

A Program based on Metadiscourse Markers to Develop EFL Academic Writing of Faculty of Specific Education Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

The current study aimed at investigating the effect of using metadiscourse markers to develop postgraduate students' academic writing skills at the Faculty of Specific Education, Zagazig University. Sixty students enrolled in first year special diploma, EFL Curricula and Instruction, were chosen as the study participants. Based on a quasi-experimental design, the study involved two groups: An experimental group (n=30) and a control one (n=30). A pre-post academic writing skills test was designed to assess the students' level in the specified skills before and after the treatment. The results revealed that the experimental group surpassed the control one in the overall academic writing skills. Accordingly, using metadiscourse markers proved to have a large effect on students' academic writing skills, in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics.

Keywords: metadiscourse markers, academic writing

Introduction

Writing is not simply the act of putting words on a page without considering the reader, the writer, or the context. It goes beyond just producing text and language structures. Writing is deeply tied to different communicative goals and involves a dynamic interaction between the writer and the reader (Kamler & Thomson, 2014, p.6). Therefore, engaging with a written text creates a dialogue where ideas and perspectives are shared between the author and the audience.

In recent years, both theorists and researchers have increasingly agreed that developing academic writing skills presents significant challenges for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. While university students—especially those learning English as a foreign language—are often taught how to construct written texts, there is limited attention given to the social and contextual aspects of writing. These aspects are crucial for helping students effectively meet the requirements of academic tasks like proposal writing. Instead, instruction tends to concentrate on rigid activities focused on vocabulary, grammar, and text structure, which are treated as static and unchanging across various contexts, purposes, and audiences (Correa & Echeverri, 2017; Johns, 2011).

Academic writing is often seen as a persistent challenge that causes stress and difficulty for EFL learners. Despite faculty members providing increased support and instruction to graduate students, many still struggle to write effectively, even after years of writing practice during their college education (Mullen, 2006). Highlighting the difficulties EFL learners face, Thomas (2005, p. 1) pointed out that teaching writing can be particularly discouraging and frustrating. This is largely because it demands considerable effort to explain the various cognitive processes involved in writing to students.

Academic writing is an essential skill that postgraduate students must be well-equipped with, particularly as they are expected to produce high-quality proposals. However, many postgraduate students perceive academic writing as a difficult and stressful task due to their lack of adequate skills (Thomas, 2005). As a result, academic writing remains a significant challenge within the field of English language teaching. Most postgraduate students

need to develop a broad set of academic writing abilities and learn how to effectively engage and communicate with their readers through their writing.

Recently, studies on academic writing have focused on the importance of the rhetorical and interactive features of the written text, emphasizing the social relationship between the writer and readers (Franzosi & Vicari, 2018; Hyland & Jiang, 2018; Pérez-Llantada, 2010; Qin & Uccelli, 2019). This perspective stresses readers' role in understanding the author's intentions as well as his/ her stance towards the content. According to Blagojevic (2009), Mardani (2017) and Hyland (2004), academic writers do not merely produce texts that represent external reality, but they use the language to negotiate and communicate social relations. This can be accomplished by employing a number of devices that reinforces reader-author relationship. Such devices are called metadiscourse markers which help readers organize, interpret and evaluate the content.

Metadiscourse is recognized as one of the important rhetorical strategies which serves as a means for organizing discourse and exploring the author-reader relationship. It is a key component through which the writer interacts with the reader within the text (Sanderson, 2008; Hassanein, 2016; Yaghoubi & Ardestani, 2014). Therefore, metadiscourse marks the written text as a social interaction including the ways by which writers negotiate meaning with readers. In order for that interaction to take place, both writer and reader must adhere to certain rhetorical features in the production of written texts.

Guided by various metadiscourse markers, EFL readers draw on their interpretations and refine their understanding of the propositional content, rather than sticking to the linguistic forms and structural patterns. With regard to social engagement with content, Hyland (2005) claimed that metadiscourse can stand as a framework which signals the writer's attitude and shows the interactive nature of academic writing. This enables readers to interpret the meaning, understand the language in use and realize the implied author's intentions and attitudes.

Context of the problem

To make sure of the study problem, a pilot study was conducted on a sample chosen randomly from postgraduate students, EFL Curricula and Instruction, Faculty of Specific Education. An academic writing skills test was administered to the students. Results revealed that 80% of the students obtained very low scores. Students seemed to focus on the product and the structure of the written text, and do not pay enough effort to the ultimate goal, i.e. communication and interacting with an audience. Additionally, based on students' written works, it was noted that most students lacked the necessary skills to utilize metadiscourse markers. Most students faced many challenges in writing their research proposals. They continually expressed uncertainty about using different devices (e.g., expressions of ability, probability, uncertainty, etc.).

In her study of academic writing skills, Lis (2010) indicated that academic writing seemed to have been quite challenging to the students. Ten out of sixteen micro-skills were found to be more problematic and difficult. Students could not also present their ideas in an organized way. They lacked the ability to use strong evidences and build correct sentence structures. Results revealed that the students faced challenges and self-doubts concerning their academic writing abilities. They also challenged disconfirmation of producing well-organized pieces of writing and reported self-doubts about their writing abilities. Finally, the researchers recommended the development of new ways to address these challenges and to enhance students' knowledge of academic writing.

Statement of the problem

The problem of this study could be stated in the low level of postgraduate students' academic writing skills. Consequently, the current study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How can metadiscourse markers be utilized to develop postgraduate students' academic writing skills?
2. What is the effect of using metadiscourse markers on developing students' academic writing skills?

Hypotheses

1. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students and those of their control peers in the post administration of the academic writing skills test favoring the experimental group students.

2. There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students in the pre-post administrations of the academic writing skills test favoring post-administration results.

Significance of the study

As the current study investigates the metadiscourse markers, it is expected to provide EFL curricula developers with insights into how to utilize various writing tasks and activities that promote communication and interaction between the author and readers. It may also help EFL learners to construct more dialogic written texts that maintain reader-writer relationship. The study also provides a test which may help in the diagnosis and assessment of academic writing skills. Additionally, the study emphasizes the social context of written texts. This may attract the attention of EFL instructors to stress the rhetorical features, conventions and linguistic patterns; which may help EFL learners negotiate and construct knowledge.

Definitions of terms

Metadiscourse markers

Ädel (2006, p. 31) viewed metadiscourse as the author's commentary woven throughout the text. This reflects the writer's attitude toward the subject matter and guides the reader in interpreting the language and choices made in the writing. As a result, the reader is influenced by specific linguistic strategies and responds intentionally to the information, highlighting the interactive relationship between writer and reader.

Operationally, metadiscourse markers are linguistic tools and features used by students to structure and refine the content of a text, build a connection between writer and reader to enhance communication, and support readers in understanding and interpreting the message of the text.

Academic writing

According to Strongman (2014), academic writing is a style that involves the deliberate selection of words to convey complex ideas effectively to different readers and audiences through written communication.

Operationally, academic writing refers to a form of writing that utilizes accurate word choices, specific rhetorical devices and expressions, as well as particular grammatical structures and patterns. Its purpose is to meet the academic needs of postgraduate students by presenting ideas in a clear, logical, and coherent manner tailored to a target audience.

Methodology

Participants

Sixty first-year postgraduate students, EFL Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Specific Education, Zagazig University were involved in the current study. This sample was chosen since at this stage, students are required to obtain necessary skills for writing academic texts, e.g. thesis proposals. They were randomly assigned to either experimental or control group (each group comprised 30 students). In order to make sure that the two groups were homogenous, participants were at the same average age (ranging from 23-24) and they had spent four years studying English at college. In addition, pre-testing students' academic writing revealed no significant difference between the mean scores obtained by the two groups.

Table 1

t-test results of the experimental group and the control one in the pre testing of the academic writing test.

Group	N	M	S.D	t-value
Cont.	30	14.445	4.08	0.236
Exp.	30	14.655	4.18	

t-value is not significant at (0.01) level

Experimental Design

The quasi-experimental design was adopted in the current study, where a sample of two groups were assigned for the purpose of the study, i.e. the experimental group receiving instruction through metadiscourse and the control one taught through regular instruction. A pre post academic writing skills test was administered to investigate any significant differences. The obtained data were analyzed using t-test.

Instruments

In order to fulfill the purpose of this study, a pre-post academic writing skills test was designed. To determine its validity, the test was submitted to a panel of jury specialist and experts in the field of TEFL. They were requested to evaluate the test in terms of clarity, correctness, wording and the suitability of the items for the students' proficiency level. The test was pre-administered to both groups in order to make sure that the study groups were at the same level before the treatment, and hence any progress achieved after the treatment could be attributed to using meta-discourse markers. The same version of the test was post-administered to find out if there is any significant difference. In addition, the test was piloted on a sample of 30 students other than the study participants to determine the suitability and the clarity of the test items. The test-retest method was used to determine the reliability by calculating the internal consistency (alpha coefficient = 0.89).

Study Material

In order to develop the students' academic writing skills, four units based on the metadiscourse markers were designed. The suggested units aimed at:

1. Developing EFL postgraduate students' academic writing skills in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics.
2. Identifying the general characteristics of EFL academic writing.
3. Identifying how metadiscourse markers are used in academic writing.
4. Describing the different purposes of using metadiscourse markers.
5. Utilizing metadiscourse markers in writing.
6. Presenting academic information in a clear and coherent manner.

Content of the Units

The content of the units was designed on the basis of the metadiscourse markers and in terms of the specified objectives. It included four units comprising a variety of tasks and activities. Each unit was intended to develop certain academic writing skills and dealt with particular types of metadiscourse markers.

Unit One: Using hedges and boosters

Unit Two: Attitude and Engagement markers & Self mentions

Unit Three: Frame markers, endophoric markers, and code glosses

Unit Four: Transitions and evidentials

Results

Results were presented in the light of the study hypotheses. Data were analyzed using paired and independent samples t- test. Both the descriptive and inferential statistics (means, standard deviation, t-test, etc...) were calculated using the Statistical Package for Social Science.

Testing the First Hypothesis

The first hypothesis states that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students and those of their control peers in the post administration of the academic writing skills test favoring the experimental group students. To test the first hypothesis of the study, t-test for independent samples was used to determine any significant differences.

Table 2
t-test results of the experimental group and the control one in the academic writing post-test

Dimension	Group	N	Mean	Standard deviation	df	t. value	Sig.
Content	Experimental	30	11.800	1.500	29	20.200	0.001
	Control	30	4.200	1.300			
Organization	Experimental	30	12.300	1.100	29	27.000	0.001
	Control	30	4.100	1.000			
Vocabulary	Experimental	30	4.100	0.650	29	13.100	0.001
	Control	30	1.700	0.600			
Language use	Experimental	30	6.200	1.050	29	9.500	0.001
	Control	30	3.200	1.100			
Mechanics	Experimental	30	6.900	0.850	29	3.500	0.001
	Control	30	6.100	0.870			
Total	Experimental	30	41.300	3.500	29	25.000	0.001
	Control	30	19.500	2.800			

Table 2 indicates that the experimental group surpassed the control one in the overall academic writing skills and its dimensions. The means of the experimental group for content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics were 11.800, 12.300, 4.100, 6.200 and 6.900 respectively. Conversely, the control group obtained lower means in the overall academic writing skills and in each dimension. These results are expected since regular instruction of writing focuses on practicing writing conventions (e.g., punctuation, spelling and capitalization). The t-value for the overall academic writing skills (25.000) is statistically significant at (0.001) level. Therefore, the first hypothesis is partially accepted.

Testing the Second Hypothesis

The second hypothesis states that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group students in the pre-post administrations of the academic writing skills test favoring post administration results. To test the second hypothesis of the study, t-test for paired samples was used to determine any significant differences.

Table 3
t-test results of the experimental group in the pre- and post- academic writing test

Dimension	Measurement	N	Mean	Standard deviation	df	t. value	Sig.
Content	Pre	30	1.500	1.200	29	45.120	0.001
	Post	30	10.900	1.580			

Organization	Pre	30	2.700	1.000	29	43.850	0.001
	Post	30	11.800	1.260			
Vocabulary	Pre	30	1.300	0.450	29	20.320	0.001
	Post	30	3.700	0.720			
Language use	Pre	30	2.500	0.820	29	19.980	0.001
	Post	30	5.700	1.100			
Mechanics	Pre	30	5.000	0.900	29	10.500	0.001
	Post	30	7.000	0.850			
Total	Pre	30	14.200	3.000	29	60.250	0.001
	Post	30	38.900	3.550			

Table 3 indicates a significant difference between the means of the experimental group in the pre- and post-testing favoring the post testing in the overall academic writing and its dimensions. The t-value for content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics (45.120, 43.850, 20.320, 19.980 and 10.500) are statistically significant at (0.001). The t-value for the overall academic writing skills (60.250) is statistically significant at (0.001) level. Therefore, the second hypothesis is partially accepted.

Discussion of Results

This study attempted to investigate the impact of using metadiscourse markers on developing EFL postgraduate students' academic writing skills. The results indicated significant differences between the mean scores of the experimental group and those of the control one, in favour of the experimental. The experimental group surpassed the control one in overall academic writing and its dimensions (content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics).

This improvement in the experimental group could be due to explicit teaching of various metadiscourse devices. The experimental group students received a systematic instruction in metadiscourse markers. They were engaged in various tasks such as identifying the difference between statements containing metadiscourse markers and those without metadiscourse markers, locating and classifying different transition words in a text (e.g., addition, comparison, consequence), and scanning texts to identify different metadiscourse devices and the type of relationships being expressed. In addition, they were trained on how to compare two texts in order to discuss how certain devices are employed within each text, as well as examine research articles to determine what types of devices are being used and their functions. This is consistent with Azar and Hashim, 2019; Esataji and Vafaeimehr, 2015; Farokhi and Emami, 2008; Hryniuk, 2018; and Susanti, Kurnia, and Suharsono, 2017, who emphasized the importance of using metadiscourse markers in writing academic texts.

By engaging students in authentic discussions using different metadiscourse markers, the students could express themselves clearly. Following this task, they were asked to work in groups and think of possible questions for the assigned topic and challenge a point of view. Thus, they were able to elaborate on different ideas, organize ideas logically, and support the topic with relevant and accurate information. They could negotiate information in ways that are appropriate and meaningful. This result is in line with studies such as Chen, 2006; Khedri, Heng and Ebrahimi, 2013; and Sanford, 2012, which stressed the importance of using different metadiscourse markers in writing academic texts.

Contrary to the experimental group students, their control peers showed lower mean scores on the post-administration of the academic writing skills test. They did not pay attention to the ultimate goal of writing, i.e.

communicating and interacting with the reader. They lacked the necessary skills in order to identify what the text is trying to communicate. They just received regular instruction which focused only on certain skills and rules in grammar, spelling, and mechanics. Such type of instruction did not allow students to communicate their ideas effectively, consider the needs and interests of the reader, or establish interaction between them and their readers. Additionally, students did not consider the social context of the written text, the function for which the text is written, nor the individuals to whom the text is written. Rather, in traditional instruction, a topic was assigned and then the students were asked to apply the steps of writing till they produced the final product.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers should be integrated into EFL post-graduate curricula. EFL students, specifically those who have challenges with academic writing, need more training on how to incorporate different types of metadiscourse markers in their writings. Besides, EFL instructors need to shed light on metadiscourse markers as communicative devices used by writers to engage with readers and negotiate arguments, rather than considering them as unnecessary and redundant elements. The assessment of EFL students' academic writing, especially the use of metadiscourse markers, should comprise an integral part of EFL writing courses.

Suggestions for Further Research

In the light of the present study, the following topics are suggested:

- Further research is needed to investigate the effect of metadiscourse markers on the comprehension of EFL academic texts.
- Investigating the effect of metadiscourse markers instruction on EFL learners' narrative and descriptive writings.
- Investigating the impact of utilizing metadiscourse markers on spoken language processing.
- Exploring the relationship between utilizing metadiscourse markers and social interaction in academic writing.

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