

Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods (MJLTM)

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Modern Journal of Language Teaching Methods (MJLTM)

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ISSN: 2251-6204

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THE EFFECT OF METADISCOURSE ON EFL LEARNERS' READING COMPREHENSION

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ABSTRACT

This study is an aim to examine the effect of meta-discourse on reading comprehension of EFL intermediate and advanced students. 120 EFL students were assigned into four groups of 30. There were two groups of treatment and control both in intermediate and advanced levels. Two versions of texts with and without discourse markers were given to the control and treatment groups respectively. The result demonstrated a significant difference between groups in advanced and intermediate levels. However, there was no significant difference within the intermediate groups. Therefore, in order to find out the possible reasons a follow up unstructured interview was conducted. The results revealed that the intermediate students were not aware of the role of discourse markers in the texts. Thus, Researchers raised their consciousness about discourse markers, which helped the premise of the study, and the second administration of the versions of the texts to the intermediate groups led in a significant difference. The findings of this study clearly display the important role of meta-discourse and the degree of consciousness about them across different levels in reading comprehension of EFL students.

KEY WORDS

Metadiscourse, Reading Comprehension, Consciousness raising,
Discourse markers

Introduction

Fortunately, the significance of meta-discourse has recently been recognized as a pivotal feature in communication. Luckily, this important issue has been touched by academia and especially language teaching milieu and its facilitative role (Crismore, 1984, 1989; Hyland, 1998, 1999; Perez & Macia, 2002) has been acknowledged. Adding to this promising context is the shift from the traditional textual focus to more functionally oriented perspectives in the realm of meta-discourse. This new view according to Hyland (2005) considers meta-discourse as a phenomenon, which is distinct from propositional meaning and refers to the aspects of the text that embody writer-reader interactions and the relations, which are internal to the discourse.

The presence of meta-discourse has been investigated in written discourse (Hyland, 2005; Hyland, 2000, 2004; Carlson, 1998). The effect of the discourse markers has also been investigated in this field as well (Martinez, 2004; Simin and Tavangar, 2009; Cheng and Stefensen, 1996; Intraprawat, and Stefensen; 1995). Contrary to all these attempts in determining the role of discourse markers in written discourse, the crucial role of meta-discourse in spoken discourse seems to have been ignored.

Students of English as a foreign language are more required to listen to and comprehend great amounts of second language input (Eslami and Eslami, 2007). The importance of meta-discourse in listening comprehension has attracted the attention of some scholars (Chaudron and Richards, 1986; Flowerdew and Tauroza, 1995; Perez and Macia, 2002).

Despite these attempts to underscore the role of meta-discourse in written discourse, there has been little attention paid to the role of meta-discourse in reading comprehension. So this study is partially inspired by the few studies conducted recently and is hopeful to highlight the crucial role of discourse markers in EFL students reading comprehension.

Definition of reading

Reading can be seen as an "interactive" process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity or (reading fluency). In this process, the reader interacts dynamically with the text as s/he tries to elicit the meaning and where various kinds of knowledge are being used: linguistic or systemic knowledge (through bottom-up processing) as well as schematic knowledge (through top-down processing). Since reading is a complex process, Grabe argues that "many researchers attempt to understand and explain the fluent reading process by analyzing the process into a set of component skills" (1991, p. 379 as cited in Alyousef, 2005) in reading; consequently researchers proposed at least six general component skills and knowledge areas: 1. Automatic recognition skills 2. Vocabulary and structural knowledge 3. Formal discourse structure knowledge 4. Content/world background knowledge 5. Synthesis and evaluation skills/strategies 6. Metacognitive knowledge and skills monitoring (Alyousef, 2005, p. 144)

Reading to see what a text says may suffice when the goal is to learn specific information or to understand someone else's ideas. But we usually read with other purposes. We need to solve problems, build roads, write legislation, or design an advertising campaign.

Alyousef (2005) believes, "We must evaluate what we have read and integrate that understanding with our prior understanding of the world. We must decide what to accept as true and useful" (p. 144).

To assess the reliability of remarks within a text, we must go outside a text and bring to bear outside knowledge and standards. In other words, as we read more and hear more, we will gain knowledge and discover new contexts for our ideas. We will also come to think more critically. According to Lachini (2003), "As readers we want to accept a fact only when it is actually true. To evaluate a conclusion, we must evaluate the evidence upon which that conclusion is based. We do not want just any information; we want reliable information" (p. 1).

The situation with the written word is no different. A text does not contain a meaning. Readers construct meaning by what they take the words to mean and how they process sentences to find meaning. Readers draw on their knowledge of the language and of conventions of social communication. They also draw on other factors, such as knowledge of the author, the occasion, or the audience "They infer unstated meanings based on social conventions, shared knowledge, shared experience, or shared values. They make sense of remarks by recognizing implications and drawing conclusions" (Kurland, 2000).

Traditional approaches to reading

In the traditional teaching of reading comprehension, the teacher asks the class to turn to a certain page or announces that he is going to teach a certain unit. He then explains some of the more difficult vocabulary items. This is followed by silent reading on the part of the class. The teacher then reads part of the text and comments on what he feels is difficult for the students. S/he may sometimes ask a few questions, which are usually answered by a few bright students, or if s/he fails to get the necessary response, s/he answers them himself/herself and proceeds to the next sentence or paragraph. A question and answer session follows in which the teacher does the questioning and a selected number of students supply the answers, often by lifting a few sentences straight from the text. If there is sufficient time left, the teacher asks different students to read aloud. Finally, the class is asked to do the written exercises, which are often on vocabulary and structure.

Some of the weaknesses of the approach mentioned above or variations of it, according to Cheng (1985), are:

1. The teacher concentrates on teaching content rather than reading skills.

2. There is no attempt to establish a purpose in reading. In real life, one reads for a variety of reasons. In the classroom, students apparently read in order to answer comprehension questions, which is not what one usually does in real life.
3. While there is obviously a place for reading aloud in the language lesson, not every kind of text lends itself to this kind of practice. Drama and short stories containing a lot of dialogue naturally require reading aloud. Expository, argumentative and descriptive passages do not readily lend themselves to such vocal practice. In any case, the reading aloud attempted by students is all too often stultifying, undirected, and of little profit to the students who read and to those who listen.
4. The approach does not challenge students to really come to grips with the text. There is rarely any group discussion of the text. After the silent reading by the class, the teacher asks individual students to answer the questions in the book. If a student gives a correct answer, the teacher passes on to another question without bothering to find out if other students have worked out the correct answer on their own.
5. The reading text is often used as a vehicle for the teaching of vocabulary and structures. The textbook writer is partly responsible for this as the exercises following the text and comprehension questions are normally those dealing with lexis and grammar. There is a place for language exercises but these should not be looked upon as the main components of a reading lesson (pp. 55-56).

Based on the weaknesses mentioned by Cheng (1985), which are shared by many educators all around the world, paying attention to new features of teaching reading texts like meta-discourse markers in the process of reading comprehension was highlighted.

Meta-discourse

Meta-discourse is a widely used term in current discourse analysis and language education that involves speakers or writers not only in producing but an interaction between text producers, text and their audience (Hyland, 2005). In fact text producers try to anticipate their audience expectations, requirements and resources to affect their understanding to pave the way of an effective communication. Until recently there has been an overarching ideology quite limited to conveying the ideas by focusing on the grammatical patterns and rules. Today, however, new conceptualizations of meta-discourse have led to a shift towards the means that speakers or writers try to express their attitudes. Hyland (2005) argues that "meta-discourse embodies the idea that communication is more than just the exchange of information, goals or services, but also involves the personalities, attitudes and assumptions of those who are communicating" (p. 3).

Halliday's (1994) functional, pragmatic approach to language is of great help in conceptualizing, understanding and classifying meta-discourse. He considers three major

functional systems for the language i.e. ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational level concerns with the propositions, the interpersonal layer is dealt with all those personal feelings, personality expressions as well as the social interplay along with different interactional forms. The textual layer is quite essential for understanding the ideational and interpersonal meaning. Following this functional view, metadiscourse can be classified into two broad categories i.e. the interpersonal and textual in which we can find other subcategories as well. Vande Kopple (1985) believes that textual metadiscourse reveals a discursual relationship between individual propositions that culminate in a cohesive and coherent text. This is what Lyons (1997) refers to as text reflexivity or “the capacity of natural language to refer to or describe itself” (p. 5)

Different scholars have investigated the role of metadiscourse instruction in different skills of the language (Dastjerdi and Shirzad, 2010; Jalalifar and Alipour, 2007; Martinez, 2004). The common result of these studies displays the positive effect of discourse markers instruction.

Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010) investigated the effect of explicit teaching of meta-discourse markers on EFL learners’ writing ability at three levels of advanced, intermediate, and elementary. They found that explicit instruction of meta-discourse markers significantly increased EFL learners’ writing ability at three levels. Their findings also revealed that intermediate EFL learners took more benefits of familiarity with discourse markers than those at the other levels in their writing ability. In other words, intermediate EFL learners improved their writing more significantly than the other groups.

Meta-discourse and academic lectures as monologues

The lecture discourse has been analyzed by some scholars (Murphy and Candlin, 1979; Chaudron, 1988; Shing Chiang and Dunkel, 1992; Allison and Tauroza, 1995). They have in fact considered factors such as speech rate, cultural differences, note-taking practices, listening strategies and discourse organization. Listening to the lectures as monologues has always been one of the demanding jobs for foreign language learners. It has also been an important skill for university students (Flowerdew and Miller, 1992). Different scholars have considered lectures as monologues from different perspectives. Some have focused on the macro structure of lectures (Olsen and Huckin, 1990); others have paid attention to the interactional practices of lecture comprehension (Morell, 2004).

Method

Participants

The participants in this study included four groups of 30, two intermediate and two advanced, students taking IELTS training courses at Kishair English Institute, Mashhad. Iran. All the participants’ first language was Farsi and their age ranged from 22 to 43 with the mean of 33.

First a test of TOEFL derived from *Actual TOEFL tests* was given to 112 EFL students studying at Kish Air English institute. Then those whose scores ranged between 450 and 550 were considered as intermediate. Also, those whose scores ranged above 550 were

considered as advanced learners. Therefore, 65 of the test takers were labeled intermediate and 62 advanced. Other participants, whose scores were lower than 450 and did not serve a purpose for the study were excluded from them. For the sake of the purpose of the study, both groups of scores were ranked from the highest to the lowest. Then in each group the one with highest score was assigned to one group and the second highest score was assigned to another group and this process continued to the one with the lowest score. So the participants were randomly assigned into four groups. Moreover, to make the number of each group equal, the researchers included 30 students in each group. Finally, in order to make sure that the difference between the mean scores is not significant and the two intermediate and the two advanced groups are the same with regard to the construct tested, the researchers used an independent t-test.

Table 1. Independent samples t-test for the Intermediate Groups

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variance s | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|--|------|------------------------------|------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|---------|
| | | F | Sig. | T | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper | |
| GE | Equal variances assumed | .141 | .46 | 9.064 | 58 | .71 | 2.40 | .29837 | 2.2273 | 3.96362 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 9.109 | 57.9 | .71 | 2.40 | .29689 | 2.3123 | 3.2079 |

Table 2. Independent samples t-test for the advanced Groups

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variance s | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
|--|--|--|--|------------------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|

| | | F | Sig. | T | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|----|-----------------------------|------|------|-------|------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|--------|
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| GE | Equal variances assumed | .163 | .46 | 9.064 | 58 | .67 | 2.70 | .29837 | 2.1148 | 3.2936 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 9.109 | 57.9 | .61 | 2.70 | .29689 | 2.1177 | 3.2907 |

The results of this test revealed that the two groups at both levels, intermediate and advanced did not significantly differ from each other in terms of their performance on the T-test. It means that the participants of the two groups were equal with regards to their GE (General English) ability.

Materials

The material used for this study consisted of 5 texts based on section 4 of IELTS examinations. 5 of these monologues were derived directly from IELTS tests. Since such section consists of monologues, which are rich in meta-discourse (Hyland, 2005), they serve the purpose of the study very well. The other 5 monologues were based on the first group of monologues, but the meta-discourse was excluded.

Procedure

First, the researchers in the study selected five texts from the original IELTS exams. Then in order to organize the second group of texts, they excluded the meta-discourses from the original ones. Hyland’s model of interpersonal meta-discourse (2005) was determined for underlining the meta-discourse and their exclusion from the original texts. The learners in the experimental groups read the original texts, and those in the control groups read those with the meta-discourse excluded.

Results

The first research question was “Is there any difference in intermediate EFL learners’ reading comprehension with regard to the inclusion and exclusion of meta-discourses?” The following table shows the mean scores of the intimate control and experimental groups.

Table 3. The mean scores of the intermediate experimental and control group reading scores

| | Group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------------|--------------|----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| Intermediate | Experimental | 30 | 16.4313 | 1.93032 | .26104 |

| | | | | | |
|--|---------|----|---------|---------|--------|
| | Control | 30 | 12.5284 | 1.46876 | .24164 |
|--|---------|----|---------|---------|--------|

Table following table illustrates whether such difference in mean scores of the two groups is significant or not.

Table 4: Determining the significance of the mean scores between the two groups

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|--------|
| | | F | Sig. | T | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| GE | Equal variances assumed | .123 | .49 | 9.064 | 58 | .38 | 2.70 | .29837 | 2.1448 | 3.2397 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 9.109 | 57.9 | .35 | 2.70 | .29689 | 2.4128 | 3.2087 |

As table 4 shows the difference between the two groups is not significant. It means that the inclusion and exclusion of meta-discourses has no significant effect on intimidate EFL learners' reading comprehension.

The second research question was "Is there any difference in advanced EFL learners' reading comprehension with regard to inclusion and exclusion of Meta-discourses?" The following table demonstrates the mean scores of the advanced experimental and control groups.

Table 5. The mean scores of the advanced experimental and control group reading scores

| | Group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|----------|-------|----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| Advanced | | 30 | 18.0224 | 1.94330 | .24264 |

| | | | | | |
|--|--------------|----|---------|---------|--------|
| | Experimental | | | | |
| | Control | 30 | 14.5331 | 1.76486 | .27415 |

In order to see whether the difference in mean scores of the two groups is significant or not, the researchers used an independent t-test (Table 6).

Table 6: Determining the significance of the mean scores between the two groups

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|---|------|------------------------------|------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------|---|--------|
| | | F | Sig. | T | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| GE | Equal variances assumed | .128 | .46 | 9.124 | 58 | .000 | 2.35 | .29364 | 2.2335 | 3.2435 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 9.159 | 57.9 | .000 | 2.53 | .21628 | 2.2731 | 3.2604 |

As table 5 shows, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups. It means that meta-discourses have a significant effect on advanced learners' reading comprehension.

Discussion

The results of the first research question showed that the exclusion of meta-discourses has no significant effect on intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension. Since that was not the case for the advanced ones, the researchers decided to conduct an unstructured interview with 5 learners of each group to gain further insights into the causes of such results. Therefore, 5 learners of each group were invited for a half hour interview with the researchers. In order to elicit reliable answers from the interviewees and to keep them motivated for the interview, the researchers paid each one 20, 000 Rials, around 20\$. The unstructured interview was used in this study because as Dörnyei (2007) words:

"It allows maximum flexibility to follow the interview in unpredictable directions, with only minimal interference from the research agenda. The intention is to create a relaxed atmosphere in

which the respondent may reveal more than he/she would in informal contexts, with the interviewer assuming a listening role.....This kind of interview is most appropriate when a study focuses on the deep meaning of particular phenomena (p.136).

Having conducted the interviews, the researchers found that almost all the intermediate interviewees, 9 out of 10, 5 in the control group and 4 in the experimental group, were not aware of the concept of meta-discourse. However, most of the advanced learners interviewed, 9 out of 10, 4 in the control group and 5 in the experimental one, were familiar with the concept of meta-discourse. Thus, based on the findings of the interviews, the researched decided to expand the study. They conducted a further study on the same intermediate control and experimental groups. But this time, both experimental and control groups were consciously familiarized with the concept of meta-discourse by the researchers. Then, both the control and experimental groups were given five texts different from the previous ones. However, the control group received the ones with the meta-discourses excluded. Next, the mean scores of both groups were observed. The following table demonstrates the mean scores of both groups.

Table 7. The mean scores of the intermediate experimental and control group reading scores

| | Group | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|--------------|--------------|----|---------|----------------|-----------------|
| Intermediate | Experimental | 30 | 16.2043 | 1.94330 | .21460 |
| | Control | 30 | 14.0521 | 1.76486 | .20516 |

An independent t-test was used to see whether such difference in mean scores is significant or not (table 8)

Table 8: Determining the significance of the mean scores between the two groups

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | | | |
|--|--|---|------|------------------------------|----|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|---|-------|
| | | F | Sig. | T | Df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference | Std. Error Diff | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| | | | | | | | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|------|-----|-------|------|-----|------|--------|--------|--------|
| | | | | | | | | erence | | |
| GE | Equal variances assumed | .168 | .46 | 9.062 | 58 | .63 | .000 | .29837 | 2.1148 | 3.2936 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 9.109 | 57.9 | .63 | .000 | .29689 | 2.1177 | 3.2907 |

As table 8 shows, the difference in mean scores is significant at $P < 0.001$. It means that exclusion of meta-discourse can significantly influence intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension if they are already familiar with the concept of meta-discourse.

The findings of this study also corroborate those of Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010). As mentioned in the review of literature Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010) found that explicit teaching of discourse markers can improve EFL learners' Writing ability. In this study the researchers found that meta-discourse play an important role in EFL learners' reading comprehension. Both studies highlight the significant role of meta-discourse on the EFL skills such as writing and reading comprehension.

Moreover, Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010) indicated that intermediate EFL learners could improve their writing ability more significantly than those at the elementary and advanced levels when they learned the meta-discourse markers explicitly. In this study, the researchers found that if intermediate EFL learners become consciously aware of the role of meta-discourse makers in their reading comprehension, their performance can improve their reading ability more significantly than when they are not aware of them. Therefore, both studies emphasize the explicit teaching or awareness of meta-discourse-markers can help intermediate EFL learners to improve not only their writing ability, but also their reading comprehension ability.

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study indicate that the effect of meta-discourse on EFL reading comprehension should not be neglected by the teachers. Also, meta-discourse can play a more influencing role on reading comprehension if the consciousness of the EFL learners' is raised by their teachers, especially at the intermediate level.

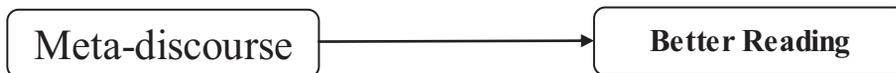


Figure1. The plausible effect of meta-discourse on EFL learners' reading comprehension

Researchers interested in the field of meta-discourse can do more research on the role meta-discourse markers on the other skills and sub-skills of English Language such as reading comprehension and speaking ability.

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