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The Effect of Metadiscourse Use on Iranian EFL Learners’ Lecture Comprehension

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Abstract

The literature on the theory of metadiscourse markers suggests that one significant function fulfilled by this type of resources is facilitating the comprehensibility of texts. Although many researchers have investigated this function in written texts, there has been little research on the role metadiscourse plays in the comprehension of spoken discourse. The aim of the present study was to gain insights into the effect of metadiscourse use on Iranian EFL learners’ lecture comprehension. To do so, 22 students were selected to participate in the study. In order to assess the students’ language proficiency a pre-test, namely Oxford Placement Test (OPT), was used. Then the subjects were randomly divided into two groups. During ten sessions, students in two groups listened to lectures with different topics in the field of linguistics by the teacher. Two versions of the same lecture were used. One of them included metadiscourse markers (Hyland’s model, 2005) and in the other one, metadiscourse markers were removed. To measure learners’ listening comprehension, a test consisting of a set of lecture-related questions (post-test) was administered. Then both groups of participants were asked to answer a questionnaire to assess the perceived level of the difficulty and the quality of the lecture. In order to analyze the obtained data, an independent t-Test was run. The findings of the study revealed that the subjects comprehended the lecture better when metadiscourse markers were included.

Keywords: EFL Learners; Lecture Comprehension; Metadiscourse; Interactive metadiscourse; Interactional metadiscourse.

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1. Introduction

The notion of interaction, especially the linguistic mechanisms used by speakers and writers to convey their personal feelings and assessments, has become an increasingly attractive area of research in recent years. According to Schiffrin (1994), communication is basically social interaction. Communication is not an isolated island with one-to-one relationship, while it is realized among different people with different knowledge, purpose and needs in a given society (Aguilar, 2008).

The most important task in communication between people is to convey some information. In order to present a logical and cohesive construction of this information, a writer/speaker uses various linguistic expressions. Some of these expressions show how the writer/speaker constructs the logical progress of the content of the text, as well as his subjective attitudes according to the content. These special linguistic expressions are called metadiscourse.

Crismore (1983) defined metadiscourse as a level of discourse where the author intrudes into the ongoing discourse to direct rather than inform the reader. Similarly, Hyland (2005, p. 3) believed that “metadiscourse embodies the idea that communication is more than just the exchange of information, goods or services, but also involves the personalities, attitudes and assumptions of those who are communicating”, and metadiscourse is taken to be “the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community”. (Hyland, 2005, p. 46). Similarly, Vande Kopple (1985, p. 83) defined metadiscourse as “discourse that people use not to expand referential material, but to help the readers connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes towards that material”.

Various taxonomies on metadiscourse elements have been proposed since initial interest began some decades ago (e.g. Vande Kopple, 1985; Crismore et al., 1993; Dahl, 2004; Hyland, 2005; Adel, 2006; Dafouz-Milne, 2008). Most of the taxonomies follow Halliday’s (1994) conception of meta-functions which distinguishes between the ideational elements of a text, its textual and interpersonal functions.

Hyland’s new model advocates the need to view all metadiscourse as interpersonal: “in that it takes account of the reader’s knowledge, textual experiences and processing requirements and that it provides writers with an armory of rhetorical appeals to achieve this” (Hyland 2005, p. 41). They have adopted Thompson’s (2001) label of interactive (instead of textual) and interactional (instead of interpersonal) metadiscourse.

Hyland’s (2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse recognizes the existence of two dimensions of interaction, the first one is the interactive dimension which: “concerns the writer’s awareness of a participating audience and the ways he or she seeks to accommodate its probable knowledge, interests, rhetorical expectations and processing abilities” (Hyland, 2005, p. 49). Incorporated in this dimension are the resources which address ways of organizing and constructing discourse with the reader’s needs in mind. The interactive resources consist of five categories:

- **Transitions markers**: a set of devices which used to mark additive, contrastive, and consequential steps in the discourse, as opposed to the external world and help readers to interpret pragmatic connections between steps in an argument. They consist of items such as: *in addition, but, thus, and, etc.*
- **-Frame markers**: They are elements that show schematic text structure and composed of items used to sequence, to label text stages, to announce discourse goals, and to indicate topic shifts: *my purpose here is to, to conclude, etc.*
- **Endophoric markers**: they are expressions that refer to other parts of the text to make additional information available to the reader, such as: *noted above, see Fig. in section 2.*
- **Evidentials**: they are the source of information from other, such as: *Z states, According to X, etc.*
- **Code glosses**: elements that provide additional information by explaining, rephrasing or elaborating what has been said as: *in other words, e.g., etc.*
On the other hand, interactional metadiscourse deals with the ways the writers comment on their own messages to make their views known while revealing “the extent to which the writer works to jointly construct the text with the reader” (Hyland, 2005, p. 49). The interactional resources consist of the following categories:

- **Hedges**: features which limit the writer’s full commitment to what is stated in a proposition and which may be the result of certain pragmatic conventions in academic writing.
- **Boosters**: features which highlight the writers’ certainty and conviction about a proposition and which may be the result of certain pragmatic conventions in academic writing.
- **Attitude markers**: items which show the writer’s affective evaluation of given parameters or entities.
- **Engagement markers**: elements through which scholars bring the readers into the text, involving them in the negotiation of academic knowledge. These include personal pronouns, question forms, directives and asides.
- **Self-mentions**: they are explicit signals of the authorial persona of the scholar(s). They feature self-references and self-citations.

Investigations of spoken academic discourse are fewer and farther between than are equivalent studies of written academic discourse. There are many reasons for this, one being that spoken data is considerably more difficult and expensive to prepare for research (record and transcribe) than written data.

One of the most important genres within spoken academic English is lectures. The lecture itself brings its own particular and potential areas of difficulty. Especially problematic is “the requirements to be able to concentrate on and understand long stretches of talk without the opportunity of engaging in the facilitating functions of interactive discourse, such as asking for a repetition and negotiating meaning” (Flowerdew, 1994, p. 182).

Listening to lectures can be challenging for non-native students because of the schematic structure of the lecture. For example, lectures can either be ‘information driven’ or ‘point-driven’. ‘Point-driven’ lectures contain an argument structure. ‘Information-driven’ lectures contain facts. Facts are easier for foreign language students to understand than arguments. This is because non-native students may recognize the words, the informational units and frame markers of a lecture, but not its main points or logical argument (Olsen & Huckin, 1990).

Because of the scarcity of research on the effect of metadiscourse markers on EFL Learners’ lecture comprehension, this study limited itself to this area of study. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the effects of metadiscourse markers use on the comprehension of lecture by Iranian EFL learners. This study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

- **Q1. Does metadiscourse have any significant impact on EFL learners’ lecture comprehension?**
- **Q2. How does the removal of metadiscourse markers from a text affect its comprehensibility?**

Therefore, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- **H01.** Metadiscourse doesn’t have any significant impact on EFL learners’ lecture comprehension.
- **H1.** The removal of metadiscourse markers from a text makes its comprehensibility difficult.

2. Methodology

The present study is an experimental research. Both qualitative and quantitative paradigms were utilized in analyzing the data. The following is a brief account of the methodology which includes the participants, the materials and the procedure in details.

2.1. Participants

Twenty-two participants were selected for this study included Iranian EFL learners who enrolled in Marefat Language School in Maragheh.
2.2. Instruments

Concerning the purpose of the study, three instruments including Oxford Placement Test (OPT), Lectures, Lecture-related Tests (post-test), and Questionnaire, were used in the study.

2.3. Procedure

To begin data collection, almost 50 students at the intermediate level of English were selected to participate in this study. After determining their level of language proficiency by using Oxford Placement Test, 22 of these students were chosen as the homogenous intermediate samples based on their scores on the test. Then, they were randomly divided into two groups (group A & group B). In every session, group A received lectures with metadiscourse markers (Hyland’s interpersonal model of metadiscourse (2005)) and group B received the same lecture without metadiscourse markers. Both of the groups listened to the lectures about LINGUISTICS (The Study of Language: Yule, 2006) by the teacher for about 35 minutes. Afterwards, both of the groups answered the lecture-related questions to measure learners’ listening comprehension through Multiple-choice items, Wh-questions and True/False statements for 15 minutes. Finally, after finishing the test, immediately, a short questionnaire was distributed among groups A and B, and they were asked to answer the questions to evaluate the levels of difficulty and comprehension of the lecture and to assess the quality of the lecture for 10 minutes.

2.4. Design

Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively based on Hyland’s (2005) interpersonal model.

3. Result

In order to investigate the aforementioned hypotheses, a number of descriptive and inferential statistical procedures were used. The mean performance of the two groups on the listening comprehension test was compared by using an independent t-test.

Table 3.1. Group Statistics of Texts With and Without Metadiscourse Markers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grouping</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variables</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with metadiscourse markers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>79.64</td>
<td>5.143</td>
<td>1.551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>without metadiscourse markers</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>64.55</td>
<td>8.501</td>
<td>2.563</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Looking at the Table, one can clearly see that the mean scores of lectures with metadiscourse markers (79.64) exceed the one they have obtained on the lecture without metadiscourse markers (64.55). Having scanned the statistics of the independent t-test, we need to determine if the difference across the variables is significant. Thereby, the next table clearly illustrated the significance of the resulting difference.

The results of the t-test showed that the \( T_{\text{observed}} = 5.037 \) for variables with \( \text{df} (20) \) at \( P \leq 0.05 \) level (two-tailed significance) which is greater than \( T_{\text{critical}} = 2.086 \). As far as the learners’ understanding is concerned, it was surprising to us because it was far better in group A than in group B. It is worth remembering that the first hypothesis was that metadiscourse doesn’t have any significant impact on EFL learners’ lecture comprehension. But at least for us, it was striking to find the reverse. According to the result of t-test used to compare the post-test scores of students, statistically significant difference was found between the post-test scores of the two groups. So the null hypothesis was rejected.
Table 3.2. Independent Samples Test of Texts with and Without Metadiscourse Markers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Levene's Test for Equality of Variances</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Sig.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
<td>2.396</td>
<td>.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal variances not assumed</td>
<td>5.037</td>
<td>16.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.1. The Analysis of Frequency of the metadiscourse markers in lectures presented for group A

In every session, group A was faced with lectures including metadiscourse markers (Hyland’s interpersonal model, 2005) as shown in figure 3.1, while group B was faced with the same lecture without metadiscourse markers. The following examples illustrated the metadiscourse markers existing in the lecture presented for group A.

- **Transition markers:**
  - *However* recent evidence demonstrates that Broca’s area *also* plays a significant role in language Comprehension. (Lecture3)

- **Frame markers:**
-So, all affixes (Suffixes & Prefixes) in English are bound morphemes. *(Lecture 4)*

- **Endophoric markers:**  
  - Long before the earliest writing of the Sumerians and the Egyptians were developed. *(Lecture 2)*

- **Evidentials:**  
  - According to one view God created Adam “whatever Adam called every living creature that was the name of thereof”. *(Lecture 1)*

- **Code glosses:**  
  - We can also say that two or more terms which share the same superordinate term are co-hyponyms. *(Lecture 8)*

- **Hedges:**  
  - You should be able to feel some vibrations. *(Lecture 9)*

- **Boosters:**  
  - Clipping is also known as shorting. *(Lecture 5)*

- **Attitude markers:**  
  - Even further back in the roof of the mouth, beyond the hard palate, you will find a soft area which is called the velum. *(Lecture 10)*

- **Engagement markers:**  
  - As you know, we have two kinds of sounds. *(Lecture 9)*

- **Self-mentions:**  
  - Yet my passport has expired cannot be replaced by my passport has died. *(Lecture 7)*

### 3.2. The analysis of Questionnaires

During 10 sessions, after presenting lectures for both groups (for group A lectures with metadiscourse markers and for group B, the same lectures without them), a short questionnaire was distributed among them. This questionnaire included 5 questions (Appendix A). Questions number 1, 2, and 5 assessed the perceived level of difficulty and comprehension of the lectures in both groups and questions number 3 and 4 evaluated the quality of the lectures and the speaker in both groups. Totally, we had 110 questionnaires for group A and 110 questionnaires for group B. The results of the questionnaire analysis include:

- In 6 of the questionnaires (in group A), very difficult (1) was chosen as the lectures’ level of difficulty. While in group B, in 30 questionnaires, very difficult (1) was selected as level of difficulty.
- In 24 of the questionnaires (in group A), difficult (2) was selected as the lectures’ level of difficulty. While in group B, in 20 questionnaires, difficult (2) was opted as level of difficulty.
- In 45 of the questionnaires (in group A), average (3) was selected as the lectures’ level of difficulty. While in group B, in 43 questionnaires, average (3) was chosen as level of difficulty.
- In 32 of the questionnaires (in group A), easy (4) was chosen the lectures’ level of difficulty. While in group B, in 13 questionnaires, easy (4) was opted as level of difficulty. The following figure shows the differences between two groups.
In 105 of the questionnaires (in group A), *much* (1) was chosen as the lectures’ level of comprehension. While in group B, this number was 63.

- In 141 of the questionnaires (in group A), *to some extent* (2) was opted as the lectures’ level of comprehension. While in group B, this number was 125.

- In 59 of the questionnaires (in group A), *little* (3) was selected as the lectures’ level of comprehension. While in group B, this number was 82.

- In 19 of the questionnaires (in group A), *not at all* (4) was chosen as the lectures’ level of comprehension. While in group B, this number was 13. The following figure shows the differences between two groups.

In 78 of the questionnaires (in group A), *good* (2) was opted as the quality of the lecture and the speaker. While in group B, this number was 103.

- In 48 of the questionnaires (in group A), *very good* (3) was selected as the quality of the lecture and the speaker. While in group B, this number was 62.

- In 40 of the questionnaires (in group A), *excellent* (4) was chosen as the quality of the lecture and the speaker. While in group B, this number was 11. The following figure shows the differences between two groups.
Based on the above-mentioned findings, we concluded that the performance of group A in the post-test was better than that of group B, while for both groups, the post test in every session after presenting lecture was the same. The statistical analysis of the mean scores and the analysis of the questionnaires in both groups produced evidence that the extracts containing metadiscourse markers were more comprehensible than the extracts without them. As a result the second hypothesis was accepted.

Inspired by Perez & Macia’s (2002) research, that students’ level of language proficiency in English and different types of metadiscourse markers present in lectures are two intervening factors that influence the level of listening comprehension. Equally, this study achieved to this findings that metadiscourse has significant impact on learners’ lecture comprehension and the removal of metadiscourse markers from a text makes its comprehensibility difficult.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This section extends the interpretation of the findings in the present study. Overall the obtained results provided answers to the research questions of the study that metadiscourse markers have a positive influence on comprehension and the lack of those markers is the cause of incomprehensibility. Also, the statistical analysis of the mean scores produces evidence that the lectures containing metadiscourse markers were more comprehensible than the lectures without.

Considering all the obtained data, the researcher was urged to reject the null hypothesis of the current study. The findings of the research are in line with the findings of the reviewed studies indicating the influence of discourse markers on the comprehension of academic lecture, and they conclude that discourse markers can facilitate comprehension, (e.g. Chaudron and Richard, 1986; Flowerdew and Toroza, 1995; Eslami and Eslami Rasekh, 2007).

Metadiscourse markers play a facilitating role in the comprehension of a text; consequently, the number of metadiscourse markers can be effective in further facilitating and smoothing of the listening process. That is to say, a rise in the number of metadiscourse markers can increase the revelation of the rhetorical structure of the text and thereby increase the level of facility these markers equip the listeners with. In fact, the lack of metadiscourse markers seems not to hinder the comprehension of a text, but it may hinder expansion of the possibilities for the semantic relationship between the elements they associate.

As noted above (section two), Hyland’s interpersonal model (2005) was chosen as a theoretical framework, including interactive and interactional markers. According to Hyland (2005), through metadiscourse markers readers/listeners can reconstruct the organizing structure of the text, identify the logical linkage of contents, and process the flow of information more easily and can also activate those conceptual schemata involved in communication of the meaning.
Through the use of interactive markers, speakers (lecturers) fashion their text and organize the propositional content that they wish to share with the listeners. In other words, interactive markers indicate the logical and temporal relationship between parts of the text and make the listener’s intention clear. The removal of these markers from the texts broke the bonds existing among the propositions and consequently sentence appeared confusing. For example, endophoric markers can help students understand the macro-structure of the text and also encourage them to retain and build on newly acquired knowledge. On the other hand, interactional markers allow the speakers to create a dialog with the listeners and to style their listening. Different types of interactional markers by their various functions in the texts make them friendly and interesting for the listeners. For example, attitude markers can prompt students to contribute their own ideas and thus critically react to the text.

As a whole view, considering the second question and the lectures without metadiscourse markers, it can be implied that the removing all metadiscourse elements would make the text much less personal, less interesting and less easy to follow. Also, the lack of them resulted in the text’s dryness. Through metadiscourse, the lecturer tends to select appropriate language components and organize them effectively in order to help the listener understand better, at the same time the lecturer will express his/her attitude and view and try to attract the listener’s attention and even guide the listener to participate the communication.

Metadiscourse has a pragmatic function in that it establishes a link between speaker and listener and shows the speaker’s intention so that the listener grasp the meaning of sentences better and the text becomes coherent and the omission of metadiscourse in the text would blur the separation of content, making the text less cohesive and less considerate of listeners.

In general, the results of this study lend further support to the idea that metadiscourse markers have a positive influence on comprehension. The greater presence of metadiscourse markers could be linked to the better performance of the group A. And the lack of metadiscourse markers is the cause of incomprehensibility in group B.

The findings of this study also have certain implications for both teachers and learners. The findings might imply that both language teachers and learners should pay special attention to the concept of metadiscourse while teaching or learning language. In this way, teachers can enable their students to become better listeners and also speakers. If the students become aware of the fact that texts consist of both propositional content and interactional elements, they can comprehend the texts better by following the speaker’s line of argument more smoothly, and also speak more comprehensibly by anticipating their listener’s interaction with the content.

The findings also have implications for syllabus designers and materials developers. The findings might suggest that teaching metadiscourse markers should be a part of some language courses. Language books should enable learners to not only understand those materials and use them as appropriately as possible, but also they should teach them how to use those markers as a strategy for comprehending the texts and also for communicating with others.

References
Appendix A

Questionnaire

Please check the option that applies to you.

1) How was the difficulty level of the lecture?

   Very difficult   Difficult   Average   Easy

2) To what extent did you understand the major points of the lecture?

   Much   To some extent   little   Not at all

3) To what extent did the lecturer try to make the listener understand the complicated points of the lecture?

   Much   To some extent   little   Not at all

4) Assess the quality of the lecture. Reason your answer.

   Poor   Good   Very good   Excellent

   ........................................................................................................................................
   ........................................................................................................................................
   ..............................................................

5) Did you find it difficult to answer the questions? Why (not).

   Much   To some extent   little   Not at all

   ........................................................................................................................................
   ........................................................................................................................................
   ..............................................................

THANKS ALOT