

Exploring Metadiscourse Markers in Master Thesis Abstracts of TEFL Students: A Case of the University of Mazandaran

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Abstract

Metadiscourse as a self-reflective linguistic device plays an important role in both making a coherent academic text and interacting with readers. Using a sequential mixed method design, the present study investigated the use of metadiscourse markers in the abstract section of 70 master thesis abstracts written by Iranian TEFL students at the University of Mazandaran. The study further examined TEFL graduated students' (n=7) perspectives on the employment of these markers in their thesis abstracts. Based on Hyland's (2005) model, the interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers were identified in the data. Next, the whole corpus was carefully examined word by word to report on the frequency of metadiscourse marker use. The findings revealed that interactive metadiscourse markers were used three times more than interactional metadiscourse markers. Moreover, transitions and hedges were more frequently employed while evidentials, boosters and self-mentions were less frequently used. Findings from the qualitative data collected through conducting email interviews with graduated TEFL students suggested that they had positive perspectives towards the use of interactive metadiscourse markers in contrast with the use of interactional metadiscourse markers in their thesis abstracts. The results of this study can offer a number of pedagogical implications for explicit instruction of metadiscourse markers in thesis abstracts.

Keywords: *abstract, Hyland's (2005) model, metadiscourse markers, master thesis, TEFL*

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1. Introduction

Academic writing has recently become a necessary skill for students in higher education. It plays an important role for graduate students to fulfill a requirement of a university degree. Master thesis writing, particularly writing a thesis abstract, in English is a burden for graduate students who come from a language background other than English. Cooley and Lewkowicz (2003) stated that the abstract “is a summary of the text and it informs readers of what can be found in the dissertation and in what order, functioning as an overall signpost for the reader” (p. 112). Therefore, the abstract of a master thesis plays an important role as it is the first section of a thesis that provides the readers with a brief, but exact, overview of the research (Cross & Oppenheim, 2006). Metadiscourse markers can involve writers’ interactions necessary for successful communication with potential readers in the same disciplinary community (Hyland & Tse, 2004). In fact, writers generally need to employ metadiscourse markers in order to “shape their arguments to the needs and expectations of their target readers” (Hyland, 2004, p. 134). Therefore, what thesis writers are required to do is the prediction of the potential readers’ needs by creating appropriate discourse in the abstract of their theses.

Studies on the concept of metadiscourse and metadiscourse analysis have recently achieved significant progress in the field of EAP. These studies, highlighted in the work of different scholars (Ädel, 2006; Crismore, 1983; Hyland, 2004, 2005, 2010, 2015; Jalilifar & Shooshtari, 2011; Malmir & Taji, 2021; VandeKopple, 1985; Wei et al., 2016; Williams, 1981) have provided adequate information on the concept of metadiscourse, metadiscourse models and the analysis of metadiscourse markers; nonetheless, most of them has been conducted on different disciplines (native vs. non-native; humanities vs. non-humanities) and different sections of English research articles (abstract, introduction, discussion and conclusion) or the introduction and discussion sections of master thesis and dissertations. Indeed, few studies (e.g., Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004) have focused on the graduate and postgraduate students’ perspectives on using metadiscourse markers in writing their master thesis and doctoral dissertations. The purpose of this study is to investigate, firstly, the use of metadiscourse markers in TEFL master thesis abstracts and secondly, the perspectives of TEFL graduated students towards the employment of metadiscourse markers to create a coherent and interactional discourse in the TEFL community.

2. Review of Literature

Williams (1981) broadly defined metadiscourse as “writing about writing, whatever does not refer to the subject matter being addressed” (cited in VandeKopple, 1985, p. 83). VandeKopple (1985) divided Williams’ (1981) classifications of academic writing into two levels: on the first level, the writer provides the reader with the information and propositional content about the subject; on the second level, which is called the level of metadiscourse, the writer assists the reader in interpreting, classifying and reacting to the material. Furthermore, Vandekopple broadly characterized the concept of metadiscourse as

“discourse about discourse or communication about communication” (1985, p. 83). In the same broad vein, Crismore (1984) stated that metadiscourse is the contentless directive in the text given to the reader for the purpose of understanding the primary discourse. Moreover, he added that “metadiscourse is the author’s intrusion into discourse, to direct rather than inform the readers” (p. 280). Overall, these definitions have communicated broad meanings in the field of teaching text structure and discourse.

As Sultan (2011) referred to the early 1990s as the time of development in text analysis, linguists reacted against the strong emphasis on propositional meaning in the text. Consequently, this development influenced the broad views of metadiscourse and different scholars have since attempted to propose more specific definitions (for instance, Crismore, 1984; Hyland, 1998, 2004, 2005, 2010; Swales, 1990, 2004). For instance, Crismore et al. (1993) stated that metadiscourse allows the writers not only to demonstrate how different parts of a text are connected but also to put forward their ideas about the content of the text and the reader. They further tried to shed more light on Crismore’s (1984) definition and suggested that although metadiscourse is the linguistic material of the texts, which does not add anything to the content; it contributes to the interpretation of the content by the reader. On the other hand, Hyland (1998) proposed another specific definition for metadiscourse as “aspects of a text which explicitly organise the discourse, engage the audience and signal the writer’s attitude” (p.437). Hyland and Tse (2004) also considered metadiscourse “as an umbrella term to include a heterogeneous array of cohesive and interpersonal features which help relate a text to its context by assisting readers to connect, organize and interpret material in a way preferred by the writer and with regard to the understandings and values of a particular discourse community” (p. 157).

Moreover, Ädel (2006) mentioned that metadiscourse is a branch of metalanguage which is “text about the evolving text or the writer’s explicit commentary on his ongoing discourse” (p.20). She further emphasized both the context of communication and the people involved in the channel of communication. To support a similar perspective, metadiscourse was found in building a gateway for understanding interactional features of texts (Fu & Hyland, 2014). In a recent definition, Hyland (2015) referred to metadiscourse as “a means by which propositional content is made coherent, intelligible and persuasive to a particular audience” (p. 10).

By presenting 400 lexical items, Hyland’s (2005) model is the most comprehensive and applicable model of interpersonal metadiscourse. This model has been preferred in different metadiscourse studies in the last decade since it is recent, clear, simple and comprehensive (Abdi, 2011). There are two resources of metadiscourse in this model: *interactive* and *interactional*. The interactive resources include *transitions*, *frame markers*, *endophoric markers*, *evidentials* and *code glosses*. On the other hand, the interactional resources comprise *hedges*, *boosters*, *attitude markers*, *self-mentions* and *engagement markers*. Table 1 illustrates Hyland’s (2005) model in further detail.

Table1

Hyland's (2005) Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse (P. 49)

Category	Function	Examples
Interactive resources	Help to guide reader through the text	
Transitions	express relation between main clauses	<i>In addition/but/thus/and</i>
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences, or stages	<i>finally/to conclude/my purpose is</i>
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	<i>noted above/see Fig/in section 2</i>
Evidentials	refer to information from other texts	<i>according to X/(Y, 1990) Z states</i>
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings	<i>namely/e.g./such as/in other words</i>
Interactional resources	Involve the reader in the argument	
Hedges	withhold commitment to proposition and open dialogue	<i>might/perhaps/possible/about</i>
Boosters	emphasize certainty in proposition or close dialogue	<i>in fact/definitely/it is clear that</i>
Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to proposition	<i>unfortunately/I agree/ surprisingly</i>
Self-mentions	explicit reference to author(s)	<i>I/we/my/me/our</i>
Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader	<i>consider/note/you can see that</i>

Several studies have been conducted on metadiscourse markers in academic writing, i.e., different parts of research articles (e.g., introduction, methodology and discussion sections) and different disciplines of research articles (e.g., hard sciences vs. soft sciences, native vs. non-native). On the other hand, few studies (Akbas, 2012; Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Kawase, 2015; Marandi, 2003; Mirshamsi & Allami, 2013; Ozdemir & Longo, 2014) have examined metadiscourse markers use in master thesis and doctoral dissertations.

As a case in point, Hyland (2004) conducted a study on a corpus of 240 master and doctoral dissertations. The sample consisted of 20 master and 20 doctoral dissertations from each of the six academic disciplines: computer science, public administration, business studies, biology, applied linguistics and electronic engineering. In order to find metadiscourse markers, the corpus was searched electronically for 300 common metadiscourse items. He compared doctoral and master dissertations and found that master students used slightly more interactional metadiscourse while the doctoral students used substantially more interactive forms. The findings revealed that doctoral students had a more sophisticated approach to language as these advanced students sought to craft more “academic” communication to engage their readers.

Ozdemir and Longo (2014) aimed to investigate the cultural variations in the use of metadiscourse markers in English master thesis abstracts written by Turkish and American students. They used Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse to conduct the study on 26 thesis abstracts written by Turkish master students and 26 thesis abstracts written by American master students. It was found that thesis abstracts written by Turkish and American students were both similar and different culturally. That is, Turkish students used fewer evidentials, endophoric markers, code glosses, boosters, attitude markers and self-mention in their abstracts. Also, transitions and frame markers were the most frequently used ones across these two cultures. The frequency of hedges was similar in both cultures and there was not any use of

engagement markers across corpora. It was found that the difference across cultures can be attributed to academic writing courses and the use of English as a lingua franca in Turkish master studies.

Wang and Zhang (2016) recently compared the different frequency of metadiscourse in mathematical and linguistic academic papers in terms of their abstract sections. Their corpus included 30 mathematical and 30 linguistic abstracts of academic papers from Social Science Citation Index and Science Citation Index journals. It was found that metadiscourse in the abstracts of linguistic academic papers were more frequently used than mathematical academic papers. Interactive metadiscourse was also adopted more than interactional metadiscourse in abstracts of the two disciplines. Both disciplines indicated the same trends in the frequencies of interactive resources. On the other hand, regarding interactional metadiscourse, hedges were the most frequently used metadiscourse markers in linguistic academic papers while self-mentions were most frequently used in mathematics academic papers.

In the Iranian context, Sarani et al. (2017) investigated the employment of interactional metadiscourse markers in the discussion and conclusion of English academic articles by humanities and non-humanities writers. They used Hyland's (2005) taxonomy to compare hedges, boosters and attitude markers in these articles. Their findings revealed that hedges and attitude markers were more frequently used in the humanities' articles than in non-humanities'. The researchers also found significant differences in the use of hedges and boosters between the two groups.

Hussein et al. (2018) analyzed metadiscourse markers in 24 master thesis abstracts, written by non-native Iraqi female students (n=12) and native American female students (n=12). They compared metadiscourse markers and their usage across the two groups in terms of nativity and field of study (linguistic and literary fields). Adopting Hyland's (2005) model, they classified metadiscourse markers into different types and subtypes in both sets of data. Their findings indicated that both groups used the interactive resources more than the interactional ones. Further analysis of the data indicated that the American researchers could engage their readers by employing more instances compared to their counterparts. The researchers recommended teaching metadiscourse markers at college-level courses to enhance coherence and clarity in writing.

Some other studies have considered EFL students' perspectives on the use of metadiscourse markers. One such study was conducted by Alavinia and Zarza (2011) in order to investigate the effect of metadiscourse markers on Iranian EFL learners' perception of written text. Their findings indicated a positive role of metadiscourse markers in improving text perception of EFL learners, suggesting that both types of metadiscourse markers had an almost similar impact on the learners' reaction to texts. Adopting Hyland's (2005) model, the present study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are metadiscourse markers used by the Iranian TEFL students in their master thesis abstracts?
2. What are the Iranian TEFL students' perspectives towards the use of metadiscourse markers in their master thesis abstracts?

3. Methodology

3.1. Corpus and Participants

We conducted the study on 70 out of 109 master thesis abstracts, which were available at the library of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Mazandaran. The corpus of the study consisted of 14,587 words from 70 TEFL thesis abstracts. These theses were written by former master students at the University of Mazandaran over the years 2007-2016. To obtain the second aim of the study, which was the TEFL graduated students' perspectives towards the employment of metadiscourse markers, we invited the students (n=16) who graduated within the last two years since they could make ample justification for their employment of metadiscourse markers in their abstracts and reach saturation. However, seven participants within the age range of 26 to 30 voluntarily took part in the study. The participants' profiles are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant's Profiles

Coding	Gender	Age	Major	Degree	Graduation Year
P1	Male	28	TEFL	MA	2016
P2	Male	27	TEFL	MA	2015
P3	Female	30	TEFL	MA	2016
P4	Male	26	TEFL	MA	2016
P5	Female	26	TEFL	MA	2015
P6	Female	27	TEFL	MA	2015
P7	Female	28	TEFL	MA	2016

As it is shown in Table 2, there were seven participants in this study, coded to be distinguished as: P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6 and P7. It can be seen that four participants were female and three participants were male. The maximum age was 30 years old while the minimum age was 26. Therefore, the age range was only four years and the average age was 27.4. All of them majored in TEFL and received a master degree at the University of Mazandaran. Three participants were graduated in 2015 and the four others in 2016.

3.2. Instrument

To explore the participants' perspectives towards the employment of metadiscourse markers, the data were collected through interview to support the findings from the first part of the analysis, and to gain rich insights into the participants' perspectives. The rationale for conducting an interview was to investigate the participants' detailed perspectives through the prepared open-ended questions. Since electronic interview via e-mail in qualitative method is efficient in cost and time, the asynchronous e-mail interview was conducted in the current study. In other words, this type of interview provided the participants with sufficient time to think on the issue and share their perspectives. The interview

questions were adapted from Hyland's (2004) metadiscourse study on second language postgraduate writing. That is, Hyland's (2004) metadiscourse in postgraduate writing was narrowed in metadiscourse in master thesis abstract writing.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Considering the first research question, a convenience sampling method was used due to the inaccessibility of all TEFL master theses. Thus, we conducted the study on 70 out of 109 master thesis abstracts, which were available at the library of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Mazandaran. Then, a corpus consisted of 14,587 words from 70 TEFL master thesis abstracts written by former students at the University of Mazandaran were collected. These theses were compiled over the years 2007-2016.

Regarding the second aim of the study, we decided to conduct a face-to-face interview with participants to obtain their perspectives on the employment of metadiscourse markers in their thesis abstracts. Since there were two main challenges concerning the participants' willingness and sufficient time to make justification for the employment of these markers in thesis abstracts, we preferred e-mail to a face-to-face interview. Regarding the number of participants, although we needed more participants to reach saturation, seven out of 16 students voluntarily participated in the interview. Moreover, since TEFL students were included as participants, they were supposed to be able to remember the stages in academic writing including thesis writing and provide the responses in English.

3.4. Data Analysis

To answer the first research question concerning the frequency of metadiscourse markers use in thesis abstracts, the total number of words in the thesis abstracts was carefully quantified. That is, we counted the whole words written in the hard copies of thesis abstracts manually. In addition, we carefully examined the corpus word by word with specific attention to the functions and meanings of the words in order to identify the metadiscourse markers according to Hyland's (2005) model. Therefore, the corpus was read purposefully and reiteratively to calculate the number of metadiscourse markers in each thesis abstract. Then, to report the frequency of metadiscourse markers use in thesis abstracts, we calculated the proportion of metadiscourse markers in each thesis abstract as well as the whole thesis abstracts. For the purpose of reliability check (Dornyei, 2007), two of the authors reviewed the data, testing the coded items and calculating the proportion of metadiscourse markers in thesis abstracts. Next, they compared the correspondence between the two sets of outcomes. The inter-rater reliability, computed manually for the purpose of agreement percentage, was 80% between the two raters. Moreover, they discussed the areas of disagreement to sort out the points of conflict.

To answer the second research question, we conducted a semi-structured interview with seven graduated TEFL students via email. Creswell (2014) emphasizes that searching for themes or patterns in

data is the key process for description in qualitative research. Therefore, for the purpose of qualitative content analysis, the answers to the interview questions were read purposefully and reiteratively. In addition, with the aim of interpreting the meaning of the text, we analyzed and compared within and across each case to find similarities and differences in order to code the meaning units. Then, we rechecked the codes to categorize them into specific categories and determined the codes, categories and themes so that we could reach an agreement for the purpose of inter-reliability. Finally, the five general themes of *organization of discourse, attitude, audience, certainty and language support* were obtained.

4. Results

4.1. The Use of Metadiscourse Markers in Thesis Abstracts

The present study tried to investigate the use of metadiscourse markers in master thesis abstracts written by TEFL students. Based on Hyland’s (2005) model, different metadiscourse markers were identified in 70 TEFL thesis abstract. To grasp a clear understanding of the frequency of use and percentage of the metadiscourse markers employed in the corpus, simple mathematical operations were applied. Table 3 presents the macro-level distribution of these markers in thesis abstracts.

Table 3

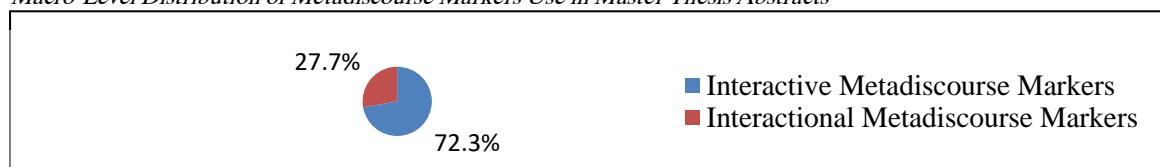
Macro-Level Distribution of Metadiscourse Markers in Master Thesis Abstracts

Metadiscourse resource	Frequency	Percentage
Interactive	672	72.3 %
Interactional	257	27.7 %
Total	929	100 %

The numbers presented in Table 3 display significant differences in the frequencies of interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers used in our sample. As it is shown above, the students used a total of 929 metadiscourse markers, which included 672 interactive and 257 interactional metadiscourse markers. To provide a clear picture of the distribution of each category, a pie chart in Figure 1 displays the macro-level frequency of metadiscourse markers use in the sample. As illustrated, interactive markers constituted 72.3% and interactional markers 27.7% of the total metadiscourse markers’ use.

Figure1

Macro-Level Distribution of Metadiscourse Markers Use in Master Thesis Abstracts



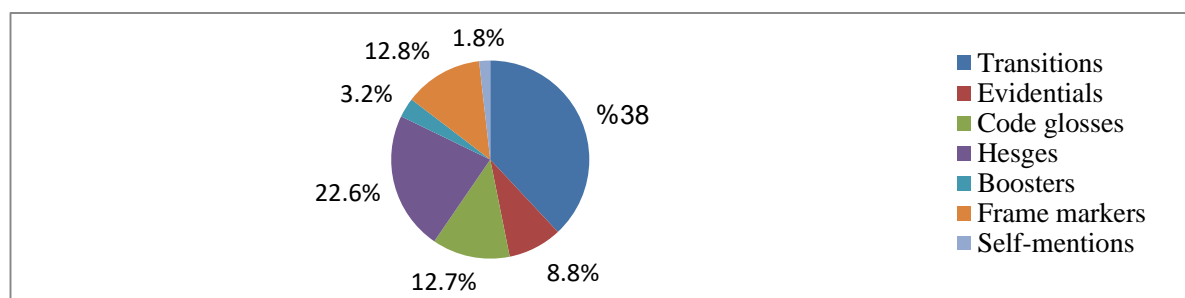
To explore the data more clearly, the frequency of use and percentage of subcategories within each group of metadiscourse markers were also calculated through simple mathematical operations. Table 4 shows the micro-level distribution of these markers in the sample thesis abstracts.

Table 4
Micro-Level Distribution of Metadiscourse Markers in Thesis Abstracts

Metadiscourse Markers	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Interactive	Transitions	353	38%
	Frame markers	119	12.8 %
	Endophoric markers	0	0 %
	Evidentials	82	8.8 %
	Code glosses	118	12.7 %
	Hedges	210	22.6 %
	Boosters	30	3.2 %
	Attitude markers	0	0 %
	Engagement markers	0	0 %
	Self-mentions	17	1.8 %
	Total	929	100 %

As it can be seen in Table 4, at the micro-level, the distribution of metadiscourse markers from the highest to the lowest percentage is as following: transitions 38%, frame markers 12.8%, code glosses 12.7% and evidentials 8.8%. No instance of endophoric marker was found in the thesis abstracts. On the other hand, the interactional metadiscourse markers were distributed in the thesis abstracts as following: hedges 22.6%, boosters 3.2% and self-mentions 1.8%. Within this category, attitude and engagement markers were not employed by the students in their thesis abstracts. Thus, the most frequent interactive metadiscourse marker was transitioned and the least frequent one was evidentials. In terms of interactional metadiscourse markers, hedges and self-mentions were the most frequent and the least frequent ones, respectively. Figure 2 also displays the micro-level frequency of use of metadiscourse markers. The highest and the lowest categories belong to transitions and self-mentions, respectively.

Figure 2
Micro-Level Distribution of Metadiscourse Markers Use in Master Thesis Abstracts



To explore the distribution of items of interactive metadiscourse markers, the frequency and percentage of each category were calculated. Within the transitional markers, the word *and* was the most frequent item while *nonetheless*, *despite*, *hence* and *so far* were among the least frequent items. With regard to the frame markers, the word *first* was used most frequently whereas expressions such as *lastly*, *to achieve the goal*, *this is due to* and *in the first step* were less frequently employed. In terms of evidentials,

according to was used more predominantly. Lastly, concerning the code glosses, the word *regarding* was most frequently used while the expressions such as *approximately, in this way, at least, most cases* and *corresponding* were used less.

Regarding the interactional metadiscourse markers, the most frequent and the least frequent items were provided by calculating the number and percentage of each category. Considering the hedges, the word *reveal* was the most frequent one while words such as *demonstrate* and *suggestion* were less frequently used. On the other hand, TEFL students used the word *mostly* with the highest frequency but they used the five following boosters less frequently: *largely, fully, heavily, crucial* and *excessively*. Lastly, only two words of self-mentions were employed in which *I* was used mostly; furthermore, the word *us* was used once. Table 5 displays the number and percentage of interactional metadiscourse markers within each category of hedges, boosters and self-mentions used in 70 master thesis abstracts. As it is clear from the table, the highest variation (19) and frequency (210) belong to the hedges and the lowest ones are observed within the self-mentions (2 categories of *I* and *us* for 17 times).

Table 5

Number and Percentage of Interactional Metadiscourse Markers in Thesis Abstracts

Hedges	N	%	Boosters	N	%	Self-mentions	N	%
reveal	23	10.95	mostly	9	30.00	I	16	94.11
show	21	10.00	mainly	7	23.33	us	1	5.88
indicate	20	9.52	considerably	3	10.00			
suggest	19	9.04	widely	2	6.66			
seem	17	8.09	commonly	2	6.66			
could	16	7.61	extremely	2	6.66			
can	14	6.66	excessively	1	3.33			
would	13	6.19	crucial	1	3.33			
possible	12	5.71	heavily	1	3.33			
relatively	12	5.71	fully	1	3.33			
it was found	10	4.76	largely	1	3.33			
slightly	9	4.28						
might	7	3.33						
may	6	2.85						
rarely	4	1.90						
must	3	1.42						
illustrate	2	0.95						
demonstrate	1	0.47						
suggestion	1	0.47						
Total	210	100	Total	30	100	Total	17	100

Note: (N) number, (%) percentage

4.2. TEFL Students' Perspectives

To answer the second research question, semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven TEFL graduated students via email. Then, the written responses of students regarding their perspectives were read purposefully and reiteratively to interpret the meanings for the content analysis. With this aim,

each case was analyzed and compared within and across other cases to find similarities and differences in order to code the meaning units. Then, the codes were categorized into specific categories. Finally, through identifying the codes and categories, five general themes were obtained to report on TEFL students' perspectives on the use of metadiscourse markers in their abstracts. In the following sections, the results of the interviews are presented and discussed. The sections include the excerpts which were derived from the participants' original raw data and detailed discussions on each general emerged theme.

Organization of Discourse

The first theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the email interviews was the *organization of discourse*. It was found that TEFL graduated students mostly attended to organizing the discourse in their abstracts. They answered the interview questions from a similar perspective towards cohesion and coherence. It should be noted that they emphasized the need to employ cohesive devices and coherent ideas to achieve readability and to communicate ideas in writing their thesis abstracts. The participants' attitudes lent urgent perspectives toward discourse organization. They demonstrated this perspective through different expressions, such as: *employing transitions and connective devices, linking the abstracts parts in stages, and using exemplification and reformulation*. To further illustrate TEFL graduated students' perspectives towards the use of metadiscourse markers in their master thesis abstracts, their expressions are discussed with sample excerpts. In this regard, three participants stated that conveying ideas in academic writing is achieved by using connective devices. For example, participant 2 (P2) considered transitions as devices to relate semantic ideas. Excerpt 1 has been identified from the email interview with P2:

Excerpt 1:

Researcher: What do you think makes a good abstract? What should be included?

P2: Well, in my opinion, a good abstract provides an organized summary of all parts of a research report. Because the abstract of a thesis can be called the identity card of the research I conducted. I mean it is the first part the reader can face. So, I included the main part of the research (introduction, method, result and discussion) and tied them together with transitional devices.

Researcher: Did you think of cohesion and coherence in your abstract? If yes, what words did you use to connect the ideas?

P2: Cohesion was important to me in writing my abstract and...I used cohesive devices like and, so, but, however, additionally and so on to make the thesis abstract neatly organized. As for the coherence, which is more toughly achieved, I tried my best to match the research ideas. Yet, I was not that successful in practice as one of the referees stated in my defense session.

As it was shown in Excerpt 1, P2 was completely aware of organizing the discourse of his thesis abstract since he referred to it as an important feature which the reader can face. Even though he intended to write coherently, he believed that he could not express his research ideas appropriately.

Attitude

The second theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the email interviews was *attitude*. It was found that TEFL graduated students were reluctant to show their attitude and perspective when they were writing their abstracts. All the seven participants hold similar perspectives towards their reluctance to use attitude markers such as *surprisingly*, *unfortunately*, and *I agree* and self-mentions such as *I*, *we*, *our* and *my*. They responded to interview questions by demonstrating their neutral position and passive voice. In other words, they believed that it was not necessary to present their attitudes and positions as a researcher in their thesis abstracts. Excerpt 2 presents one of the respondent's (P2) viewpoint in this regard:

Excerpt 2

Researcher: Did you think it was important to give your attitude to what you were writing about or should you be neutral? Could you express emotions?

P2: From my point of view, it is not necessary to present attitudes in thesis abstracts. The abstract has its special parts that should be written in order. In doing so, there is no place for presenting other things like attitudes and emotions. I think in most articles about abstract writing it is said that being neutral is preferable. That's why I was neutral without any bias.

The abovementioned statement refers to the student's attempt to make preferable decisions about his position in research according to the previous research articles he has studied in the academic community.

Audience

The third theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the email interviews was the *audience*. It was revealed that most of the TEFL graduated students had a broad perspective towards the consideration of the audience in their abstracts. They demonstrated their agreement on the fact that their audience and academic community would evaluate their thesis abstracts. TEFL graduated students put forward the idea of engaging their audience, although they were not certain how to do it in practice. In other words, they did not involve the readers explicitly and tried to show this engagement by using some techniques. As you can see in Excerpt 3, P4 mentioned his perspective.

Excerpt 3

Researcher: Did you think about the readers when you were writing?

P4: Yes, of course. My supervisor, advisor and examiners were going to read my thesis abstract, so I should have used the appropriate language. It seems I did so although I did not involve them explicitly.

Researcher: Did you think this influenced your writing? In what ways?

P4: I was writing to the professors and they expected master students to be aware and show this awareness in writing. They wanted to hear me to speak in a way they themselves do. It surely influenced on the way I chose the words but not in an explicit way.

Certainty

The fourth theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the email interviews was a *certainty*. The findings of the analysis indicated that the participants were very conservative in expressing their confidence and certainty. They predominantly expressed that they did not show their certainty, nor did they make any claim regarding their uncertainty. Respectively, concerning the point of confidence in writing, their thinking style indicated that they preferred to stay cautious and not confident. Excerpt 4 is an example of this point.

Excerpt 4

Researcher: What could you say if you were not sure that something was correct or not?

P4: Definitely, I would make no claim whenever I was unsure in the process of writing, so I would remove it or study more to draw a better conclusion; because I almost always wanted to stay on the safe side.

The findings obtained from the above excerpt are a probable sign of not being aware of the role of hedging in writing. Although TEFL graduated students moderately used hedges in their thesis abstracts, they did not explicitly demonstrate their perspectives on the role of hedging in academic writing. Instead of removing the results of their research in the case of uncertainty, the participants would respond that they could lessen the impact of their utterance and soften it by using hedges.

Language Support

The fifth theme that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the email interviews was *language support*. As the participants were asked to write about anything left in the final part of the email interview, the analysis of their answers revealed some facts about the support they needed while writing their thesis abstract. Almost all TEFL graduated students showed that developing their thesis abstract was a fairly vague challenging job. The reasons they mentioned in their emails were as following: *supervisors were relatively concerned with the development of the student's thesis abstracts, students had to find some model thesis abstracts to follow and it was a challenge for them to meet the examiner's expectations for a standard thesis abstract*. To elaborate more on this emerged theme, Excerpt 5 from P1's response is presented below.

Excerpt 5

Researcher: Is there anything left about your thesis abstract that you would like to write about?

P1: I'd like to share a point on the thesis conference sessions with my supervisor. Since I wasn't sufficiently skilled in writing, I needed much help in the process of writing my thesis, especially the abstract part. Because it is the summary of the whole challenges you faced to conduct your study. Overall, I received less helpful comments on my thesis abstract from the supervisor.

The above account indicates that it was a challenging situation for P1 to develop his thesis abstract regarding the obstacles he encountered in the process of writing. He did not receive much support from his supervisor; therefore, he was forced to rely on his own limited knowledge.

5. Discussion

The first question of the study attempted to investigate the extent to which metadiscourse markers were used by TEFL students in their master thesis abstracts. For this purpose, the corpus of 70 TEFL master thesis abstracts was coded and analyzed based on Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse. The macro-level distribution of metadiscourse markers included 72.3% interactive and 27.7% interactional metadiscourse markers. This finding is in line with the findings of Hyland (2004) and Hussein et al. (2018) in which the frequency of interactive metadiscourse markers use was more than that of interactional metadiscourse markers. In fact, TEFL students, in the present study, generally tended to help the readers to understand the main content of their thesis abstracts coherently through using interactive metadiscourse markers. In a similar vein, the findings of a study conducted by Ozdemir and Longo (2014) showed that Turkish students, whose first language is not English, used interactive metadiscourse markers more frequently than interactional metadiscourse ones.

In addition, it was found that the most and the least frequently used interactive metadiscourse marker were related to transitions and evidential, respectively. This finding is in line with Hussein et al. (2018) findings that reported the highest use of transitions within interactive markers by both Iraqi and American authors. The findings concerning the maximum use of transitions suggest that students tended to organize their discourse in coherent ways for the understanding of their readers. They used transitions for the logical organization and structure of various purposes such as: *addition, illustration, condition, cause and effect, time, and contradiction*. This finding is also in line with the results obtained from Hyland's (2004) study, which was found that transitions are the most frequently employed devices by academic writers in order to enable the readers to recover the writer's intentions correctly. Concerning the lower use of evidentials, which is consistent with the obtained results of Ozdemir and Longo's (2014) study, it seems that the reason might be the fact that TEFL graduated students rarely needed to refer to the sources of information from other texts in their thesis abstracts. Another reason is that evidentials are mostly used in other parts of a thesis like discussion through using the markers such as: *according to X* and *Z states*. In addition, findings in Table 4 show that endophoric markers were not used in the TEFL master thesis. The reason behind this fact may be that there was no need to refer to the information on other parts of the text in thesis abstracts by using the markers like: *noted above, see in fig., in section 2*. Besides, we know that endophoric markers are mostly employed in the result chapter of the thesis.

It could be inferred from the findings that the highest extent to which interactional metadiscourse markers were used in TEFL master theses was related to hedges. In other words, graduated TEFL students showed their reluctance to categorically present the propositional information through using markers of hedging, namely: *modal verbs, modal nouns, modal adjectives, modal adverbs, that-clauses and certain lexical verbs*. This finding is consistent with Hyland's (2004) study in which hedges were the most frequent interactional metadiscourse subcategory, constituting 41%, to meet the writers' need to evaluate their assertions and make them persuasive to readers.

On the other hand, the most frequently used interactional marker was hedges followed by boosters and self-mentions. This finding is to some extent consistent with Sarani et al. (2017) findings on the Discussion and Conclusion sections of academic articles, and Hussein et al. (2018) findings on Iraqi students' use of interactional markers. This may suggest that the nature of information discussed in TEFL thesis abstracts as a Humanities major is more subjective and graduated students preferred to use hedging to persuade their readers. Although Hyland (2001) found that using self-mentions has a significant role to mediate the interaction between the writer's argument and discourse community expectations, the findings of the current study showed the least frequent use of self-mentions. In this regard, the low frequency of self-mentions used in the current study is in line with the results of Hyland and Tse's (2004) study. Additionally, it was found that TEFL graduated students rarely used boosters (3.2%) to show their certainty in thesis abstracts. Furthermore, attitude and engagement markers were not employed in the abstracts under study. There may be less necessity of showing the writer's appraisal of the propositional information and conveying agreement and surprise. Moreover, they did not use engagement markers since the writers explicitly address the readers through using imperatives, second pronouns and question forms mostly in other parts of a master thesis like: *results* and *discussion* sections. So, engagement markers were not commonly used in thesis abstracts. Thus, findings showed that Iranian graduated TEFL students in this case used metadiscourse markers in different frequencies in their master thesis abstracts and interactive metadiscourse markers were more frequently used than interactional metadiscourse markers.

The second research question examined the Iranian graduated TEFL students' perspectives towards the use of metadiscourse markers in their master thesis abstracts. Through content analysis of the data, five major findings were obtained. First, it was found that graduated TEFL students at the University of Mazandaran had a positive perspective on the use of interactive metadiscourse markers to organize the discourse of their thesis abstracts. Also, their perspective was reflected through different expressions such as employing transitions and connective devices, linking different parts of the abstract, using exemplification and reformulation. Second, the qualitative analysis of the interviews revealed that graduated TEFL students expressed their reluctance to show their attitude when they were writing their abstracts. In fact, they thought that showing attitudes and opinions in thesis abstracts is not common. Third, regarding the consideration of their audience, particularly their supervisors, advisors and examiners, the participants stated that they were not sufficiently successful to engage their audience in practice. Fourth, it was found that they did not believe that showing certainty and confidence is acceptable in academic writing, in particular in writing the master thesis abstract. Fifth, regarding language support, they expressed their opinions on the lack of workshops and tutorial sessions on thesis writing, particularly thesis abstract writing while composing their thesis abstracts. Thus, findings suggest that these graduated TEFL students' perspectives were fairly positive towards using metadiscourse markers in thesis abstracts and they required more support and awareness on the use of these markers.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating the extent to which metadiscourse markers were used by TEFL students in their master thesis abstracts and their perspectives on the employment of these markers. In doing so, it offers an opportunity for EFL teachers of EAP courses to see the position of metadiscourse in thesis abstracts. Findings suggest that non-native students of English have few opportunities to obtain metadiscourse knowledge in this particular EFL context. Following that, metadiscourse markers seem to be less frequently employed in English master thesis abstracts. Therefore, EFL instructors should be aware of the metadiscourse markers' use and may need to reconsider their teaching techniques and, as a result, take action in light of the pedagogic goals at hand. To examine TEFL students' perspectives on metadiscourse use, the current study could collect data from a very limited sample, which was not representative of the population; further research is needed to investigate TEFL students' perspectives using a larger sample size to examine their views on the use of metadiscourse markers in all parts of the thesis. Qualitative research could also be conducted to investigate students' reasons for frequent use of some metadiscourse markers as well as their reluctance in using some other markers. As the current study did not consider gender effect, L1 background and other disciplines, further studies are suggested to investigate the effects of these factors on the use of metadiscourse markers and compare the TEFL thesis with other disciplines'. The present study also offered a picture of the lack of teaching metadiscourse markers in EAP courses for teachers and teacher trainers. As suggested in previous studies, teaching metadiscourse markers should be considered in any writing syllabus. In addition, some experimental studies could be conducted to shed light on the role of explicit instruction of metadiscourse and a variety of interventions (extensive reading, feedback on writing, etc.) in academic writing classes.

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