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A Study of Metadiscourse
For Teaching Composition at Advanced
Level

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Synopsis

The present study was conducted with two theoretical supports: 1) the constructs of metadiscourse and discourse, and 2) the research and findings in the area of teaching writing. It intends to explore how metadiscourse can enhance student writer's awareness of readers' needs and how the use of metadiscourse is related to the quality of the texts that students compose. By such investigation, the present writer hopes to prove that the teaching of metadiscourse is an effective methodology to improve the quality of student writing at advanced level.

The present thesis consists of three chapters: Chapter 1 is a survey of theories of metadiscourse and discourse. It defines metadiscourse, distinguishes metadiscourse from primary text discourse, and classifies metadiscourse markers. It also examines the relevant literature in applying metadiscourse to composition teaching. Chapter 2 looks at the theories of writing as a cognitive process and the diverse approaches to teaching writing, resulting from different understandings and assumptions about the nature of writing. Chapter 3 is a detailed report of an experiment in applying the construct of metadiscourse to composition teaching. The findings have supported the assumptions that knowledge of metadiscourse helps to develop an audience-oriented stance in student writers and that teaching metadiscourse is a step in the right direction to successful writing.

Kew Words: **Metadiscourse, Primary text discourse, Discourse analysis, EFL/ESL composition teaching, Process approach.**

Contents

Introduction

Composition is difficult to teach because it is a highly abstract cognitive process. We lack accurate devices to analyze how we generate ideas and how the ideas fall into logical arguments or rhetorical patterns. Teachers and instructors have not been able to explain such processes to their students, although they are able to teach certain rhetorical, structural, and grammatical regularities in composition, the written product.

Most writers who have considered their purpose would agree that a primary goal of writing is to communicate with some intended audience. The explicit goal of producing a written text and the implicit goal of reaching an audience are reflected in the two levels of text: Primary discourse and metadiscourse. Primary discourse provides information about the subject of the text and expands propositional content about a topic. Metadiscourse, a second and a less obvious level, is that part of the text which comments on the text itself or which directs comments to the reader (Williams, 1981; Margaret S. Steffensen, 1996). When we write on the level of metadiscourse, we supply cues that help readers organize, interpret, and evaluate the propositional content of the text (Vande Kopple, 1985; Williams, 1981).

Many of the categories of metadiscourse are covered in composition instruction for both first-language and second-language students and are included in composition textbooks (Williams, 1981) though there has been no attempt to organize an entire composition course around the constructs of metadiscourse. Considerable attention has been paid to metadiscourse in written texts among foreign researchers (Crismore, 1989; Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen, 1993; Crismore & Vande Kopple, 1988; Steffensen, 1992; Vande Kopple, 1985). However, very few studies have looked at variations in how student writers incorporate metadiscourse into a text. Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1988; 1995) have shown that an appropriate use of metadiscourse plays an important part in a successful text. When student writers lack an overall knowledge of rhetorical conventions, they do not know how to make good use of these interpersonal and textual functions of language. This often leads them to produce writer-based prose in which the propositional content is not effectively conveyed, thus lowering the overall quality of their texts.

The present study is, therefore, conducted with an attempt to address this weakness in student writers. The research receives insights from two major sources: the theories of metadiscourse and discourse, and the theories of writing. Since student writers tend to focus on the product, the written text, and do not pay enough attention to the ultimate goal of writing and communicating with an audience (Yang Shuxian, 2002), concepts of metadiscourse, "a construct that is increasingly important in both composition and reading research" (Margaret S. Steffensen, 1996), will help to develop an audience-oriented stance, thus improving the quality of writing for student writers, particularly those at intermediate and advanced levels.

The purpose of the study is to explore, first, how metadiscourse can enhance the writer's awareness of readers' needs and, second, how the use of metadiscourse is related to the quality of the texts that students compose, and third, how the application of metadiscourse construct can result in effective methodology in teaching writing at advanced level.

To support hypotheses about such queries, an experiment was conducted among 30 graduate students at the English Department of Xiamen University during the second term of the first academic year (2001-2002). Subjects were divided into two classes: those in the experimental class were taught metadiscourse in addition to the practice of process methodology, while others in the control class were taught composition through only a process method. Pre- and post-treatment student papers were analyzed to determine whether metadiscourse usage had produced different results and how the interpersonal, textual, and ideational components of the texts in the two groups were affected.

It was found that students in the experimental group used a much more balanced proportion of metadiscourse markers than the students in the controlled group. They also used a higher proportion of textual markers, which suggested that they were more concerned with organizing and interpreting their propositional content and in this way were making their texts more considerate and accessible to their readers. In terms of error rate before and after the teaching of metadiscourse, students in the experimental group were able to reduce the excessive and ineffective use of metadiscourse and to use more varied metadiscourse in their spontaneous writings, which were characterized with more explicit structure and improved topical progression..

The findings indicated that students from the experimental group have benefited from instruction about metadiscourse. They produced essays that received significantly higher grades than those in the control group. Qualitative in-depth analyses of the essays by students in the experimental class further showed that this improvement was attributable to the use of metadiscourse markers, which make the texts more accommodating toward readers, and which strengthen the ideational as well as the interpersonal and textual meaning of the texts. These results suggest that teaching students to use metadiscourse is an important way of improving their writing quality.

The present thesis consists of three chapters: Chapter 1 is a survey of theories of metadiscourse and discourse. It defines metadiscourse, distinguishes metadiscourse from primary text discourse, and classifies metadiscourse markers. It also examines the relevant literature in applying metadiscourse to composition teaching. Chapter 2 looks at the theories of writing as a cognitive process and the diverse approaches to teaching writing, resulting from different understandings and assumptions about the nature of writing. Chapter 3 is a detailed report of an experiment in applying the

construct of metadiscourse to composition teaching. It is concluded that teaching the use of metadiscourse is a step in the right direction to successful writing.

Chapter One: Theories of Metadiscourse and Discourse

1.1 Metadiscourse

All language use is social and communicative engagement that involves two parties, a producer (writer or speaker) and a receiver (reader or listener). We write to be read (even in examinations), and in order to accomplish this goal the writer and the reader must work together through the medium of the text.

The explicit goal of producing a written text and the implicit goal of reaching an audience are reflected in two levels of discourse: the **primary text discourse**, which provides information about the subject of the text and expands propositional content about a topic, and the **metadiscourse**, which refers to "that part of the text which comments on the text itself or which directs the comments to the reader" (Williams, 1981). This second level of the discourse is less obvious. When we write on the level of metadiscourse, we supply language hints that help readers organize, interpret, and evaluate the propositional content of the text (Vande Kopple, 1985; Williams, 1981). Take the following sentence for instance.

Frankly, John is incompetent

This sentence can be interpreted at two different levels: (a) At the level of primary text discourse, the speaker/writer provides some information about John. In other words "*John is incompetent*" is the proposition of the sentence. (b) At the level of metadiscourse, "*frankly*" indicates the attitude of the speaker/writer towards the proposition and constructs a bridge between the speaker/writer and the listener/reader.
It is a device to convey the speaker/writer's proposition.

Language considered in its social context can be described as a behavior potential (Halliday, 1976). The options in the semantic system of a language derive from three macro-functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Options in the ideational system concern the content of the text and are informational, referential, representational, and experiential. Options in the interpersonal system enable language users to establish interpersonal relationships. Here, language is used as the mediator which allows users to express their personal feelings about the ideational content of their texts and to guide the readers in processing propositional content. Options in the textual system have the function of creating texts, which are distinct from strings of words or isolated sentences and clauses. Halliday's concepts of these three functions of language are relevant to the research in metadiscourse. Primary discourse fulfills the ideational function of language; metadiscourse serves the interpersonal and textual functions of language (Vande Kopple, 1985).

1.2 Metadiscourse versus primary text discourse

1.2.1 Discourse and text

In everyday life the discourse people are engaged in has a multiplicity of roles. Whether to write a letter, to compose a course paper, to have a telephone conversation, to visit a local shop or a doctor, or even to look up a word in a dictionary, we are actively engaged in discourse as speakers and hearers, or writers and readers. In these activities, we continuously produce and interpret discourse.

Gillian Brown and George Yule (2000) stated that text, which is the verbal record of a communicative act, is the representation of discourse. Therefore, texts are classified into written and spoken. According to Halliday, "everything that is said or written" is text. (Introduction, P. xiv)

The notion of text as a printed record is familiar in the study of literature. A text may be differently presented in different editions, with different type-face and on different sizes of paper. The notion of text may also reach beyond the reproduction of the printed material. A letter, handwritten in ink, may have its text reproduced in printed form. However, from one edition to the next, from handwritten to printed, the different presentations all represent the same text.

On the other hand, the problems encountered with the notion of text as the verbal record of a communicative act become more complex when we consider what is meant by spoken text. A simplest view is that a tape-recording of a communicative act will preserve the text. However, the tape-recording may also preserve a good deal that may be extraneous to the text itself-- coughing, chairs creaking, buses going past, that scratch of a match lighting a cigarette, etc. These events should not be included as constituents of a text. In fact the discourse analyst working with a tape-recording of an event would make a written transcription and annotated according to his interests.

Text in the present paper is a technical term referring to the written texts produced by student writers

1.2.2 The text structure

The structure of a text can be broken down into (or built up from) its individual elements-- each self-contained, but at the same time related to all the others within the complete structure. The structural elements of a written product can be illustrated as follows.

Book
Part
Chapter
Section
Sub-section
Paragraph
Sentence
Clause
Phrase
Word

Of course, not all pieces of writing will use every one of these elements. Few people write complete books while at college. Nonetheless, a typical college essay is, in many ways, like a chapter of a book: a considered, detailed, and relatively self-contained part of it.

Paragraph is like a complete text in miniature. A text may, for example, have an "introduction", a "development" and a "conclusion"; so may a paragraph. A complete text may start off by making a major point, to be followed by chapters which develop it; so may a paragraph. Alternatively, a complete text may not come to its main point until the end; so may a paragraph. Many texts will be concerned with the qualifications and alternatives to the heart of their arguments; so may a paragraph. And just as a complete text will end in some conclusion, a paragraph can often be brought to an end with some concluding re-statement of the main point made earlier on.

If there is a difference (apart from length and complexity) between the structure of a complete text and that of an individual paragraph, it will be in the fact that in a complete text, there may be a great many "main points", whereas in a paragraph there is only one. This is crucial to understand what paragraphs are and how they work. No matter how many points there are in a text, these points are related to one major topic or subject that the writer is interested in. In other words all the paragraphs in a text are related to the subject, and all the sentences that make up each paragraph are also related to this subject. This characteristic of a paragraph or a text is known as unity, or singleness of purpose.

On the other hand, these related sentences and paragraphs are closely linked to each other in an orderly sequence. The typically straight line of the development of an English paragraph or text is the basis of coherence. Das (1978) clearly differentiates between "value-as text" (cohesion) and "value-as message" (coherence).

1.2.3 Coherence and cohesion

Coherence is related primarily to content, to the conceptual relatedness of propositions. Coherence is defined by Das as "value-as-message" in terms of communicative function. Such communicative events are related to those described in the speech-act theories of Austin (1962) and Grice (1975). This echoes Carrell, for whom coherence is "what the reader or listener does with the text" (1982: 482). Just as stated above, coherence refers to the knowledge that provides the conceptual under girding of a text. The concepts and the relations of the textual world (which the text creates and assumes) must be accessible to both the writer and the reader. No text is completely explicit, but with a satisfactory text, readers share enough background knowledge to be able to make successful inferences and fill gaps.

Coherence is not a property of the linguistic forms in the text and their denotations, but of these forms and meanings interpreted by a receiver through knowledge and reasoning. As such, coherence is not an absolute quality of a text, but always relative to a particular receiver and context. A description of coherence is usually concerned with the links inferred between sentences or utterances. It is often contrasted with cohesion, which is the linguistic realization of such links.

Cohesion can be defined as the set of resources for constructing relations in discourse which transcend grammatical structure (Halliday 1994:309). It is a semantic notion referring to relations of meaning between elements of a text, as in "*Wash and core six cooking apples. Put the apples in a fireproof dish.*" (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, P.3) analysis of the sentences' elements at the intersentential level reveals that there is repetition of the word apples in the second sentence as well as repetition of imperative form of three transitive verbs. The use of the definite article *the* in the second sentence depends on the occurrence of the term *apple* in the preceding sentence. At the intrasentential level, transitive verbs are followed by direct objects. *Six* is followed by a noun in the plural. The verb *put* requires a following locative, satisfied by the prepositional phrase *in a fireproof dish*.

Halliday (e.g. 1973:141) modeled cohesion as involving nonstructural relations above the sentence, within what he refers to as the textual metafunctions (as opposed to ideational and interpersonal meaning). Halliday and Hasan (1976), in their classic work on cohesion, identified five types of cohesive link operating in the upper reaches of text structure: reference, ellipsis, substitution, conjunction and lexical cohesion. In a recent reiteration of the concept of cohesion, Halliday (1994) preserves this classification.

Reference

Reference is a relationship in meaning; a relation between linguistic expressions where one determines the interpretation of the other. It refers to resources for referring to a participant or circumstantial element whose identity is recoverable. In

English the relevant resources include demonstratives, the definite article, pronouns, comparatives, and the phoric adverbs *here, there, now, then*.

Ellipsis

Ellipsis is a lexical-grammatical device involving the omission of clause, or some part of a clause or group, whose meaning will be retrievable from the preceding text. For instance, *Did they win? – Yes, they did.*

Substitution

Substitution is a special case of ellipsis with the elliptical element indirectly represented by a certain place holder- e.g. *so* and *not* for clauses, *do* for verbal groups, and *one* for nominal groups.

Conjunction

Conjunction is a cohesive relation marking logical-semantic relations between linguistic expressions and linking paragraphs. Conjunctive expressions are classified into three broad categories on the basis of the function they have in the text:

1. Elaboration: *"in other words", "I mean to say"; "for example", "thus…"*
2. Extension: *"and", "also", "nor"; "but", "on the other hand", "however"; "instead", "except for that"; "alternatively…"*
3. Enhancement: *"behind", "then", "finally", "an hour later"; "likewise", "thus"; "therefore", "with this in view"; "in this respect…"*

Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion depends on the choice by the speaker/writer of particular lexical items, which are related to the relevant preceding expressions through some recognizable semantic relation. The repetition of lexical items, synonymy or near-synonymy (including hyponymy), and collocation are included. Collocation was Firth's (1957) term for expectancy relations between lexical items (e.g. the mutual predictability of *strong* and *tea*, but not *powerful* and *tea*).

According to Halliday and Hasan, cohesion in a text is largely responsible for giving a text its "texture", its property of being a text.

Although the use of cohesive markers, either by the speaker-writer in composing texts or by the reader-listener in understanding them, is not compulsory, it is a very important way to achieve coherence.

1.2.4 Discourse errors

Discourse errors are related to the concept of coherence. According to Carl James (1998), there are three types of coherence: The first is topical coherence, which refers to the need for the components of a discourse to be relevant to its general topic or goal. Where a discourse contains irrelevant propositions or moves, it loses coherence. The second is relational coherence, which refers to the requirement for the propositions constituting a discourse to be related to each other. The third is sequential coherence, referring to the need for constitutive propositions to be arranged in some effective order.

Based on James' classification, Wang Dong (2002) conducted a research on discourse error analysis in Chinese student writing. His research indicates that there are several serious problems that Chinese students and writing teachers should pay attention to. The first is the absence of themes or topic sentences. A theme functions to state or summarize the main point of a paragraph or a text. In some student writing samples, there is no theme or it is not marked clearly, being too ambiguous to discover, or even contrary to the proposition. In some others, the theme appears in an inappropriate place, though it is clearly stated.

The second problem is in the organization of paragraphs.　The text is sectioned in an arbitrary or confusing manner.　This may be relative to the fact that there is no theme or topic sentence in most paragraphs. The students may have no idea of what a particular paragraph is mainly about, which makes it difficult for them to decide on paragraph separation. Thus it is not surprising that the text is paragraphed at will.

The third problem is a weakness in applying cohesive devices. On the one hand, students overused some transitional words, such as *and*, *but*, *however*, *for example*, *so*, *therefore*, *although*, and *though…*. On the other hand, they scarcely or never used others. This has inevitably made the relations between sentences rather simple, resulting in ambiguous logic and ineffective argument. The weakness is also found in lexical cohesion. Lexical cohesive devices employed by the students mainly include repetition of nouns and pronouns, often resulting in confusion in reference. Other devices, such as the use of super-ordinates, hyponyms, antonyms, synonyms, and the co-occurrence of relative items in question, are rarely employed in their writing samples.

Wang's research has substantially supported one of his hypotheses: grammatical errors constitute a small part of the total errors in student writing, whereas errors involving situational or stylistic appropriateness and discourse errors such as incoherence account for most errors.

1.3 Classification of metadiscourse markers

Vande Kopple (1985) analyzed seven types of metadiscourse：1) Connectives (*first, therefore, but*); 2) Code Glosses (*for example, i.*e.); 3）Illocutionary Markers *(to*

conclude, frankly speaking…）; 4）Narrators, (*according to…*); 5）Attitude Markers (*I find it surprising…*); 6） Commentary (*Dear friend, you will find it surprising…*). And 7) Validity markers, which are further subcategorized (Kopple, 1985) into Hedges *(maybe, might, it is possible that…*) and Emphatics (*it is true, certainly…*). Connectives, Code Glosses, and Illocutionary Markers are considered textual markers within a Hallidayan framework and create texture by making text organization explicit. The rest of them are interpersonal markers which develop the relationship between the reader and the writer.

Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993) have adopted Vande Kopple's system of classifying metadiscourse, but with some modification. They reorganized the categories into 1) Textual Metadiscourse, consisting of Textual Markers (Logical Connectives, Sequencers, Reminders, and Topicalizers) and Interpretative Markers (Code Glosses, Illocutionary Markers, and Announcements), and 2) Interpersonal Metadiscourse consisting of Hedges, Certainty Markers, Attributors, Attitude Markers, and Commentary.

We used Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen's typology of metadiscourse for our analysis. But we have to make some complements. That is, this system should include punctuation marks (except periods, of course) and other paralinguistic marks (such as underlining, capitalization, circled words, arrows, and numbers) as metadiscourse items because these marks can signal text glosses and clarifications as well as certainty and attitude. For example, when a colon, a comma, an underlining, parentheses, or brackets are used, an explanation is expected in the following. And here, they function as Code Glosses, which signal a following explanation. Exclamation marks, underlining, and capitalization can be used to show the writer's attitude and are subsumed to Attitude Markers.

This system should also include the following as metadiscourse: 1) Questions that are later answered by the writer in the text; 2) rhetorical questions that readers must answer themselves by actively making inferences and by employing their encyclopedia knowledge about the question topic; 3) tag questions used for politeness and maintaining interpersonal relations with the readers; 4) complementary remarks and comments to the reader that interrupt the propositional content; and 5) the first person plural pronoun "we" that includes both the writer and the reader. All of these are Commentaries, and they function to draw the reader into a close writer-reader relationship.

1.4 Metadiscourse in relation to composition teaching

1.4.1 Previous studies

The rhetorical goals of writing are fundamental aspects of the writing task. Some rhetoricians (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) propose that all writing is

motivated by the intention to persuade--to convince our readers to take certain actions, to adopt our point of view, to agree with us, to like what we like, and dislike what we dislike. Most writers who have considered their purpose of writing would agree that a primary goal of writing is to communicate with some intended audience.

Metadiscourse markers are one of the factors that make a text "reader friendly". Vande Kopple (1985) suggested that exploring metadiscourse would increase students' sensitivity to the needs of their readers; making them better able to meet those needs, and thus changing writer-based prose (Flower, 1979) into reader-based prose. Furthermore, he argued that understanding metadiscourse would make writers more aware of the truth value of the propositional content and turn them into the writers who pay more attention to reflecting any doubts they may have in their writing rather than simply asserting that their statements are true.

Many of the categories of metadiscourse are covered in composition instruction for both first-language and second-language students and are included in composition textbooks (Williams, 1981) though there has been no attempt to organize an entire composition course around the constructs of metadiscourse. Considerable attention has been paid to metadiscourse in written texts among foreign researchers (Crismore, 1989; Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993; Crismore & Vande Kopple, 1988; Steffensen, 1992; Vande Kopple, 1985). However, very few studies have looked at variations in how student writers incorporate metadiscourse into a text. Intaraprawat (1988) and Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) have shown that appropriate use of metadiscourse plays an important part in a successful text. When student writers lack an overall knowledge of rhetorical conventions, they do not know how to make good use of these interpersonal and textual functions of language. This often leads them to produce writer-based prose in which the propositional content is not effectively conveyed, thus lowering the overall quality of their texts. Cheng Xiaoguang (1997) applied metadiscourse to composition teaching and taught native-American collegiate metadiscourse. His experiment proves that metadiscourse is an important technique to improve students' writing skills.

1.4.2 My proposition

The following study is organized around the concept of metadiscourse. Metadiscourse is "a construct that is increasingly important in both composition and reading research" (Margaret S. Steffensen, 1996). It is believed that many Chinese student writers focus on the product, the written text, and do not pay enough attention to the ultimate goal of writing and communicating with an audience (Yang Shuxian, 2002), so teaching metadiscourse will be an effective methodology for Chinese students at intermediate and advanced levels. Thus, the purpose of the study is to explore, first, how metadiscourse can enhance the writer's awareness of readers' needs and, second, how the use of metadiscourse is related to the quality of the texts that students compose.