

## Iranian EFL Learners' Use of Metadiscourse Markers in Argumentative Writing

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### Abstract

*This paper is an attempt to investigate the EFL Iranian learners' use of metadiscourse markers in argumentative writing. The participants of the study are 40 students both male and female. To produce the relevant data, participants were given a pretest of writing ability to check their initial knowledge use of metadiscourse markers. Finally, a post test assessing their writing ability with metadiscourse markers was administered. Writing is a social activity and it is supposed as an important factor of literacy in society despite being mastered in English, students from different cultures and with different first languages seem to be different in developing writing texts. Metadiscourse markers enable the writers to interact with the readers effectively. The findings revealed that both male and female writers employed more interactive markers than interactional markers due to the fact that both genders inserted transition markers frequently to guide readers through the texts. The findings indicated generally that instruction of metadiscourse markers significantly improves EFL learners' writing ability of advanced students. The Teachers pay more attention to metadiscourse markers in making EFL curricula. Then they ask for the reinforcement of metadiscourse markers through instruction in EFL courses for the improvement of the learners' writing ability.*

### Keywords

metadiscourse;  
metadiscourse  
markers; writing  
ability; language  
proficiency;  
instruction; gender



## I. Introduction

Metadiscourse is extremely important when it comes to structuring a connection between writer and reader when it comes to academic writing. It makes communication between the writer and the reader more powerful. Metadiscourse markers are linguistic elements that offer a way of understanding language in use. Hence, these elements guide the sort of relation between the sender and the receiver of a text. These markers play a significant role in establishing the relation between the writer and the reader or the speaker and the listener. Writing is the productive skill in which almost all types of writers' competence are manifested. Schiffrin (1980) states that metadiscourse is the linguistic ability of the author as well as his rhetorical manifestation in the text. Such a Linguistic ability and rhetorical manifestation of the writer is the realization of both the linguistic competence and communicative competence.

Writing is a skill that is grounded in the cognitive domain. It involves learning, comprehension, application and synthesis of new knowledge. From a faculty member's perspective, writing well entails more than adhering to writing conventions. Writing also encompasses creative inspiration, problem-solving, reflection and revision that results in a completed manuscript. From a student's perspective, writing may instead be a laborious and

even dreaded exercise of attempting to place thoughts on paper while developing mastery over the rules of writing, such as spelling, citation format and grammar (Defazio, Jones Tennant & Hook, 2010).

Hence, Hyland (2004) mentions that the term metadiscourse as:

A growing interest in the interactive and rhetorical character of academic writing, expanding the focus of study beyond the ideational dimensions of a text, or how they characterize the world, to the ways they function interpersonally. Such view argues that academic writers do not simply produce texts that plausibly represent an external reality, but use language to offer a credible representation of themselves and their work, and to acknowledge and negotiate social relations with readers.

Metadiscourse markers have been used in various contexts and texts. Hyland (1999) examined the use of metadiscourse in two corpora-textbooks and research articles in three disciplines: Biology, Applied Linguistics and Marketing. Academic writing is considered to be rich and fruitful contexts and genre for using metadiscourse elements. This means that using these elements or markers in an effective way is the ultimate goal for the language teaching process. Throughout such successful usage, the interaction between the writer and the reader or vice versa facilitates the teaching process. For coherent discourse to be produced, writers or speakers must exploit what they already know about the discourse and integrate it with other sources of information. Up to the present time, the bulk of the research into the effects of second language instruction have recorded the linguistic progress of one group exposed to an FonF approach and another exposed to FonFs instruction (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2002; Loewen, 2003). The present study aims to further explore this area, concentrating on the effect that FonF, and FonM have on the acquisition of a grammatical form with communicative value: the six forms of conditional sentences have been selected. Studies on the effectiveness of focus-on-form instruction have increased greatly and suddenly in recent years. Ellis et al (2002) improved Long's (1991) definition of FonF instruction by making the difference between two types: 'Planned focus-on-form' and 'incidental focus-on-form.' In many studies, focus on form was the result of prior planning on. (Alahmad, 44).

Hyland (2005) applied the term metadiscourse markers to highlight the use of markers in written form. He elaborated that writers use metadiscourse markers as a set of tool "to negotiate interactional meanings in a text" (p. 37). They help the readers see the writer's perspectives. Although there are many developments in contrastive rhetoric in the past 30 years and many studies are done in this field, its focus on the study of contrasts or differences is still open to be studied. To date, the literature has offered valuable findings which support the fact that students with different cultural backgrounds and different first languages are different in using rhetorical strategies in their writing. Nevertheless, investigating the rhetorical patterning of Iranian EF learners who are studying English in different EFL contexts with different cultural background is undone till today. This is because there are very few applied linguistics researchers who are familiar with the language and culture of this country. Mostafa Rahimirad (2019) in his article entitled *The Impact of EFL Teachers' Assessment Literacy on Their Assessment Efficiency in Classroom* states that, it is true that teachers are at the heart of every educational process in the classroom. Success of any educational reform depends on the teachers', as the implementers of the system, understanding and application of the requirements of the reform. Thus, as attempts have been made to bring about necessary changes and improvements in teaching, learning, and assessment in schools, it is important to explore. (11) Mahbobeh Rahmatirad in her article *The Effect of Task-Based Syllabus on Iranian EFL Learners* depicts:

The rise of CLT has had a profound effect on syllabus design. The assumption that communication is an integrated process rather than a linear accumulation of discrete structures and items created a dilemma for syllabus designers, whose task has traditionally been to produce ordered lists of structural items graded according to difficulty, frequency, or pedagogic convenience. Recently, task-based syllabuses have been receiving the most attention from the research community. In this paper, the trends in CLT which have led to the evolution of task-based syllabuses will be examined and an attempt will be made to provide some justification for their current prominence.

The ability to express emotional states is a central fact in human life and a great number of researches have been focused on the relationship between emotions and nonverbal behaviors, however, as mentioned by Hancock, few researches have examined how emotions are reflected verbally. As O’Kearney mentions, «references to other-directed negative emotions were predominant for boys, and inner-directed negative emotions were characteristic of girls.» Males are educated to hide their real feelings and do not express their emotion easily (Rahimirad, 19).

## II. Review of Literatures

Martinez investigated the use of discourse markers in expository composition of Spanish undergraduates. Elaborative markers were the most frequently used, followed by contrastive markers. There was also a significant relationship between highly rated essays and poorly rated ones in the frequency use of elaborative, contrastive and topic relating discourse markers.

A study by Jalilifar and Alipour attempted to determine the effect of explicit instruction of Metadiscourse markers on preintermediate. Ninety students were selected and given three versions of the same test, original, modified and unmodified metadiscourse-free texts. Next, one of the groups received instruction on metadiscourse. Results revealed the positive influence of form-focused instruction of metadiscourse. It also revealed that metadiscourse markers are primarily responsible for cohesion rather than coherence.

According to Dafouz (2008) stated that the term «metadiscourse» is too broad and includes different lexical items from various grammatical classes and even punctuation. As by using textual resources, the writer tries to organize the text in the most reader friendly manner, the eventual purpose of textual elements in a text seems to be creating a better interpersonal relation between the writer and the reader. Metadiscourse, which is also called metatext or metalanguage in many researches (e.g. Bunton, 1999; Farrokhi & Ashrafi, 2009; Mauranen, 1993; Rahman, 2004), is “self-reflective linguistic expressions referring to the evolving text, to the writer, and to the imagined readers of that text. According to Sultan (2011), the term ‘metadiscourse’ was first coined by Zellig S. Harris in 1959.

Harris tried to describe text elements which comment on the main information of a text, but which themselves contain only unessential information (Sultan, 2011). It is based on a view of writing as a social engagement and, in academic contexts, reveals the ways writers project themselves into their discourse to signal their attitudes and commitments” (Hyland, 2004).

### 2.1 Purpose of the Study

The current study is an attempt to fill in this gap by investigating the significant differences between students in Iran when they compose in their foreign language (which is English here). Lakoff (1975) revealed that women used linguistic features that reinforced

their subordination. Men and women are subject to favor distinct language features in expressing themselves. These differences between men and women in communication have attracted on-going scholarly discussion. Matei (2011) suggested that women had the tendency to use more discourse markers in spoken communication. Following on from the above, the present paper was aimed at examining the effect of explicit metadiscourse instruction markers on written success of EFL learners after learning appropriate use of metadiscourse markers may seem important Essential for knowledgeable writers in academic English Thus, efforts were made to address the following questions:

1. Does instruction of metadiscourse markers have any significant impact on EFL learners' writing achievement?
2. In what ways the use of metadiscourse markers is different from male and female students in academic essays?

### III. Research Method

In writing, the learners, in this case, should build a communication through a cohesive and coherent text that enables the readers to have a better understanding of what the writer's intention. In order to understand the writer's intention, it is required metadiscourse markers which are basically used to negotiate meaning (Hyland, 2010). Metadiscourse, which is principally used in both spoken and written texts, allows the writer to show the readers about the different parts of the text which are related and should be interpreted (Hyland, 2010).

The use of language is stressed and is not only used to communicate knowledge about the facts, but also to introduce information to others through the arrangement of the text. This means that the writer must not only express his / her feelings and/or experience in writing but also interact explicitly and implicitly with the readers through a cohesive and coherent text. This means that the writer needs to convey not only his / her feeling and/or experience in writing, but also to communicate directly and implicitly with the readers through a cohesive and coherent text that enables the readers to understand the meaning of the writer. It is in line with Hyland & Tse (2004) who state metadiscourse is recognized as an important means of facilitating communication which support a writer's position and build a relationship with an audience through their texts. As Hyland (2005) states in his book on metadiscourse, "the term metadiscourse was coined by Zellig Harris in 1959 to offer a way of understanding language in use, representing a writer's or speaker's attempts to guide a receiver's perception of a text" (3). Hyland (1998) states that

"Based On a view of writing as a social and communicative engagement between writer and reader, metadiscourse focuses our attention on the ways writers project themselves into their work to signal their communicative intentions. It is a central pragmatic construct which allows us to see how writers seek to influence readers' understandings of both the text and their attitude towards its content and the audience".

As a result it is rare for metadiscourse to be either explicitly taught or adequately covered in writing materials in a way which either shows the systematic effect of particular options or reveals the important interactive nature of discourse. It seems vital, then, that students should receive appropriate instruction in metadiscourse using models of argument which allow them to practice writing within the socio-rhetorical framework of their target communities (Hyland, 2005). "Metadiscourse is known to be an effective technique for improving writing and a means to render textbooks more considerate and reader friendly." (Cheng and Steffensen 1996, Crismore 1984, Hyland 1998 & 1999). Xu (2001)

In the Persian context, metadiscourse markers have been investigated in EFL learners' discourse. Some studies focused on the learners' use of metadiscourse markers while producing a text in English. The markers were highlighted and analyzed by drawing on Hyland's model of metadiscourse markers (2005). The collected data were elaborated using descriptive qualitative approach. Both figures and numbers are explained through verbal means. The use of metadiscourse is more field-specific than gender-specific. The findings indicated that the use of metadiscourse markers is not the only factor influencing gender.

## IV. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

#### a. Data Analyze

Hyland provided a new model of metadiscourse as the interpersonal resources required to present propositional material appropriately in different disciplinary and contexts in his article, Hyland developed a new taxonomy which mainly consists of two parts: Interactive Resources and Interactional resources.

Disciplinary interactions: metadiscourse in L2 postgraduate writing. Hyland developed a new taxonomy which mainly consists of two parts: Interactive Resources and Interactional resources.

Throughout the using of metadiscourse markers, this discourse expresses the writer's voice in writing. Crismore (1985) explain two typologies for metadiscourse markers: informational or referential and attitudinal or expressive metadiscourse. Vande Kopple (1985) distinguishes two types of meaning concerning metadiscourse: propositional meaning and non-propositional meaning. Generally, these taxonomies have some sort of relation with the Halliday's three metafunctions ideational, textual, and interpersonal. Hyland (2005) elaborated that the interactive dimension "concerns the writer's awareness of a participating audience and the ways he or she seeks to accommodate its probable knowledge, interest, rhetorical expectations and processing abilities" (p. 49). The resources in this dimension serve as tools to organize information which meets the readers' need. Table 1 projects the five broad sub-categories of this interactive dimension which was taken without modification from Hyland, 2005, p. 49.

**Table 1.** Interactive Categories of Metadiscourse Markers (Hyland, 2005, p. 49)

Category	Function	Examples
Transitions	Express relation between main clauses	in addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	finally; to conclude; my purpose is
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	noted above; see Fig; in section 2
Evidential	refer to information from other texts	according to X; Z states
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings	namely; e.g.; such as; in other words

Another dimension proposed by Hyland (2005) is the interactional categories which concern on how the writers present "interaction by intruding and commenting on their



message” (p. 49). There are five sub-categories of interactional dimension which was taken without modification from Hyland, 2005, p. 49.

**Table 2.** Interactional Categories of Metadiscourse Markers (Hyland, 2005, p. 49)

Category	Function	Examples
Hedges	With hold commitment and open dialogue	Might, perhaps, possible, about
Boosters	Emphasize certainty or close dialogue	in fact, definitely, it is clear that
Attitude Markers	Express writer’s attitude to proposition	Unfortunately, I agree, surprisingly
Self-mention	Explicit reference to authors	I, we, my, me, our
Engagement markers	Explicitly build relationship with readers	Consider, note, you can see that

The academic writing is considered to be rich and fruitful contexts and genre for using metadiscourse elements. Throughout such successful usage, the interaction between the writer and the reader or vice versa facilitates the teaching process. The student gets benefit from knowing almost all of them and how they are used correctly by explicit or implicit instructions. The analysis of the selected texts was closely based on Hyland’s (2005) taxonomy of interactive and interactional metadiscourse. As metadiscourse devices usually have more than a single function, it is essential that the analysis be carried out precisely for each text manually.

## **b. Participants**

Since the study included participants from two universities and the researchers did not afford random sampling from a pool of participants, they followed a non-random and availability sampling method. Therefore, the sampling method applied in this study was intact group sampling from two universities in Iran. A total of 40 students studying at universities located in Tehran in Iran. The required data are collected from 20 male students from Iranian students in Islamic Azad University (Markaz branch) and 20 female students from Research and Science University. The participants are adult university students whose field of study is English.

This study also elaborated the differences and the similarities in the use of metadiscourse markers between female and male students’ essays through document analysis. The collected data were elaborated using descriptive qualitative approach. Both figures and numbers are explained through verbal means. Participants are both male and female, the age of the students ranged from 19 to 35.

Then, a pretest on writing performance was given to all participants. Each participant was actually required to write a paragraph of no less than ten lines on each topic in order to determine the extent of his/her initial knowledge and unprompted use of metadiscourse markers. All groups were then exposed to the same instruction of metadiscourse markers in six successive sessions. They were given passages with metadiscourse markers time and again and were required to first identify them and then write down the function of each marker on a sheet of paper. Finally, the writing ability post-test was administered to check the participants’ achievement in terms of metadiscourse markers after having been exposed to

instruction. They were provided and familiarized with a list of definitions and examples of the categories of the international model of metadiscourse of (Hyland, 2005, P. 49.)

They were under the instructor’s guidance, given opportunity during the instruction sessions to give synonyms for different types of metadiscourse and generate sentences using them. Participants were also frequently given sentences with deleted metadiscourse markers and were asked to supply the markers. They were given passages with metadiscourse markers time and again and were required to first identify them and then write down the function of each marker on a sheet of paper. They were also required to use each type of metadiscourse in various types of sentences simple, compound and complex.

Finally, the writing ability post-test (i.e. writing a 250 word informative essay) was administered to check the participants’ achievement in terms of metadiscourse markers after having been exposed to instruction. The participants’ scores on the pre-test and posttest were then compared to find the degree of improvement of each group. The analysis and comparison of the test results are presented.

#### 4.2 Discussion

The findings indicated that both genders applied more interactive resources than the interactional ones. Both groups are heavy users of transition markers and hedges. Moreover, males used these resources more than females. This section explains in details.

Table 3 shows that both sexes use 1004 interactive metadiscourse markers. Both groups had the tendency to use transition markers. Female students used 450 markers of 1041 interactive resources, while male students used 554 markers. The transition markers are the most common function of interactive markers as seen in table 3. The Hyland (2005) proposed model classifies transformation markers into three distinct categories: addition, effect, and statement.

**Table 3.** Interactive Dimensions of Metadiscourse Markers

Interactive MM	Females	Males	Total
Frame markers	42	87	129
Endophoric Markers	1	1	2
Transition markers	450	554	1004
Total	45	88	133

The most frequent feature of interactive markers as shown in table 3 is the transition markers. Although male writers tended to use more frame markers, both sexes were inclined to apply additive relations rather than explicitly state their purpose in writing by the use of discourse goals. The writers also employed frame markers serving as signals of text boundaries (Hyland, 2005). The variants of additive relations found in the essays are first, second, third, and next. The EFL writers also used several interactive markers such as well, right and now to indicate topic shifts.

**Table 4.** Transitions Markers

Transition Markers	Females	Males	Total
Addition	435	450	885
consequence	134	180	314
argument	6	7	13
total	575	637	1212

**Table 5.** Endophoric and Evidential Markers

Evidential and Endrophoric Markers	Females	Males	Total
Attribution	30	22	52
Reference to other parts	2	1	3
Total	32	23	55

Writers also introduced other parts of the text by using endophoric markers. Endophoric markers are phrases which refer to earlier material or something yet to come (Hyland, 2005). The EFL writers do not use many endophoric markers. Some of references to others found in the essays are what is mentioned and like I said before as seen in table 5. Another common feature is self-mention markers which «refer to the degree of explicit author presence». The presence of the authors in this study is reflected by the use of first person pronouns and first person plural pronouns. Male students were more inclined to use this feature to personalize the ideas in the essays. According to Hyland this feature served several functions such as strengthening the writers' presence, including personal narratives or experience, and promoting solidarity. The use of this feature seemed to be influenced by a field-specific factor. The results of the participants' pre-test and posttest were compared through Paired Sample T-Test. The writings were therefore subjectively scored.

**Table 6.** Descriptive Statistics of the Elementary Group

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair pretest	7.5625	20	2.47487	.43750
Post-test	9.515	20	2.7193	.48072



## V. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study shows from the assumption that the use of metadiscourse markers is influenced by gender differences. This study is based on two variables, the number of metadiscourse markers and the quality of essay writing and gender of EFL learners. The study revealed that both groups had similarities, using more interactive markers than interactional markers. Furthermore, although male students use more interactional resources, the discussion indicates that gender is not the only factor that determines how writers express themselves. It is assumed that women prefer to use a more personalized style, male writers in this study also made their presence noticed by using self-mentions. It confirms Hyland's argument (2005) that writers often use more self-mentions in papers on humanities and social science than they do in science and engineering. Intermediate learners had the highest improvement. In other words, instruction of metadiscourse showed to be most effective for this group of Iranian EFL learners. The findings of this research reveal the fact that metadiscourse awareness affects the learners' language performance. This is important that teachers, and researchers in language teaching and learning to pay more attention to metadiscourse as an important aspect of language. They can enhance EFL learners' ability to understand and remember information by making texts more coherent both textually and interpersonally.

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