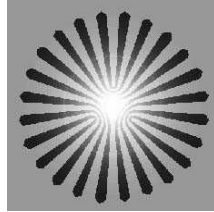


In the Name of God



Payamenoor University
Faculty of Humanities

**The Comparison of the Effects of Metadiscourse
Markers and Proficiency Level in Reading
Comprehension of
Iranian EFL learners**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
M.A. in English Language Teaching

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“Dedicated to my parents,

For their love,

support, and encouragement”

Abstract

The present study aimed at investigating the effects of metadiscourse markers on the comprehension of English texts by Iranian EFL learners. It, moreover, tried to measure the subjects' awareness of those markers and their interaction with the texts by using a follow-up questionnaire. A set of 11 True/False questions were developed based on the propositional contents of an original English text and its doctored, metadiscourse-removed version. Then, it was used as the English reading comprehension test. The Participants' awareness of metadiscourse markers and their interaction with the texts were measured by a set of two multiple-choice questions used as a follow-up questionnaire. The results of the analysis showed that all the participants of the study performed significantly better on the un-doctored text. The study, moreover, revealed that it was the lower learners rather than the higher ones who benefitted more from the presence of metadiscourse markers. The results of the follow-up questionnaire also revealed that difficulty of a text in its general sense had nothing to do with the presence or absence of metadiscourse markers, but difficulty in the sense of being able to comprehend the major points of the texts was closely related to the presence or absence of those markers ,with un-doctored text felt to be understood more by all the participants.

Keywords: Metadiscourse, Interaction, Text, Reading Comprehension, Awareness, Difficulty.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1. 1. Overview

Nowadays, most researchers or teachers of a second/foreign language pay special attention to the activity of reading, believing that reading is one of the most important skills for learners (see Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Lynch & Hudson, 1991). Richards and Renandya (2002) point out major reasons why language teachers should focus on this activity. First among the reasons is that many EFL learners declare reading as one of their most important goals. Second, extensive exposure to comprehensible written texts can facilitate language acquisition; and finally, reading provides opportunities to introduce new topics, to stimulate discussion, and to study language (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, and idioms).

Reading in the view of Nunan (2001) is an interactive process which pushes the reader to constantly shuttle between bottom-up and top-down processes. This interactive process means that in addition to decoding the meaning of individual words, prior knowledge of content and relevant schemata should also be activated and used. Moreover, aside from a student knowing a number of words, being familiar with context and falling back on background knowledge, research clearly shows that a reader's knowledge of text structure and discourse cues has significant effects on reading in a foreign language (see Carrel, 1985; Carrel *et al.*, 1989; Raymond, 1993; Tang, 1992).

Parallel to the interaction between the reader and the content in the reading process, an interaction also takes place between the reader and the writer (Camiciottoli, 2003). This latter interaction is called metadiscourse, and is defined by Crismore *et al.*

(1993, p.40) as “linguistic materials in texts, written or spoken, which does not add anything to the propositional content, but that is intended to help the listener or reader organize, interpret, and evaluate the information given.”

Vande Kopple (1997, p.2), too, defines 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.” Likewise, Hyland (2005, p.3) believes 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.”

Although in recent years some researchers have investigated the effects of some types of metadiscourse markers on reading comprehension (see Aliasin, 2006; Chung, 2000; Geva, 1992; Mohammad Salehi, 2005; Ozono, 2002; Ozono & Ito, 2003), few studies have taken a holistic look at their effects on reading comprehension (see Camiciottoli, 2003), and almost no study has focused on their effects as a whole on the comprehension of English texts by Iranian EFL learners.

Being in agreement with the above discovery, the purpose of this study is, therefore, an investigation on the effects of metadiscourse on the comprehension of English texts by Iranian EFL students according to their proficiency levels. The possible degree of the awareness of metadiscourse markers among groups of learners will be investigated by using a follow-up questionnaire.

1. 2. Statement of the Problem and Significance of the Study

Today English is the lingua franca of the world, and according to Crystal (1992), non-native users of English comprise more than two thirds of the potential speakers of English. It is the language of commerce, education, and diplomacy in the modern world; and hence reading in that language is an important skill for those who learn it as their second or foreign language.

Reading is the process of activating the relevant knowledge and related language to accomplish the exchange of information from the writer to the reader. Some scholars in the past used to call it a passive skill, but nowadays, because of the priority given to the active mind of the reader, it is referred to as a receptive skill in the sense that the reader receives something from the writer and tries not only to decode the language in the text but also to recreate the writer's intended meaning, using whatever resources he/she has at his/her disposal (Chastain, 1988).

In fact, each proficient writer tries as hard as possible to create a dialogue with the reader. This dialogue is brought about by the help of metadiscourse markers. Therefore, as observed by Hyland (2005), the writer does not simply present information about the suggested route but he/she takes the trouble to see the walk from the reader's perspective. Halliday (1985) also believes that readers must anticipate what the writer is going to say and engage themselves with the text, and in this fashion meaning can not be arrived at only by sequencing unconnected sentences. Crismore (1985) also believes that all academic disciplines are conventions of rhetoric personality which influence the ways writers intrude into texts to organize arguments and represent themselves, their readers and their attitudes and all of them can be accomplished by using metadiscourse in the text.

Metadiscourse markers satisfy the textual and interpersonal functions of language proposed by Halliday (1978), but unfortunately, as Camiciottoli (2003) and Vande Kopple (2002) indicate, the effects of these non-linguistic materials on reading comprehension have not been intensely investigated in foreign or second language contexts. In fact the dangerous tendency, as Coates (1987, p.113) points out, has always been “to concentrate on the referential function of language at the expense of all the others.”

Although metadiscourse has been studied from a descriptive point of view (e.g., Bondi, 1999; Bunton, 1999; Crismore, 1989; Crismore & Farnsworth, 1989; Crismore & Farnsworth, 1990; Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1981 & 1990), and some researchers have investigated its use by different writers (e.g., Abdollahzadeh, 2001; Bandari, 1999; Carlson, 1988; Cheng and Steffensen, 1996; Connor, 1987; Crismore *et al.*, 1993; Ghapanchi, 1998; Hyland, 2004; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Marandi, 2002; Simin, 2003), little work has been done on the effects of metadiscourse on reading comprehension of native or foreign language learners (e.g., Camiciottoli, 2003; Crismore, 1989; Crismore & Vande Kopple, 1997); and almost no researcher has, up to this point, focused on the effects of metadiscourse as a whole (i.e., not focusing on one aspect of it like ‘connectives’) on the comprehension of English texts by Iranian EFL learners.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to shed light on the effects of metadiscourse markers on the comprehension of English texts by Iranian EFL learners. This study will, moreover, include proficiency level of the learners as a moderator variable; and, finally, in this study, the awareness of the students’ of the metadiscourse markers and the degree of

their interaction with the texts will also be investigated and analyzed by using a follow-up questionnaire.

1. 3. Research Questions

In the present study an attempt was made in order to answer the following questions regarding the effects of metadiscourse on the comprehension of English text:

1. Is there any difference between the performances of EFL learners on the un-doctored English text (the text with the original metadiscourse markers) and the performances of students on the doctored English text (the text whose metadiscourse markers have been removed)?
2. Is there any difference between the performances of students on the two kinds of English texts across different proficiency levels?
3. Do the students find the doctored texts more difficult to understand than the un-doctored ones considering different proficiency levels?

1. 4. Research Hypotheses

Based on the above research questions, the following null hypotheses are suggested:

H₀1. There is no difference between the performances of students on the un-doctored English text and the performances of students on the doctored English text.

H₀2. There is no difference between the performances of students on the two kinds of English texts across their different proficiency levels.

H₀3. The students do not find the doctored texts more difficult to understand than the un-doctored ones considering different proficiency levels.

1. 5. Definition of Important Terms

1. 5. 1. Discourse

According to Crystal (2003, p.141), discourse refers to “a continuous stretch of (especially spoken) language larger than a sentence. McCarthy (2001, p.48) also believes that discourse is “the organization of language beyond the level of the sentence and the individual speaking turn, whereby meaning is negotiated in the process of interaction.”

1. 5. 2. Metalanguage

Richards *et al.* (1992, p.227) believe that metalanguage is “the language used to analyze or describe a language.” For example in English the sentence ‘an adjective is a word that describes the thing, quality, state, or action which a noun refers to’ is in metalanguage.

1. 5. 3. Metadiscourse

Williams (1981) defines metadiscourse as “Writing about writing, whatever does not refer to the subject matter being addressed.” Mao (1993, p.265) also believes that metadiscourse can “refer to discourse about discourse, to any kind of critical interpretation

or theoretical exposition of a given (or target) discourse or theory.”

1. 5. 4. Textual Metadiscourse

Vande Kopple (1985, p.87) defines textual metadiscourse as metadiscourse that “shows how we link and relate individual propositions so that they form a cohesive and coherent text and how individual elements of those propositions make sense in conjunction with other elements of the text.”

1. 5. 5. Interpersonal Metadiscourse

According to Vande Kopple (1985, p.86-87), interpersonal metadiscourse can be defined as “communication about communication”, and is used to “express our personalities and our reactions to the propositional content of our texts and characterize the interaction we would like to have with our readers about that content.”

1. 5. 6. Reading

Richards *et al.* (2001, p.306) define reading as “perceiving a written text in order to understand its contents.” Widdowson (1979, p.173), too, has his own view of reading. According to him, reading is “a reasoning activity whereby the reader creates meaning on the basis of textual clues.” Likewise, Urquhart and Weir (1998, p.22) believe that reading is “the process of receiving and interpreting information encoded in language form via the medium of print.”

1. 6. Limitations of the Study

1. This study deals with the effects of metadiscourse on the comprehension of English texts by higher intermediate and lower intermediate students; therefore, other proficiency levels are not included.

2. This study will be conducted in a language institute context not in a university

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

2. 1. Importance of Reading

Reading according to Chastain (1988) is the process of activating the relevant knowledge and related language to accomplish the exchange of information from the writer to the reader. In the past, some scholars used to call it a passive skill. But, today, because of the priority given to the active mind of the reader, it is referred to as a receptive skill in the sense that the reader receives something from the writer and tries not only to decode the language in the text but also to recreate the writer's intended meaning.

The ability to read in a foreign language is one of the most important skills required of people in academic, professional, and international settings. Rivers (1981), in a similar vein, considers reading as “the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information, but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of language” (p. 259). This is particularly true of English, for today it is the language of education, commerce, and tourism, and this is why for most of the EFL learners reading is the main reason why they want to learn English.

2. 2. Definitions of Reading

Although Widdowson (1979, p.173) believes that generally reading is “a reasoning activity whereby the reader creates meaning on the basis of textual clues”, and Urquhart and Weir (1998, p.22), too, define reading as “the process of receiving and interpreting

information encoded in language form via the medium of print”, Carrel and Grabe (2002) contend that reading is difficult to define precisely because different people read for different purposes and vary the cognitive processes and knowledge resources that they use while reading.

In the same fashion, Grabe (2002, p.53) believes that any comprehensive understanding of the activity of reading should take into account the following points:

1. Different purposes for reading
2. Definitional criteria for fluent reading
3. Procedures that underlie reading as an individual skill
4. Social context influences on L2 reading
5. Unique features of L2 reading as opposed to L1 reading

He mentions ‘reading to find information’, ‘reading to learn’, ‘reading to critique and evaluate’, and ‘reading for basic comprehension’ as the main purposes for reading in a second or a foreign language. He believes that in the first the crucial skill is scanning for a specific word, phrase or number; in the second, in contrast, the necessary skill is looking for the main ideas and awareness of many of the details of the text and an organizing frame; in the third, reflections and connections to prior knowledge and an integration with prior knowledge are needed; and, finally, in ‘reading for general understanding’, a large recognition vocabulary, automaticity of word recognition, rapid overall speed, and the ability to build overall text comprehension under relatively rapid time demands are the