

Metadiscourse in EFL Learners' Writings: A Corpus-based Study

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Computer learner corpus research has been concerned with two major types of interlanguage analysis (Granger, 2002). One type of analysis compares the use of a language between L1 and L2 learners and the other compares the use of a language between different L2 learners. Such corpus-based comparisons have revealed variations in distribution patterns of various linguistic features under study. While individual grammatical and lexical features such as modal auxiliaries (Aijmer, 2002), connectors (Bolton, Nelson & Hung, 2002), or adjective intensifiers (Lorenz, 1999) have received considerable attention in previous research, little research has focused on variations on discourse features in learner language. This study thus aims to investigate variations in metadiscourse based on an international corpus of learners of English from different L1 backgrounds.

Metadiscourse, simply put, refers to the speaker/writer's awareness of the ongoing discourse and the writer-reader interaction. In written communication, metadiscourse is the self-reflective language used to assist writers to manage their unfolding discourse, express their stance and engage with readers (Hyland, 2005). Whereas corpus-based studies on metadiscourse typically focused on professional academic genres such as research articles, textbooks or book reviews (e.g., Dahl, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Kuhl & Behnam, 2011; Lorés-Sanz, 2011), only a few has concentrated on learner genres (e.g., Ädel, 2006; Crismore, Markkanen & Steffensen, 1993). For example, Ädel (2006) compared the use of metadiscourse in written argumentative texts by advanced L2 learners of English and in comparable texts by native Anglo-American English learners. Quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that there are pronounced differences between L1 and L2 learners' texts in metadiscourse use, particularly concerning personal metadiscourse.

While L2 learner texts remain a neglected area for metadiscourse studies, they are no less important than professional texts in terms of the significance in language acquisition and writing development. A comparison of metadiscourse in learner texts from different L1 backgrounds may reveal interesting commonalities and divergences in L2 development.

Taking a corpus linguistics approach to discourse analysis, this study thus attempts to address the following questions:

1. What are the similarities and differences in the distribution patterns of the use of metadiscourse between learners of English from different L1 backgrounds as evidenced in the corpus?
2. How do different learners of English in the current corpus use metadiscourse to manage their discourse and represent writer-reader relationships?

The data for the present study is based on the International Corpus of Crosslinguistic Interlanguage (ICCI), a unique learner corpus of written English from six L1 groups. All types of metadiscourse features in learner texts will be annotated and analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Given the different backgrounds of the L2 learners, it is expected that the metadiscourse used in learner texts will show variations within and across language groups in terms of distribution patterns. By a comprehensive description of the distribution and function of metadiscourse in the ICCI corpus, it is hoped that this study will contribute to our understanding of the use of metadiscourse in L2 English texts.

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