A Proposed Metadiscourse Framework for Lay ESL Writers

Helen Tan
Chan Swee Heng, Ain Nadzimah Abdullah, Universiti Putra Malaysia

Abstract: In the past two decades, writing scholars [1-3] have tried to make sense of the functions and forms of metadiscourse in writing. In doing so, each of these scholars have designed varied metadiscourse frameworks that illustrate the different categories, functions and linguistic realizations so as to capture the use of metadiscourse more succinctly. The intention of this study is to review existing metadiscourse frameworks and to plug the gap that could exist for a more comprehensive framework for effective use by lay ESL writers. The underlying postulation is that various frameworks may have different assumptions, and thus to meet the needs of lay ESL writers, a different approach is likely needed.

Key words: Metadiscourse • Metadiscourse framework • Lay ESL writers • Academic writing • organizational discourse markers and interpersonal discourse markers

INTRODUCTION

The study of metadiscourse in academic writing has long been the interest of writing scholars [1, 4, 5]. Far from being an arid and a detached piece of writing, academic writing is inherently persuasive [6, 7]. This is because in advancing their knowledge, academic writers do not only state factual information but also engages his readers by revealing their stance to their propositions. This can be done effectively through the use of appropriate metadiscourse. Its importance in academic writings (e.g.: student assignments, theses and research articles) stems from the understanding that metadiscourse forms the specialized language of academia [1]. A metadiscourse framework is often resorted by many researchers to explain their work on metadiscoursal features [5, 8-11]. In the early years, much of the metadiscourse literature would have focused on Vande-Kopple’s [3] and Crismore, Markkanen and Steffensen’s [2] work with Hyland’s [12] work as a later contribution. Apart from the reliance on the major metadiscourse frameworks, work on metadiscourse could also be branched into the specifics such as discourse markers [13], self-identity markers, validity markers, narrators, attitude markers [14, 15] and engagement markers [16]. These research into the specifics points to their contributions to successful academic writing. The three major frameworks on metadiscourse [2, 3, 12] are reviewed in this paper to establish the elements that aid textual comprehension.

To begin with, Vande-Kopple’s [3] Classification of Metadiscourse defines metadiscourse as “discourse about discourse” and he explains that writers usually write on two levels. The first is to deliver propositional content. At the second level, which is the metadiscoursal level, the writers try to connect with their readers through the following means such as organizing, classifying, interpreting, evaluating and reacting to the propositional content [3]. This framework follows a more traditional interpretation of textual functions which focuses on language used by writers to comment on or to organize the propositional content. In doing so, Vande-Kopple [3] divides metadiscourse into two broad domains: textual and interpersonal metadiscourse. Textual metadiscourse helps writers link and relate individual propositions so that they form a cohesive and coherent text. On the other hand, the interpersonal metadiscourse provides the writers the avenue to signal their personalities and their reactions to the propositional content of the text. Textual metadiscourse is exemplified through the use of word connectives and code glosses while the interpersonal metadiscourse is realized through the use of illocution markers, validity markers, narrators, attitude markers and commentary [3].

Using Vande-Kopple’s [3] classification system of metadiscourse as a point of reference, Crismore, et al. [2] see it fit to collapse some categories and create new ones as they respond to metadiscourse efficacy. They called their taxonomy “A Revised Classification System for
Metadiscourse Categories” [2]. Similar to Vande-Kopple’s [3] work, Crismore et al.’s [2] also see the need to sub-divide metadiscourse into two broad domains: *textual* and *interpersonal*. However, the function of *textual* metadiscourse is now described with an orientation towards the affect that has an influence on writing. They emphasize also on what they term as ethical appeals which cut across both textual and interpersonal domains. The textual targets at the cognitive which is described as the logical while that of *interpersonal* includes the emotional [2]. Following this line, the textual elements (code glosses, illocution markers and announcers) are classified as interpretive markers which show the focus on textual reasoning.

Vande-Kopple’s [3] classification of narrators which is writer focus is now subsumed as attributors which carries with it a notion of *evidential* function, later picked up by Hyland [12].

A marked difference in Crismore et al. [2] work is the inclusion of punctuation marks (except the *period*) as elements of metadiscourse. These typographical marks (e.g. dashes, question mark, underlining, capitalization, circled words, arrows, and numbers) are considered as metadiscourse cues in a text because they elaborate and clarify certainty or uncertainty as well as convey the attitude of the writer. This new inclusion provides additional metadiscoursal functions beyond the word and clausal levels.

Building up on both the above mentioned frameworks, Hyland [12] proposed a taxonomy known as the Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse. He was also influenced by the work of Thompson [17] and Thompson and Thetela [18] which postulate that the reader plays a central role in text comprehension. The focus of Hyland’s [12] framework is on the interpersonal which translates into the building of reader-writer relationship. He explains the framework in terms of *Interactive resources* and *Interactional resources*. The interactive resources guide the reader through the text through the use of *transition markers*, *frame markers*, *endophoric markers*, *evidentials* and *code glosses* (a term found in all three frameworks). The interactional resources, on the other hand, convey the writers’ emotions or reactions to the propositional content and also to build a personal rapport with the readers. The resources are the use of *hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers and self-mentions*. Hyland’s [1] framework is seen as functional in a context which operates in a discourse and does not attempt to demarcate propositional content from metadiscourse use to the point that they are separate issues. Rather both propositional content and metadiscourse use operate hand in hand and contribute towards the manifestation of textual comprehension.

Upon a review of the three major framework of metadiscourse, it could be concluded that the efficacy of a metadiscourse model rests heavily on its application, that is, writers are able to translate theoretical notions into practice. First, writers have to understand metadiscourse use and next, they have to initiate its use based on a clear understanding of the model. Therefore, a framework that is comprehensive and that uses clear terminologies in its categorizations is vital. For example, linguistically loaded terms such as *code glosses* and *endophoric markers* will pose a challenge to lay ESL writers. These lay ESL writers are beginner writers who may not have been exposed to linguistic terminologies and as such would not have easy access to the meaning of metadiscourse and its use as they would not have the linguistic sophistication. For this reason, this paper seeks to review existing metadiscourse frameworks to establish clearer key indicators and use terms that are less linguistically loaded to reach the lay ESL writers so that the framework would be more user-friendly and is able to make use of their prior knowledge maximally.

**A Proposed Metadiscourse Framework for Lay ESL Writers:** The core intention of this paper is to propose a metadiscourse framework for lay ESL writers. It classifies metadiscourse into two distinct domains: *organizational discourse markers* and *interpersonal discourse markers*. The term *organizational discourse markers* is more precise as they initiate lay ESL writers to the role of metadiscourse within the internal structure of a text. Thus, the lay ESL writers would know that the use of the *organizational discourse markers* would help them manage the flow of their ideas so that the text becomes more cohesive and coherent. On the other hand, the term *interpersonal discourse markers* relates to the important reader-writer relationship which has to be established in order for the text to create dynamic meaning.

Under organizational discourse markers are *connectives, sequencers, topicalizers, pointers, citations and elaborators*. Connectives are words or phrases that connect one idea to the next. It can occur as inter-sentential linkers and take the form of transitions such as *in addition, moreover and in fact*. Alternatively, it can also occur as intra-sentential linkers and they are realized through the use of co-ordinating conjunctions such as *and, but and for*. Sequencers are metadiscourse features that mark explicit chronological stages of movement in the

written discourse. They are realized as sequencing words like *first, next, and finally*. **Topicalisers** are discourse markers that the writers use to state their intention or purpose to their readers. They occur commonly in phrases such as *my purpose is to,... I want to,... In this essay,...*

**Pointers** are deictic expressions that connect current propositions with the preceding or forthcoming ideas. Words like *the table above, as mentioned earlier, as can be seen in the following table* are examples of **pointers**. Different from the linguistically loaded term, **endophoric marker**, the term **pointers** is much clearer for the lay writers’ comprehension and use. **Citation** is a more comprehensive coverage of **evidentials** used by the writer to support an argument. The function of **citation** is to provide the writer with an authoritative stance that lends credence to any claims made. They are often realized through the use of phrases like *according to..., X states that...*. The final category of **organizational discourse markers** is **elaborators**. Rather than the term code glosses as used in the other frameworks which is linguistically loaded, **elaborators** as the word suggest, are words or phrases that give additional information to the proposition. They are commonly realized through expressions such as *for example, such as and like*. Besides the use of words, **elaborators** can also manifest in the form of **dashes or brackets**. These punctuation marks inform us that metadiscourse is not confined to the use of words alone.

Similar to the **organizational discourse markers**, the **interpersonal discourse markers** also have several sub-categories. **Hedges** are forms of metadiscourse that indicate the tentativeness of the proposition. This term is retained to explain that in stating claims, writers may want to refrain from totally committing to the truth of the proposition. Words or phrases such as *perhaps, maybe,* are some examples of **hedges** commonly found in academic writing. **Emphatics** (rather than **boosters**), is used to show the writer’s certainty of the proposition. Examples are *absolutely, definitely and it is clear that*. **Attitude markers** reveal the writer’s stance towards the proposition. Expressions such as *unfortunately, I agree, surprisingly, amazingly* are just a few of the examples of attitude markers. Another category of **interpersonal discourse markers** is **engagement markers**. **Engagement markers** provide an avenue for the writer to build solidarity with his readers. Instances of **engagement markers** are *note that* and *you can see that*. In this framework, an additional category which is the use of the **conditional** has been added to the **interpersonal discourse markers**. Through **conditionals** such as *if you.... If I were you..., the writer can demonstrate a deliberate attempt in bringing the reader into the conditional argument. In doing so, the writer considers the reader as equally capable of thinking alongside with the writer on the line of argument. Finally, **self-mentions** show the intrusion of the writer’s persona and voice in the writing. It is realized through the singular personal pronoun *‘I’* and the plural pronoun *‘we’*. The functions and examples of expressions for each sub-category of metadiscourse are synthesized and shown in Table 1.

To conclude, a framework on metadiscourse has to be dynamic and suited to the learner. It can be adapted for a particular community of writers who need help in their writing. If metadiscourse is a necessary linguistic element that makes successful prose, it is pertinent that information on its use is made available not only to expert writers but also to budding writers. In fact, it is to the latter group of writers that terminologies and explanations should be made more explicit. This is necessary so that in their pursuit of becoming expert writers themselves, they are not intimidated by academic and linguistic jargon.

The framework encompasses features that subscribes to the notion of text organization and the social relationship between the writer and the reader who together make meaning of the text. In doing so, the framework draws features from the primary sources i.e. frameworks from Vande-Kopple [3], Crismore, *et al.* [2] and Hyland [12]. The first element listed in the framework is on **connectives** which are often emphasized to students as a key feature in text organization. The term **connectives** is also used by Vande-Kopple [3]. This well used feature is within the framed knowledge of many adult ESL writers and it should be retained in this proposed framework. Similarly, other terms like **pointers, citations and elaborators** are seen as simplified reference to the other important elements characteristic of metadiscourse use such as **code glosses and evidentials**. Basically, the point emphasized for the lay ESL writers is the sense of maintaining a discourse flow through **organizational discourse markers** which must operate in tandem with **interpersonal discourse markers** which will help to connect the writer to the reader. While the lay ESL writers have to be trained in realizing the discourse markers that relate to text organization, he has to simultaneously understand the use of interpersonal discourse markers as a strategy that would aid in fulfilling the writing goal. Writing could then stand out as engaging, alive, personal and infused with the use of sound argumentative skills and appropriate metadiscoursal strategies. In short, metadiscourse matters in successful academic writing and
Table 1: A Simplified Metadiscourse Framework for ESL Lay Writers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organizational</strong></td>
<td>Discourse markers</td>
<td>Help writer to manage the flow of ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connectives:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) Inter-sentential linkers</td>
<td>expressions that link one idea to the next (between two sentences)</td>
<td>Thus, In addition...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) Intra-sentential linkers</td>
<td>expressions that link one idea to the next (within a sentence)</td>
<td>Thus, ... ...and... ...but... ...yet...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sequencers</strong></td>
<td>contribute to the staging of ideas</td>
<td>finally/to conclude/next,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topicalizers</strong></td>
<td>stating the purpose or intention of the writer</td>
<td>my purpose here is to... In the essay, I am going to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pointers</strong></td>
<td>linking current information with preceding or forthcoming information</td>
<td>noted above/see Fig/ in section 2, ... that was mentioned earlier...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Citations</strong></td>
<td>giving credit to writers of other texts</td>
<td>according to X / (Y, 1990) Z states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elaborators</strong></td>
<td>providing readers with extra information of the proposition</td>
<td>namely/e.g./such as/in other words, these includes.../use of punctuation marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpersonal Discourse markers</strong></td>
<td>Help writer connects with his readers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hedges</strong></td>
<td>withhold writer’s full commitment to proposition</td>
<td>might/perhaps/possible/about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emphatics</strong></td>
<td>emphasize force or writer’s certainty in proposition</td>
<td>in fact/definitely/it is clear that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude markers</strong></td>
<td>express writer’s attitude or stance to the proposition</td>
<td>unfortunately/I agree/surprisingly,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engagement markers</strong></td>
<td>explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader</td>
<td>consider/note that/you can see that, use of questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conditionals</strong></td>
<td>explicitly brings the reader into the argument</td>
<td>If you ... If I were you...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-mentions</strong></td>
<td>explicit reference to author(s)</td>
<td>I/we/my/our</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

lay ESL writers must begin on the right platform to bring them forward to the next level of writing ability. This effort could well be facilitated through a comprehensive metadiscourse framework designed for ESL lay writers.

REFERENCES

8. Harwood, N., 2005. We do not seem to have a theory... The theory I present here attempts to fill this gap: Inclusive and exclusive pronouns in academic writing. Applied Linguistics, 26(3): 343-375.
16. Missing