EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension Ability in the Light of Metadiscourse Awareness

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Abstract—Nowadays, many researchers or teachers of a second or foreign language believe that reading is one of the most important skills for ESL/EFL learners, so they pay special attention to the activity of reading (Grabe & Stoller, 2001; Lynch & Hudson, 1991).Recent studies of written texts show a growing interest in interaction between readers and writers. This interaction is called metadiscourse. This study examined the effect of metadiscourse awareness on reading comprehension of EFL intermediate students by using metadiscoursal taxonomies proposed by Hyland (2005). The participants included sixty intermediate female learners at a language institute in Urmia. They were randomly assigned to two groups. A pre-test of reading comprehension was given to both the experimental and control groups to check their initial performance in reading comprehension. Then the experimental group was exposed to instruction of metadiscourse markers for five sessions. The control group received no specific instructions in metadiscourse. Finally, both groups were given a post-test to measure their reading ability. The findings revealed that explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers improves EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. These findings have some implications for language teachers and material developers. They should pay more attention to metadiscourse markers in making EFL curricula and try to raise the learners' awareness toward MD markers to improve their reading comprehension ability.

Index Terms—metadiscourse awareness, interactive resources, interactional resources, reading comprehension

I. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of reading skills in an L2 is a priority for millions of learners around the world. It is vital for academic achievement and is an important and necessary skill for most forms of personal learning and educational attainment in today's society. Eskey (2005) stated that most of the students who study English as a foreign language (EFL) hardly need to speak the language in their daily lives but they might need to read it in order to "access the wealth of information recorded exclusively in the language" (p. 563). However, because of complex nature of reading process, developing effective reading habits can be very difficult. As Rivers (1988) stated, reading is a problem-solving activity that engages the reader in the process of deriving and assigning meaning. During this problem-solving activity readers should use their contextual information such as syntactic, semantic, and discourse constraints. These pieces of information affect their interpretation of the passage.

Reading was traditionally considered as a passive process. However, it is recently recognized as an active and interactive process. Nunan (2001) believes that reading is an interactive process in which the reader has to combine bottom-up and top-down processes. In this view, besides an interaction between the reader and the content, there is also an interaction between the reader and the writer. This latter interaction, which involves conveying of attitudes and assumptions, is called metadiscourse (MD). Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen (1993) defined MD as "linguistic material 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" (p. 40). Therefore, as Nemati & Parvaresh (2008) stated, the process of writing involves working upon two levels: on the first level, writers focus on what they want to communicate to the readers, and on the second level, they focus on how they communicate with the readers. Vande Kopple (1997) pointed out that the first level is called primary, or discourse, level, whereas the second is called metadiscourse level.

Hyland and Tse (2004) claimed that through metadiscourse markers (e.g., with some surprise, I suspect that, in simple terms, we all know that), the writer is able to not only bring coherence and reader-friendliness to the text but also associate it with a given context and express his or her personality, credibility, and relationship to the message. As a result, these markers are used to organize the writer's position towards the reader or the content (Hyland, 2005). Thus, metadiscourse markers help both the writer and the reader in two ways. On one level, they help the writer organize the propositional content and his or her ideas, and they help the reader interpret the writer's message through indicating the

organization of the text. On the other level, they build an interaction between the reader and the writer and bring reader-friendliness to the text (Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007).

Zellig Harris coined the term metadiscourse in 1959 to show a writer's /speaker's effort to guide a receiver's perception of a text (Hyland, 2005). The concept was later developed by Vande Kopple (1985), Crismore (1989) and Hyland (2004, 2005). As Hyland (2005) mentioned "metadiscourse stresses that as we speak or write we negotiate with others, making decisions about the kind of effects we are having on our listeners or readers" (p. 3).

Since MD markers have different meanings, there are several taxonomies for these markers in the literature. Vande Kopple (1997) defined MD as discourse that writers use to help readers connect, organize, interpret, evaluate, and develop attitudes toward the informational material. Using Lautamatti's (1978) taxonomy and Williams' (1981) work, Vande Kopple (1985) identified two main types of MD markers: textual and interpersonal. He divided them into seven subcategories: text connectives, code glosses, illocution markers, validity markers, narrators, attitude markers, commentaries. Table 1 illustrates the classification system as suggested by Vande Kopple (1985).

TABLE 1
VANDE KOPPLE'S CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM FOR METADISCOURSE (1985)

Textural Metadiscourse
Text connectives Used to help readers recognize how texts are organized and how different parts of a text are connected to one another functionally or semantically. They include sequencers (first, next, however, but), reminders (as mentioned in Chapter 1), and topicalizers (with regards to, in connection with). Logical and temporal relationship markers are also included (consequently, at the same time).
Code glosses Used to help readers grasp the writer's intended meaning. Often they are based on the writer's perception of the reader's knowledge of the topic. These devices reword, explain or clarify semantic relationships (x means y).
Validity markers Used to express the writer's commitment to the probability of or truth of a statement. Hedges (perhaps, may, might), emphatics (clearly, obviously), and attributors (according to Willett) are included here.
Narrators Used to inform readers of the source of the information presented- who said or wrote something (according to Scott).
Interpersonal Metadiscourse
Illocution markers Used to explicitly target the speech act being performed at specific points in the text (to sum up, I hypothesize, we predict).
Attitude markers Used to reveal the writer's attitude toward the propositional content (unfortunately, interestingly, and surprisingly).
Commentaries Used to communicate with readers in an implicit dialogue (dear reader, you may not agree).

Crismore et al. (1993) tried to improve Vande Kopple's (1985) MD taxonomy. They defined metadiscourse as the linguistic material intended to help the reader or listener organize and interpret information in texts, but does not add any information to the propositional content. Table 2 shows the revised categories of MD according to Crismore et al. (1993).

TABLE 2
METADISCOURSE CATEGORIZATION BY CRISMORE ET AL. (1993)

Textural Metadiscourse
1. Textual markers
Logical connectives Show connections between ideas (in addition, therefore, so)
Sequencers Indicate sequence/ordering (first, next, finally)
Reminders References to previous information (as we saw previously)
Topicalizers Indicate a shift in topic (now, I will discuss)
2. Interpretive markers
Code Glosses Further explain text material (for example, that is)
Illocution markers Name the act performed (in sum, to conclude)
Announcements Announce upcoming information (in the next chapter)
Interpersonal Metadiscourse
Hedges Show uncertainty to truth of claim (might, possible, likely)
Certainly markers Express commitment to claim (certainly, shows, know)
Attributors Give source or support of claim (Scott claims that…)
Attitude markers Display writer values (surprisingly, I hope)
Commentary Build Relationship with reader (dear reader, please consider)

Hyland (2005) proposed a new model for classification of MD markers. According to him "metadiscourse is an umbrella term for the self-reflective expressions that are used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text and help the writer/speaker express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community" (Hyland, 2005, p.37). He has divided MD expressions into two main categories: interactive and interactional. Table 3 summarizes MD, according to Hyland (2005).

TABLE 3
AN INTERPERSONAL MODEL OF METADISCOURSE (HYLAND, 2005, P.49)

Interactive: Help to guide reader through the text
Transitions Express relations between main clauses (in addition/but/thus/and)
Frame markers Refer to discourse acts, sequences and stages (Finally/to conclude)
Endophoric markers Refer to information in other parts of the text (Noted above/see Fig.)
Evidentials Refer to information from other sources (According to X/ Z states)
Code glosses Elaborate definitions of words or phrases (Namely/e.g./such as)
Interactional : Involve the reader in the argument
Hedges Withhold commitment and open dialogue (might, perhaps possible)
Boosters Indicate certainty or close dialogue (in fact, definitely)
Attitude markers Express writer's attitude to proposition (arguably, unfortunately)
Self-mentions Explicit reference to author (I, we, my, me, our)
Engagement markers Explicitly build relationship with reader (you can see that, note,)

Hyland (2005) stated that interactive devices help the writer deal with the information flow and establish his or her intended meaning. They focus on ways of organizing discourse to predict readers' knowledge and show the writer's assessment of what needs to be made explicit to limit and guide what can be recovered from the text. On the other hand, by using interpersonal devices, the writer interacts with the readers, expresses his/her views, supports or rejects an idea or informs the reader of his/her own personal interpretation and reaction about the content.

Interactional devices are concerned with the participants of the interaction and show the writer's voice or personality based on the norms of the community. Hyland (2010) states that in this case, "MD concerns the writer's efforts to control the level of personality in a text and establish a suitable relationship with his/ her data, arguments, and audience,

marking the degree of intimacy, the expression of attitude, the communication of commitments, and the extent of reader involvement" (p.128).

Hyland (2005) believes that an awareness of metadiscourse offers three main advantages to students. First, it helps them better understand the cognitive demands that texts make on readers and the ways writers can help them to process information. Second, it gives them enough resources to take a stance toward their ideas. Third, it enables them to negotiate that stance, and engage with their readers. Crismore et al. (1993) also state that students should be given metacognitive awareness of MD and strategies to use it, so that they might know how to consider the author, connect sentences to maintain schemas, change topics, notice an introduction, transition, and a conclusion, identify the author's attitudes and whether he/she is being subjective or objective, and realize the relevant signals and circumstances, which define the rhetorical situation of the text.

Different scholars have investigated both the role and presence/absence of metadiscourse instruction in different skills of the language (Steffensen & Cheng, 1996; Martinez, 2004; Jalalifar & Alipour, 2007; Sa, 2008; Dastjerdi & shirzad, 2010). However, they have revealed diverse and sometimes interesting results. For example, some researchers (e.g. Crawford Camiciottoli, 2003) stated that some metadiscourse items do not always result in higher reading comprehension, because other factors may interact with metadiscourse and affect comprehension.

Steffensen and Cheng (1996) investigated the effect of targeted instruction on metadiscourse on the writing abilities of native-speaker university students. An experimental group that had been taught the form, function and purpose of metadiscourse learned to use it effectively and produce compositions that earned significantly higher scores than those of a control group, which had received no instruction on metadiscourse.

Martinez (2004) investigated the use of discourse markers in the expository compositions of Spanish undergraduates. The main findings were that students employed a variety of discourse markers with some types used more frequently than others.

A study by Jalilifar and Alipour (2007) attempted to determine the effect of MD presence and instruction on TOEFL reading passages for three groups of students with pre- to intermediate reading proficiency. Ninety students were selected and given three versions of the same test, original, modified and unmodified metadiscourse-free texts. The significant result was that the omission of metadiscourse markers from a text does not hinder the comprehensibility of the propositional content presented in the text, when enough structural modifications are made in the text. The explicit MD instruction was argued to have helped participants notice and become aware of these language forms and their functions while reading. The removal of these markers broke the propositional chains in the texts and thus made them confusing.

Sa (2008) investigated the effect of inclusion and exclusion (absence/presence) of MD markers on listening comprehension of EFL learners. The study aimed at exploring the role of metadiscourse in listening comprehension. Two groups of participants listened to different versions of the same TEM8 mini-lecture, one with metadiscourse while the other without, and both of the groups were required to finish the same tasks and questionnaire after listening. Statistical results showed that metadiscourse plays a vital role in listening comprehension, with significant differences.

Dastjerdi and Shirzad (2010) investigated the impact of explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers on advanced, intermediate, and elementary English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' writing performance. The participants of their study were undergraduate students majoring in English Literature at the University of Isfahan. Their findings indicated generally that explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers significantly improves EFL learners' writing ability, however, in their study the learners at the intermediate level improved significantly greater than those at the advanced and elementary levels that shows that the practitioners should pay more serious attention to metadiscourse markers in making EFL curricula.

Following what was mentioned above, this study aimed at investigating the impact of explicit instruction of MD markers on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance.

The study poses the following research question and null hypothesis:

RQ: Does explicit instruction of MD markers affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability?

H0: Explicit instruction of MD markers doesn't affect Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

This study was conducted with 60 female Iranian learners. They were intermediate EFL learners of English at Iran Language Institute in Urmia. Two intact classes were selected and randomly assigned into experimental or control groups. The participants were between 16 and 22 years of age. The initial homogeneity of the participants was further assessed via a Preliminary English Test (PET). The researcher ran an independent samples t-test to obtain a meaningful guarantee for the homogeneity of the participants' proficiency level (t (17) = 1.13 ρ=.27> .05).

B. Design

The study employed a quasi-experimental design to examine the effect of explicit instruction of MD markers as an independent variable on the reading comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners as a dependent variable.

C. Instrumentations

Three instruments were used in this study. The Preliminary English Test (PET), a second level Cambridge ESOL exam for intermediate level learners, was administered to ensure the homogeneity of the subjects in terms of language proficiency. The test included four sections of Reading, Writing, Listening, and Speaking. Speaking and Writing sections were removed for practical and administrative reasons. To check the initial performance of both the experimental and control groups in reading comprehension, the researchers gave them a pretest of reading comprehension. After the treatment stage, both groups were given a posttest of reading comprehension to check whether there was any significant difference between their performances.

D. Procedure

First, the Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered to learners to ascertain the homogeneity of participants in terms of language proficiency. Then, before the treatment, the pretest of reading comprehension was given to both the experimental and the control groups to check their initial performance in reading comprehension. It included four reading comprehension passages followed by twenty multiple-choice items. The participants received one point for each correct response. The time allocated for this test was forty minutes. The experimental group (EG) was then exposed to explicit instruction of MD markers for five sessions. In each session, they were familiarized with definitions and examples of some types of MD markers proposed by Hyland (2005). The learners were asked to give synonyms for different types of MD markers and use them in sentences. They were given some sentences and asked to complete them with correct MD markers. Some passages with MD markers were also given to them. They had to read the passages, underline MD markers, write them down and explain the function of each marker clearly. The treatment was conducted on two days a week which included roughly thirty minutes of MD markers instruction at the end of each session. Since this study aimed at determining the effects of MD markers instruction on the learner's performance, the control group (CG) received no specific instructions in MD markers. After the treatment, in order to see the effect of MD awareness on the learners' reading comprehension, learners in both groups were given a posttest of reading comprehension. Like the reading comprehension pre-test, it included four reading comprehension passages followed by twenty multiple-choice items. The time allocated for this test was forty minutes, too. The participants' scores on the pre-test and posttest were then compared to find the degree of improvement of each group.

E. Data Analysis

To answer the research question regarding the impact of explicit instruction of MD markers on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance, the researcher ran an independent samples t-test on the pre- and post-test scores of the experimental and control group.

III. RESULTS

The research question in this study addressed the effect of explicit instruction of MD markers on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension performance. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics for the participants' pre- and post-test of reading comprehension.

TABLE 4
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR PRE- AND POST-TEST OF READING COMPREHENSION BY GROUPS

Group	N	Mean	std	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test Experimental group	30	16.48	1.62	.35
Control group	30	16	1.56	.31
			2.24	.68
Control group	30	16.25	1.96	.50

First, equality of variances was investigated using Levene's test of. The results of the test, p= .73, indicated that an independent t-test could be run. Then, to compare the reading comprehension scores for experimental and control groups in pretest, the researchers ran an independent samples t-test. As Table 5 demonstrates there was no significant difference for experimental group (M = 16.48, SD = 1.62) and control group (M = 16.00, SD = 1.56; t (22) = 1.350, P>.05). This indicates that the performance of the two groups did not differ in the pretest of reading comprehension.

TABLE 5
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST FOR PRE- AND POST-TEST OF READING COMPREHENSION BY GROUPS

	Levense's Test for Equality of variances		t-test for equality of means		Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean differences	Std. error differences
	F	Sig.	t	df			
Pre-test Equal variance assumed	1.183	.737	1 .350	22	.880	.48	.04
Equal variance not assumed			1.350	20.876	.880	.48	.04
Post-test Equal variance assumed	.253	.650	4.302	22	.000	2.12	.18
Equal variance not assumed			4.302	21.54	.000	2.12	.18

In order to see whether the treatment procedure implemented to the experimental group had any significant effect on this group and to see whether the experimental groups' mean was significantly different from that of the control group, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare their mean scores on posttest of reading comprehension. As it is shown in Table 4, the mean score for the experimental group (M = 18.37) is higher than that for the control group (M= 16.25). The results of the independent t-test (t (22) = 4.302, P = .000 < .05) imply that there is a significant difference between experimental and control groups' mean scores on the posttest of reading comprehension (Table 4). Thus the null-hypothesis that explicit instruction of MD markers does not affect the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners is rejected.

IV. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the effect of MD awareness on reading comprehension of EFL intermediate students by using metadiscoursal taxonomies proposed by Hyland (2005). The findings reveal that explicit instruction of MD markers in Iranian EFL courses is quite successful for improving learners' reading comprehension ability. This result supports Crismore's (1985) claim that MD awareness has been very effective in foreign/ second language teaching classrooms and with various parts of language skills and components. These results confirm some previous studies (Tavakoli, Dabaghi, & Khorvash, 2010; Nemati & Parvaresh, 2008) which revealed that explicit instructions in metadiscourse improved learners' reading comprehension.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of explicit instruction of MD markers on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension ability. The results of this research indicated that learners in MD instruction group outperformed control group. The findings of this study have some implications for second language teachers. Teachers should try to raise the learners' awareness toward MD markers and help them become better readers and more insightful writers. Moreover, the results of this research can have implications for material developers. They should develop suitable texts that contain MD markers for learners of various language proficiency levels. The findings help them design more coherent texts to enhance EFL learners' ability to understand and remember information.

Nevertheless, this study has some delimitations. First, it is constrained to intermediate level. Learners of different levels of proficiency such as elementary and advanced levels can be investigated to make some generalizations. Second the participants were Iranian and from Iran Language Institute, so the results cannot be generalized to learners of other nationalities.

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