

The Desideratum of Metadiscourse Markers in Expository Writing

Siti Faridah Kamaruddin¹, Naginder Kaur^{2*}

¹ Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA Sarawak Branch, Mukah Campus, 94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia

² Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perlis Branch, Arau Campus, 02600 Arau, Perlis, Malaysia

*Corresponding author: naginderkaur.uitm@gmail.com

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Abstract

Metadiscourse has often been explored through various types of writing, allowing novice writers to organise and negotiate propositional content with readers. By using effective metadiscourse markers, namely, interactive, and interactional markers, readers of expository essays would become more engaged and guided through their writing. Additionally, there is limited research in the literature on the use of metadiscourse among Malaysian novice writers. Hence, this review article aims to conceptualise the use of metadiscourse within the framework of expository genre by critically analysing the gaps in the literature. The conceptualisation will present relevant generic matters of the complexities of expository writing and the role of metadiscourse for organising content and assisting readers to interpret and understand the writer's intended meaning. This would lead to the formulation of a revised metadiscourse model which can accommodate the needs of the expository genre and addresses the different functions involved in expository writing.

Keywords: Metadiscourse, Expository Writing, Interactive Metadiscourse, Interactional Metadiscourse, Malaysian ESL Learners

INTRODUCTION

Expository writing requires the ability to explain or provide information on a topic, and it is an important skill in upper elementary and junior high grade levels (Carroll, 2018). Class assignments in various content-related subject areas increasingly require learners of these ages to compose materials of an expository nature. Successful composition of this type of writing requires sensitivity to the appropriate text structures of expository prose and an ability to predict or organize textual propositions because of one's knowledge of the topic. Hence, this would explain the emergence of the current trend in expository discourse by correlating this discourse with language disorders such as traumatic brain injury (Yoon, 2018).

Expository discourse is the type of discourse most used in educational situations by lecturers to instruct and by the students to demonstrate their knowledge of a given topic (Lundine et al., 2018). According to Bliss and McCabe (2006, as cited in Ward-Lonergan & Duthie, 2016), expository writing should not be confused with narrative writing based on a few features such as expository writing is found in a variety of contexts including textbooks, classroom lectures, newscasts, and technical manuals and this type of writing is focused on facts, events, and ideas; is logically based; and requires planning and organization around several different ideas which makes it particularly challenging.

In relation to expository writing, there are many challenges faced by students such as writing skills deficiency to produce excellent writing tasks (Palpanadan et al., 2019); inappropriate use of conjunctions (Mohamed, 2016; Lee & Sim, 2019) to write coherently and lack of critical and analytical thinking to brainstorm for ideas (Abd Karim et al., 2016; Hammad, 2018). Another study conducted by Mastan et al. (2017) has listed other common problems experienced by ESL writers namely the inability to generate ideas in the L2, inaccurate use of grammar, insufficient vocabulary, as well as lack of exposure to the wide arrays of effective writing strategies. In addition, writing anxiety also makes the expository writing challenge becomes greater (Singh & Rajalingam, 2012; Kamaruddin et al., 2017; Aripin & Rahmat, 2021). Apart from that, the learning trajectory post COVID-19 has sent learners to shoulder responsibility in learning (Kaur & Bhatt, 2020) and yet writing skills are complex to be studied by learners themselves due to problems involving metadiscourse markers (the main focus of this study), grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation (Suvin, 2020).

There has been significant research conducted in addressing the problem of writing in English in primary school level. Li and Razali (2019) revealed that the lack of proper implementation of the process-based approach in ESL writing instruction has led to the stagnant improvement seen in the writing performance among Malaysian learners. The most significant problem was the inclusion of process-based approach to writing in Malaysian national curricula and syllabi. Learners at the primary school level also faced problems in writing grammatically correct sentences (Lim et al., 2017). Maniam et al. (2020) found that these students struggle to write good essays as they do not know the techniques to elaborate ideas. Other writing problems identified by Sivagnanam and Md Yunus (2020) are related to organization, vocabulary usage, sentence construction and relevance of ideas.

These writing problems which are considered as basic writing skills that they need to master are then brought to secondary school level as Abdul Karim et al. (2018) noted that the interference of the first language (L1) has affected the use of tenses, subject verb agreement, prepositions and the mechanics of writing based on the errors demonstrated through the essays of Malaysian secondary learners. In turn, this interference affected the structure of sentences and the presentation of ideas. Shah (2020) further added that individuals with writing problems may have difficulties in one or more aspects of writing skill such as proper use of grammar, conventions, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and some of the basic and initiating aspects of writing. It is also an unpleasant piece of work for both instructors and learners in ESL classes.

While transitioning from secondary to tertiary level, it is a pre-requisite for learners to read and write texts that are primarily expository (Pugh et al., 2000, as cited in Al-Hammadi & Mohd Sidek, 2015). These learners have been trained towards narrative writing in the secondary level and thus, they are expected to face difficulties to write expository essays at the university level. Hence, entering the university at pre-diploma or diploma level will prepare them with skills related to expository writing so that they will be able to adjust themselves to produce writing tasks as expected at university level.

Despite the transitioning phase, many difficulties and challenges are reported among Malaysian university learners. When they have to deal with factors such as conventions of academic writing, academic discourse, genres for various disciplines, different text-types as well as ethics in academic writing, they considered that ESL writing is a difficult task for them (Lee et al., 2015). Another issue resurfaced as learners are expected to be actively engaged in their thinking and writing processes (Ofte, 2014). Similarly, writing a good essay is a challenging activity as it requires synthesis of material that cannot be done in a very short time. Furthermore, learners are required to support their argument with evidence, and this may involve memorizing some key events, or the names of places, and so on. Before organising their ideas, knowledge of the subject matter is important as part of the preparation process (Hashim et al., 2018).

The teaching of writing has to be a long and individual process for foreign language learners of English (Martínez-Prieto, 2014). Much individual attention is set aside to find out the weaknesses of the learners. A major weakness, from the examination of the essays of a particular learner, is the theme-rheme structure of the clause from the semantic perspective. The theme comes first in the sequence of elements of theme and rheme in the constructions of sentences. The research has identified the non-existence of theme, disguised theme, and the lack of coherence between theme and rheme in a case study. Therefore, Jamian (2016) suggested that many students clearly lack the knowledge of what good writing is but alarmingly they felt they knew everything.

THE ROLES OF METADISCOURSE

Metadiscourse is indeed important in ensuring the clarity of propositional ideas that the learners were trying to present in their writing. Thus, Vande Kopple (2012) appraised some of the importance of studying metadiscourse. He stated that the studies of metadiscourse show how complex a structured language is. In addition, such study opens intriguing questions about ethics and language use. The studies on metadiscourse also reveal differences in how metadiscourse is used in similar texts in different languages and provide reasons why metadiscourse deserves a special place in second-language instruction.

Bogdanovic and Mirovic (2018) conceded that metadiscourse markers are used for specific reasons. For learners from mathematics and engineering discipline in their study, they used interactive categories more than interactional ones. Furthermore, different purposes of writing were delivered effectively using different markers. For instance, the use of evidentials helps to position authors in their discourse community while endophoric markers are adopted as standard practice by those novice writers. Moreover, the use of particular metadiscourse elements echoes the awareness of the writer on the specific characteristics in their discipline. On the other hand, the use of particular forms of metadiscourse can simply mean individual preferences as a result from the writer's language proficiency and confidence in ESL language skills. From these specific reasons, it shows that metadiscourse usage is closely attached to the content of writing. When learners understand the need to learn metadiscourse markers as part of writing process, they adopt several strategies to learn the different types of markers such as imitating the writing samples, using internet to self-teach themselves and seeking assistance from their instructors. Thus, the novice writers are not only facing difficulties to come up with the content of their writing but at the same time they are not be able to deliver their ideas properly due to the lack of knowledge on metadiscourse.

Hence, judging by the importance of metadiscourse role, it is also vital to know what metadiscourse is by referring to Table 1 below. According to Hyland (2005), "the model recognizes that metadiscourse is comprised of the two dimensions of interaction" (p. 47 – 48).

1. The interactive dimension. This concerns the writers' awareness of a participating audience and the ways they seek to accommodate its probable knowledge, interests, rhetorical expectations, and processing abilities. The writers' purpose here is to shape and constrain a text to meet the needs of particular readers, setting out arguments so that they will recover the writers' preferred interpretations and goals. The use of resources in this category therefore addresses ways of organizing discourse, rather than experience, and reveals the extent to which the text is constructed with the readers' needs in mind.
2. The interactional dimension. This concerns the ways writers conduct interaction by intruding and commenting on their message. The writers' goal here is to make their views explicit and to involve readers by allowing them to respond to the unfolding text. This is the writers' expression of a textual 'voice', or community-recognized personality, and includes the ways they convey judgements and overtly align themselves with readers. Metadiscourse here is essentially evaluative and engaging, expressing solidarity, anticipating objections, and responding to an imagined dialogue with others. It reveals the extent to which the writers work to jointly construct the text with readers.

Table 1: An interpersonal model of metadiscourse

Category	Function & Examples
Interactive	Help to guide the reader through the text
Transitions	Function: express relations between main clauses Examples: <i>in addition, but, thus, and</i>
Frame markers	Function: refer to discourse acts, sequences, or stages Examples: <i>finally, to conclude, my purpose is</i>
Endophoric markers	Function: refer to information in other parts of the text Examples: <i>noted above, see Figure 1, in section 2</i>
Evidentials	Function: refer to information from other texts Examples: <i>according to X, Z states</i>
Code glosses	Function: elaborate propositional meanings Examples: <i>namely, e.g., such as, in other words</i>
Interactional	Involve the reader in the text
Hedges	Function: withhold commitment and open dialogue Examples: <i>might, perhaps, possible, about</i>
Boosters	Function: emphasise certainty or close dialogue Examples: <i>in fact, definitely, it is clear that</i>
Attitude markers	Function: express writer's attitude to proposition Examples: <i>unfortunately, I agree, surprisingly</i>
Self-mentions	Function: explicit reference to author(s) Examples: <i>I, we, my, me, our</i>
Engagement markers	Function: explicitly build relationship with reader Examples: <i>consider, note, you can see that</i>

THE COMPLEXITIES OF EXPOSITORY WRITING

The need for a new metadiscourse model in the light of expository writing is relevant as this type of writing poses several difficulties for novice writers. Expository prose presents at least three unique difficulties to novice writers (Thomas, Englert & Gregg, 1987, as cited in Carroll, 2018). First, the structures of expository prose often are unfamiliar, variable, or ill-defined. While younger learners usually possess an undeveloped knowledge of the story structures underlying narrative text, they have less practice in identifying and generating expository text structures. The situation is exacerbated in the case of learners with learning disabilities, who often lack sensitivity to textual organization and to the relative importance of major and minor ideas (Collins et al. 2018). Moreover, the underdeveloped receptive competence such as reading which is important for productive competence like writing (Krashen, 1982, as cited in Richards, 2015) has been hampered by reading anxiety especially in a situation where learners have to learning in an online setting due to COVID-19 pandemic (Kamaruddin

& Kaur, 2023). Under these circumstances, the writing process must appear chaotic and driven by an associative, knowledge-telling process in which learners attempt to tell all they know about the topic in whatever order their ideas come to mind (Forbes, 2019). The knowledge-telling strategy especially characterizes young and poor writers who lack goal-related planning and who have as their primary concern "what to say next" rather than "how does this idea relate back to the major premise" (Gan et al., 2021).

The second major difficulty posed by exposition is that it requires the writer to continually hold in memory at least two chunks: memory of the text structure and the intention of the whole text, and memory of the preceding utterance (Forbes, 2019). When writers do not hold such chunks in memory, one or more of the following writing problems or errors may result: (a) redundancies (that is, repeating previous items or starting the discourse over), (b) early terminations (that is, ending the discourse prematurely because the writer has exhausted all his or her ideas on the topic), and (c) irrelevancies (that is, listing items tangentially related to the topic and to the writer's personal experiences but without attending to intention or structure of the text) (Nuckles et al., 2020).

The third difficulty is that expository text requires the writer to demonstrate a knowledge of the various types of text structures (for example, comparison/contrast, description, sequence, enumeration), and have facility in signalling text structure and relationships using pointer or keywords such as however, therefore, and in contrast to (Bock, 2013). When writers do not successfully signal the relationships between the current idea and preceding idea, the text suffers from a lack of coherence. Moreover, each text structure has its own unique requirements, which places special demands on the writer (Bock, 2013). For example, in the case of the sequence text structure, learners not only must convey the steps or actions related to the completion of a process, they also must communicate the appropriate sequence of steps (for example, first, second, then, finally). In the case of comparison/contrast, learners must define the parallel attributes of the two concepts being considered and indicate whether the attributes are alike or different for each pair of concepts. In this way, expository performance may be text dependent with the number of writing errors made contingent upon the type of structure that learners are asked to compose.

Why Metadiscourse in Expository Writing?

Malaysian language learners do not have to be taught in detail on how to use metadiscourse markers as they have learned the markers incidentally throughout eleven years of language learning since primary and secondary level prior attending tertiary level. In applied linguistics, the term incidental learning is used to refer to the acquisition of a word or expression without the conscious intention to commit the element to memory, such as 'picking up' an unknown word from listening to someone or from reading a text (Hulstijn, 2013). To be specific, most of the learners are not aware that they have acquired the knowledge on metadiscourse (Musa et al., 2019) and thus their ability on using metadiscourse markers appropriately become innate until they were exposed or taught explicitly at the tertiary level. Hence, there is a growing interest in examining the application of metadiscourse markers in expository writing by novice writers without focusing on the explicit teaching of metadiscourse.

The growing interest in the use of metadiscourse in expository writing represents an investigation of a genre specific writing format. Therefore, apart from using the existing metadiscourse taxonomy such as Hyland's to analyse expository essays produced by the novice writers, the differences observed in expository writing would require a different kind of metadiscourse framework for expository genre. Hence, the organisational structure and key signal words as compiled by Ward-Lonergan and Duthie (2016) which are stemming from the previous works of Halliday and Hasan (1976), Irwin and Baker (1989), Meyer and Freedle (1984), and Westby (1991), will be integrated with Hyland's (2005) interpersonal metadiscourse model. These organisational structures or also known as the expository writing functions are described to be the cause of difficulty for many learners to comprehend and use the key signal words proficiently as there are many different types of expository writing functions.

CONCLUSION

This review article has sought to offer a general overview of what metadiscourse is and how this fuzzy concept is being used in expository writing genre. Over the years, metadiscourse has gained much attention for persuasive and argumentative writing but little or no consideration was given to expository writing. Metadiscourse offers the novice writers with the opportunity to organise the contents and to communicate with their readers. Metadiscourse is an important linguistic tool because effective use of metadiscourse demonstrates a good quality of writing and gives the reflection of a skilled writer. This review article has also revealed the problems that learners encountered with expository writing and suggesting the need of teaching metadiscourse explicitly to release the innate ability which learners have learned ever since in primary and secondary school.

The need to examine the use of metadiscourse in expository writing is particularly important in the Malaysian context where metadiscourse is an unknown term despite they have used the markers unconsciously in their writing and the language instructors were futile to point out the importance of metadiscourse to their learners which has caused the budding ignorance on metadiscourse markers. The language instructors should emphasise that writing is not a silent, passive, and individual activity but a social and communicative approach in the form of writing.

This review article is limited to only the issues surrounding metadiscourse and expository writing and did not go in depth to other aspects such as the discussion on metadiscourse models and different types of genres. As expository writing is a unique genre itself, thus it will need a revised metadiscourse framework that can cater to its distinctive characteristics. Future studies could review other pertinent matters such as the comparison of metadiscourse models, a methodological approach for metadiscourse studies and the trend in metadiscourse studies.

Thus, it is hereby imperative that Malaysian university learners need to be exposed to metadiscourse markers regardless of which metadiscourse taxonomy is suggested by their instructors. So far, most research has been conducted on examining the use of metadiscourse markers among advanced writers such as first year ESL doctoral students (Lo et al., 2020) and less attention is given to novice writers from the early levels such as pre-diploma and diploma, especially in the genre of expository writing. To sum up, while metadiscourse is an important linguistic tool in ensuring the cohesion and coherence in expository writing, language instructors should expose to their learners with this commonly forgotten aspect of writing and make them aware that by using the markers, it will lead to a significant impact to the quality of their writing.

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