical directive against personal involvement, except in expressive writing, and the failure to realize that expressive writing is an important facet of successful persuasion. Narrators did not occur with high frequency in these texts. Code glosses are found in the texts of undergraduate students and are restricted to *such as* and *in other words*. The low frequency of code glosses can be related to the concept of audience. The density of metadiscourse features and the range of types in the persuasive texts of school students and undergraduate students showed clear quantitative differences. These findings lead us to conclude that metadiscourse features is a facet of written text that varies with the overall quality of the texts (letters). Furthermore, these differences are educationally and socially significant: readers and teachers respond to them. There is yet no yardstick for establishing the optimal level of metadiscourse in a text but work in composition and reading theory suggests that communication can be enhanced through a judicious use of these features- a well-found proposal made long ago by Cheng (1994), Cheng and Steffensen (1996), Crismore (1984), Intaraprawat (1988). Future research enterprises may take up the lead from these findings and cover a wide spectrum of textual organisation in relation to second language learning.

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