

An Analysis of Interactive Metadiscourse Markers in Expository Writing by Malaysian ESL Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Studies on metadiscourse have been conducted extensively across different genres, namely, research articles, research theses, and argumentative writing. Due to differences in genres and levels of education (undergraduate/postgraduate), there has been inconsistency in results, although most studies have adopted a common framework, which is the Interpersonal Metadiscourse model. Among these genres, research on using metadiscourse resources in expository writing needs to be further investigated, especially in the Malaysian context. Hence, this study aimed to uncover the interactive metadiscourse features used in expository essays written by English as a Second Language (ESL) students from a public university in Malaysia. The primary objective is to identify the differences in the use of interactive metadiscourse markers concerning clarity and conciseness based on Hyland's model of metadiscourse. A corpus of 206 expository essays comprising 83,445 words produced by the students was developed and analysed through quantitative and qualitative research. In order to achieve an acceptable degree of reliability, the essays were first analysed electronically using software called Text Inspector. Then, all the metadiscourse markers were examined qualitatively in context to determine their actual functions. Results revealed that the high use of interactive markers corresponds to the nature of expository essays, which is to explain, describe, or inform the reader about a particular topic or subject. The students in this study also understand that expository essays should be written neutrally, focusing on presenting facts, explaining concepts, and clearly understanding the topic. This study concluded that interactive markers are essential for inclusion in expository writing, especially in a language proficiency course, to ensure factual and critical thinking writers can be nurtured. The findings of this study may render some pedagogical implications in the ESL context, especially in writing expository essays among undergraduates.

Keywords: metadiscourse, expository writing, interactive markers, genre analysis

INTRODUCTION

The field of applied linguistics has extensively studied the area of interest known as metadiscourse. This concept can be applied to identify how propositional content is presented in different written genres with the assistance of several resources, namely interactive and interactional. Using various metadiscourse models, ranging from broad (Hyland, 2005) to narrow (Adel, 2006), linguists can examine the language preferences of writers from various disciplines, including hard science (science and technology) and soft science (social sciences), primarily in academic settings. Hence, most linguists have discussed the pedagogical implications of metadiscourse in language classrooms. However, this does not diminish the importance of metadiscourse in non-academic contexts, such as when studying genres like advertisements, newspapers, sermons, political speeches, and so on.

Given its significance across various genres and disciplines, Hyland's (2005) definition of metadiscourse is commonly applied by researchers in this field. He defines metadiscourse as the ways writers or speakers project themselves into their discourse to signal their attitudes towards both the content and the audience of the text. In other words, this concept encompasses the elements of communication that help organise the content, engage readers or listeners, and express the writer's or speaker's stance.

According to Hyland (2019), there are three main advantages of metadiscourse knowledge for students,

especially in the ESL context. First, it helps them to better understand the cognitive demands that texts place on readers and the ways writers can assist them in processing information. Second, it provides them with the resources to express a stance toward their statements. Third, it allows them to negotiate this stance and engage in a community-appropriate dialogue with readers.

ESL writers faced a few challenges in using metadiscourse markers appropriately. These challenges stem from linguistic, cultural, and educational factors that influence their understanding and use of these rhetorical tools. From a linguistic standpoint, the complexity of academic genres contributed to the challenges. Academic writing requires a sophisticated use of metadiscourse to balance formality, reader engagement, and argumentation. ESL writers often find it challenging to achieve this balance, especially when they must simultaneously address grammar, vocabulary, and content development. At the same time, these ESL writers also face syntactic and lexical limitations due to the various types of metadiscourse markers. For example, they may struggle with hedges such as “might” or “perhaps” and boosters like “indeed” or “clearly,” which require subtle distinctions in meaning and appropriateness depending on the context.

Next, the challenging use of metadiscourse markers is also influenced by cultural aspects. Writing conventions in different languages and cultures can shape how writers approach metadiscourse. For instance, some cultures, like Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States, prioritise directness (Pacheco, 2024), while others favour subtlety, such as Japan, China, India, and the Middle East (Global Coach Centre, 2022; Halcrow, 2020; Hall & Hall, 1990). These differences may result in ESL writers either being overly direct or excessively cautious, which can affect the clarity and persuasiveness of their writing.

Finally, the academic aspect presents a challenge that hinders ESL writers from effectively using metadiscourse markers. Many ESL writers lack formal instruction on the use of metadiscourse, particularly in academic writing. They frequently lack familiarity with metadiscourse markers, particularly those found in interactional resources, which can hinder their ability to effectively structure arguments and engage readers. English syllabi that prioritise general or conversational language skills do not consistently emphasise metadiscourse, contributing to this issue.

Despite the challenges, this issue is still unresolved because ESL writing is a difficult task stemming from academic writing conventions, academic discourse, the way certain disciplines approach various writing genres, text types, and ethics in academic writing (Lee et al., 2015). Metadiscourse markers are also considered complex as learners are expected to be actively engaged in their thinking and learning process (Ofte, 2014). However, due to their inability to articulate their own ideas clearly, learners often struggle to determine which metadiscourse markers are most appropriate for elucidating their writing topic to their readers, including language instructors or classmates. Moreover, Hashim et al. (2018) stated that a good essay is hard to produce, as undergraduates, especially, have not reached writing maturity yet and might need extra time to synthesise writing materials. Specifically, expository writing, which requires students to communicate information clearly and effectively without personal opinions, emotions, or arguments, may present challenges for students. They must concentrate on providing facts, logical reasoning, and evidence to aid the reader in understanding the subject (Kamaruddin & Kaur, 2024).

Although extensive research has been conducted on the role of metadiscourse markers in written discourse in the ESL context, little has been done to highlight the use of interactive metadiscourse markers and their role in achieving cohesion and coherence in expository writing, especially in an ESL context like Malaysia. The study is conducted to answer the main question: To what extent are interactive metadiscourse markers used in expository essays by Malaysian ESL students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical studies on interactive metadiscourse markers in expository essays in the Malaysian ESL context

Exploring interactive metadiscourse markers in expository essays has gained increased attention, particularly within the context of Malaysian ESL (English as a Second Language), and yet significant gaps remain. Empirical studies have highlighted the usage and importance of metadiscourse in academic writing, revealing both the benefits and challenges ESL learners face. Investigating how interactive metadiscourse markers facilitate

communication between the writer and reader is essential, enhancing essays' coherence and persuasiveness.

One pertinent study by Mat Zali et al. (2022) examined the interactional metadiscourse markers in 40 expository essays written by ESL learners across different disciplines. The findings showed variance in the types and frequencies of metadiscourse markers employed, suggesting a disparity in metadiscourse use among different fields of study. This disparity reflects the influence of disciplinary conventions on writing practices and highlights the necessity to explore further how Malaysian ESL learners adapt to these conventions. Similarly, Mohamed et al. (2021) conducted a preliminary study on metadiscourse usage in persuasive essays by students at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, illustrating how these markers help organize discourse while engaging hypothetical readers. However, their study primarily focused on persuasive texts rather than expository essays, indicating a gap in understanding metadiscourse usage across different essay types, specifically in the Malaysian context.

Furthermore, the comparative analysis by Mat Zali et al. (2022) and the broader reviews by Wang and Zhang (2017) indicate that while attention has been given to interactive metadiscourse markers, the nuanced layers of interaction between writers and readers in Malaysian ESL contexts are not thoroughly addressed. Multiple studies emphasise the role of metadiscourse in aiding clarity and responsiveness in texts. However, gaps exist regarding teaching practices that effectively incorporate these markers into ESL writing instruction (Bogdanović & Mirović, 2018). Thus, there is a pressing need for empirical research that investigates the use of interactive metadiscourse markers in expository essays and evaluates pedagogical strategies that can aid ESL learners in deploying these markers effectively.

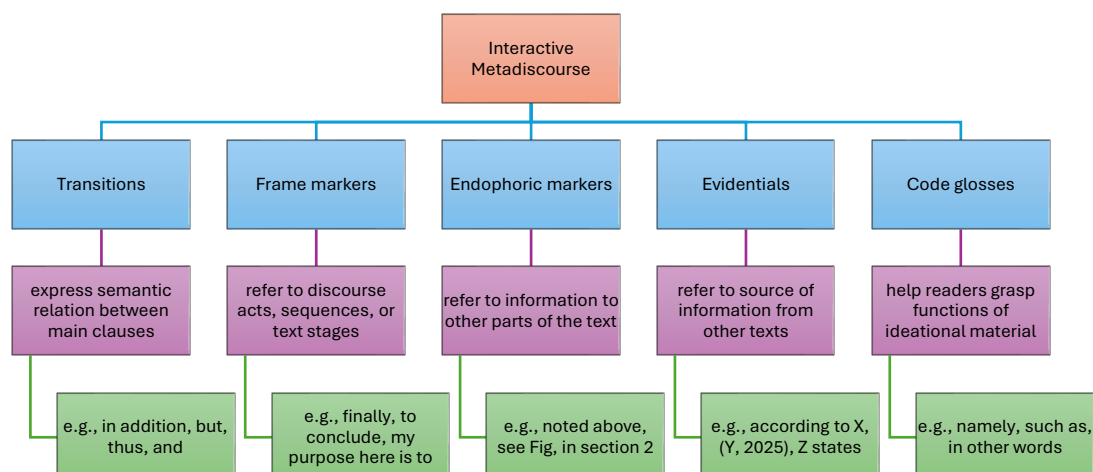
In academic discourse, Hyland's studies have significantly shaped the understanding of metadiscourse, indicating its critical role in signaling the writer's presence and engagement with the audience (Hyland, 2010). Despite this, the specific dynamics of how Malaysian ESL learners interact with such metadiscourse markers within expository essays remain underexplored. The examination of metadiscourse use across various writing tasks has implications for academic performance and instruction, necessitating a focused inquiry into how these markers can be taught and practiced (Mat Zali et al., 2021).

While empirical studies have shed light on the use and functions of interactive metadiscourse markers within various contexts, substantial gaps remain regarding their specific application in Malaysian ESL expository writing. Future research must quantify metadiscourse usage and develop targeted pedagogical approaches that enhance students' writing skills through a deeper understanding of interactive metadiscourse dynamics.

Theoretical Framework

Interactive metadiscourse includes several subcategories, each serving a specific function in facilitating writer-reader interaction (refer to Diagram 1). These markers are crucial in structuring the content and making it easier for readers to understand. They are words or phrases used by writers to organise their ideas clearly and guide readers through the text

Diagram 1 The interactive metadiscourse markers



The interpersonal model of metadiscourse developed by Hyland (2005) serves as the analytical foundation for this investigation. This model is widely used in discourse studies because it provides a clear, functional categorisation of metadiscourse elements that aligns well with the goals of academic writing. It also emphasises the way that the writers display their propositional content for a particular genre to help readers' understanding, making it suitable for analysing interactive features in student writing.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 54 diploma students from UiTM Sarawak Branch, Mukah Campus, aged between 20 and 23 years old. Of the total 54 participants, 14 were male and 40 were female. Data was purposively collected from two different faculties, namely the Faculty of Business Studies and the Faculty of Plantation and Agriculture. The level of language proficiency among these participants varied from low, average, and high by using their English results from Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) or Malaysian Certificate of Education as the indicator of their proficiency. These participants have received 11 years of language learning experience that includes writing skills, from six years in primary school and five years in secondary school.

Research Design

This mixed-method study explored the use of interactive metadiscourse markers in expository essays by Malaysian ESL undergraduates from one of the public universities. The use of language corpora has been found to be beneficial in translation classrooms and as a resource for translation instructors (Vaezian, 2019). Thus, language corpora are not only useful in translation studies but also in metadiscourse studies. Hence, a corpus of 206 expository essays comprising 83,445 words produced by the students was developed and analysed through quantitative and qualitative research.

Data Collection

The main data, which are essay samples, were collected by giving the students four types of expository writing, namely topical, cause-effect, problem-solution, and expository writing tests. For each type of expository writing, like topical, cause-effect, and problem-solution, there are ten writing topics for the students to choose from, and the topics were selected based on a writing textbook written by Kaur and Haron (2015). Only the writing topics for the expository writing test were decided by the Academy of Language Studies in Shah Alam, Malaysia, as the test is standardised for all UiTM students across Malaysia. These four types of expository essays were administered from Week 3 until Week 6 in the ongoing semester.

Data Analysis

The essays were analysed by employing the metadiscourse framework by Hyland (2005). This study only focused on interactive metadiscourse markers that focus on transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses. In order to achieve an acceptable degree of reliability, the essays were first analysed electronically using software called Text Inspector, developed by Stephen Bax in 2011. Then, all the metadiscourse markers were examined qualitatively in context to determine their actual functions. Frequency and percentage counts were used to analyse the data.

FINDINGS

Table 1 The usage of interactive metadiscourse markers

Interactive	Frequency (items)	Percentage (%)
Transitions	5357	74.87
Frame markers	936	13.08
Code glosses	652	9.11

Evidentials	121	1.69
Endophoric markers	89	1.24
Total	7155	100

Table 1 demonstrates the interactive metadiscourse markers used by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in expository writing. Students preferred to use transitions (74.87%) while using endophoric markers the least (1.24%). This indicates that while the students in this study demonstrate a high level of awareness regarding the use of transitions, they lack familiarity with other interactive metadiscourse markers, including frame markers, code glosses, evidentials, and endophoric markers. These findings also demonstrated that the participants in this study were unaware of nine other types of metadiscourse markers, apart from transition markers. Aliyu and Korau (2020) stated that when students underuse certain metadiscourse markers, this situation indicates their lack of awareness of metadiscourse. However, a low awareness of these features does not necessarily mean a low use of the metadiscourse features. Aliyu and Korau (2020) also found that most Nigerian undergraduate students exhibited limited knowledge of metadiscourse elements and yet were able to employ them instinctively in moderation within their academic writing.

Hinds (1987; as cited in Prommas, 2020) understanding of contrastive analysis can also explain the inclination to use more transition markers in the participants' expository writing. He stated that in writer-responsible cultures like English, writers play an important role in producing well-organised texts through explicit textual-organising devices, with an awareness and evaluation of readers' need for elaboration. Furthermore, this finding aligns with Farahani's (2018; cited in Hooi et al. 2022) study, which found that research articles heavily utilised transitions or logical markers, indicating the writers' awareness of their use in the text.

Transitions

Table 2 The use of transitions in the corpus

Transitions	Frequency	Percentage (%)
And	2884	54.77
Or	606	11.51
Also	429	8.15
Because	306	5.81
So	234	4.44
But	224	4.25
In addition	93	1.77
However	60	1.14
Therefore	57	1.08
Furthermore	53	1.01
Thus	53	1.01
Moreover	49	0.93
Hence	46	0.87
Since	40	0.76
As a result	22	0.42
Besides	19	0.36
Leads to	12	0.23

Although	11	0.21
Yet	9	0.17
Even though	8	0.15
Consequently	7	0.13
In contrast	6	0.11
Nevertheless	5	0.09
While	5	0.09
Result in	5	0.09
Equally	4	0.08
Though	4	0.08
Whereas	4	0.08
Thereby	3	0.06
Similarly	2	0.04
Accordingly	2	0.04
As a consequence	1	0.02
Likewise	1	0.02
Nonetheless	1	0.02
On the other hand	1	0.02
Total	5266	100

There are 35 types of transitions used by the students in expository writing, as shown in Table 2. The most common transitions used by the students are “and” (2884 items), “or” (606 items), “also” (429 items), “because” (306 items), “so” (234 items), and “but” (224 items). It can be noted that these items are less than seven letters, which explains why it is easier for the students to memorise them and apply them in writing. This is supported by Ho and Li (2018), as they mentioned that the syntactical simplicity of metadiscourse items will lead to an effect of “easy to use” as perceived by students. Erarslan (2021) also reported that students in his study predominantly use “and”, “because”, and “but”, which is similar to the finding of this current study. The usage of repetitive similar conjunctions was considered by Pasaribu et al. (2022) as one of the pupils' major flaws in their writing. For example, the connectors “and” and “then” clearly overburdened the entire texts in both groups of students in Pasaribu et al.'s study. This issue may bore readers and eventually lead them to incomprehensible content (Hyland, 2017). In contrast, the least common transition markers used by the students are “thereby” (3 items), “accordingly” (2 items), “as a consequence” (1 item), “on the other hand” (1 item), “likewise” (1 item), and “nonetheless” (1 item). It has been reported in other metadiscourse studies in ESL contexts (see Anwardeen et al., 2013; Bax et al., 2019; Chan & Tan, 2010; Ho & Li, 2018; Mohamed & Ab Rashid, 2017; Mohamed et al., 2021; Pasaribu et al., 2022; Pavlović & Đorđević, 2020; Qin & Uccelli, 2019; Sancak, 2019; Yuksel & Kavanoz, 2018) that transitions have the highest frequency, with usually more than half of the total interactive metadiscourse markers. Regarding the dominant use of transition markers in student-written texts, Hyland (2005) states that transitions are the most frequent metadiscourse markers since writers directly elucidate their reasoning without causing ambiguity.

This finding is similar to Mohamed and Ab Rashid's (2017) finding, in which transitions have the highest frequency count on their use in both corpora between good undergraduate essays (GUE) and weak undergraduate essays (WUE), with more than half of the total metadiscourse. After all, transition phrases are probably the most familiar type of metadiscourse (Smith, 2019). Familiarity with transitions may have prevented students from taking as much time to think about how to use them more effectively, especially if students assumed they were already fairly adept at using them (Smith, 2019).

Familiarity with transitions can be further extended to students' understanding of the importance of transitions in facilitating internal cognitive connections in academic discourse. Transitions help readers interpret pragmatic linkages and contrastive relationships in the text, with conjunctive and adverbial transitions most commonly used in both corpora (Geng & Wei, 2023). Sancak (2019) also supported the idea that transitions help readers to interpret and follow the connections between the ideas and to understand the reasoning of the writers clearly.

Frame markers

Table 3 The use of frame markers in the corpus

Frame markers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Well	124	13.32
First	105	11.28
In conclusion	103	11.06
Firstly	80	8.59
Secondly	74	7.95
Next	58	6.23
Lastly	54	5.80
Last	49	5.26
Second	46	4.94
Three	43	4.62
Overall	35	3.76
To sum up	31	3.33
Thirdly	28	3.01
Third	27	2.90
Finally	18	1.93
To conclude	17	1.83
Two	13	1.40
Summarise	6	0.64
To begin	4	0.43
Fourth	4	0.43
Five	4	0.43
Four	3	0.32
I propose	1	0.11
I suggest	1	0.11
So far	1	0.11
Subsequently	1	0.11
The aim	1	0.11
Total	931	100

The analysis of the expository writing corpus also found 28 types of frame markers used by Malaysian ESL

undergraduates, as illustrated by Table 3 above. Compared to transitions, the students reported that they were unaware of other metadiscourse items, ranging from frame markers to endophoric markers. However, the students unconsciously employed frame markers, which aligns with the earlier observations made by Aliyu and Korau (2020). When using Text Inspector to analyse the essay scripts, the text analysis online tool further divides the items into four categories, which are announce goals, label stages, sequencing, and topic shifts based on the categorisation made by Hyland (2005). The most common frame markers used by the students are “first” (105 items), “in conclusion” (103 items), “firstly” (80 items), “secondly” (74 items), “next” (58 items), and “lastly” (54 items). These findings are supported by Sancak (2019), as she mentioned that there was an over-reliance on sequencing markers such as “first of all”, “firstly”, “secondly”, and “finally” in the category of frame markers. The least common frame markers used by the students are “four” (3 items), “so far” (1 item), “subsequently” (1 item), “I propose” (1 item), “I suggest” (1 item), and “the aim” (1 item). Most studies, such as Anwardeen et al. (2013), Gholami et al. (2014), Ho and Li (2018), and Tahmasbi et al. (2024), have also found that frame markers are the second most prominent interactive metadiscourse markers after transitions.

It is intriguing to note the use of “well” among participants in this study. This is due to a study conducted by Owen (1981; as cited in Dumlao & Wilang, 2019), which found that L1 English users most frequently used the word “well” in their writing because it signals and mitigates various forms of conflict. However, Jucker (1997; as cited in Dumlao & Wilang, 2019) espoused that in modern English, “well” has four distinct uses, namely a frame marker, a face-threat mitigator, a qualifier, and a pause filler. The study's findings contradict this notion, as the participants successfully used “well” in 124 items, albeit in either propositional or metadiscoursal contexts. However, Traugott (2019) asserts that spoken discourse, as opposed to written discourse, commonly employs “well” as a digressive discourse marker (DDM). Nevertheless, in this study, L2 English users utilised the common spoken marker “well” in expository essays to demonstrate their interest in their learning. Sancak (2019) also highlighted that topic shifts such as “well” were not observed in either the teaching material or the student paragraphs, and this is also agreed by Belli (2019) in the context of academic writing, like master thesis abstracts.

Code glosses

Table 4 The use of code glosses in the corpus

Code glosses	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Such as	255	39.60
For example	205	31.83
For instance	98	15.22
That is	51	7.92
Called	8	1.24
Known as	8	1.24
Specifically	7	1.09
In fact	4	0.62
Which means	4	0.62
In other words	2	0.31
Defined as	1	0.16
This means	1	0.16
Total	644	100

Table 4 demonstrates that there are 12 types of code glosses produced by Malaysian ESL undergraduates in their expository essays. The most common code glosses used are “such as” (255 items), “for example” (205 items), and “for instance” (98 items). The least common code glosses are “in other words” (2 items), “defined as” (1

item), and “this means” (1 item). This finding suggests that students may overuse “such as” and “for example” when attempting to aid their readers in understanding propositional content. Anwardeen et al. (2013) have also addressed the frequent repetition of “such as” and “for example”, pointing out that this repetition occurs due to a lack of vocabulary, and students tend to repeat words they are more familiar with in their writing. Hence, it informs the language instructors to teach a different variety of code glosses, such as “including” and “namely” to replace “such as” and “to demonstrate” or “as an illustration” to substitute “for example”. Yüksel and Kavanoz (2018) proposed that novice writers often struggle to elucidate propositional meaning through further explanations or examples, primarily due to their inexperience in understanding the context of reader-writer interactions and their inability to predict their readers' background knowledge (Rustipa, 2014; as cited in Yüksel & Kavanoz, 2018). Contrary to Yüksel and Kavanoz, Bhartiya et al. (2023) asserted that undergraduate students utilised more transitions and code glosses compared to postgraduate students. Therefore, this study confirms that students found it easy to assist the reader's understanding by providing sufficient examples while simultaneously concealing their inadequacies in explaining the subject matter. Hyland (2005, p. 22) also posited that “It is not surprising to see the more prevalent use of code glosses in academic writing when ‘rephrasing, explaining, or elaborating’ are likely to be used by the writers” to ensure the more “distanced” reader is able to recover the writer's intended meaning. However, writers may feel less motivated to use code glosses when writing to a “close” audience, assuming they have more shared knowledge and background.

Evidential

Table 5 The use of evidentials in the corpus

Evidentials	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Studies	31	25.41
Said	27	22.13
Believe	15	12.30
Research	13	10.66
Shows	11	9.02
According to	7	5.74
Quote	7	5.74
Proves	4	3.28
Literature	2	1.64
Suggests	2	1.64
Demonstrates	1	0.82
Says	1	0.82
Suggest	1	0.82
Total	122	100

There are 13 types of evidence identified in the document analysis, as depicted in Table 5 above. The most common evidence used by the students is “studies” (31 items), “said” (27 items), and “believe” (15 items). The least common evidentials used by the students are “demonstrates” (1 item), “says” (1 item), and “suggest” (1 item). The participants in this study understand the importance of providing a reliable source in their writing, having studied the ‘Fact versus Opinion’ lesson during their English Language Course in Semester Two, which focuses on reading skills. Since they understand that expository writing should be objective based on factual information, using the word “studies” is their way to prove that the points they presented are objective and convince their readers to accept their points as believable. As stated by Tan and Wong (2014), evidentials are important linguistic elements used in written academic discourse, and hence, citation of other writers’ work provides credibility to the writer’s own writing. Furthermore, the lack of use of evidence by both groups of

writers in the current study, as well as Tan and Wong (2014), could suggest that the writers have not been introduced to the convention of using citations in academic writing. This is not surprising, as these writers are first-year undergraduates and would therefore need further apprenticeship in the crafting of successful academic discourse. Additionally, the findings from this study align with those of Ho and Li's (2018) study, as the use of evidentials is even more limited due to the fact that the essays were written during an examination, during which students lacked access to any external sources of information for reference. Apart from that, Pasaribu et al. (2022) also provided other reasons for the rare use of evidentials due to the type and purpose of writing that does not require students to look for references to strengthen their arguments, such as writing an expository essay as compared to writing a thesis or scientific article.

Endophoric markers

Table 6 The use of endophoric markers in the corpus

Endophoric markers	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Example	39	45.35
See	37	43.02
Chapter	4	4.65
Figure	3	3.49
Table	3	3.49
Total	86	100

Table 6 presents the findings by Text Inspector of five types of endophoric markers, which are “example” (39 items), “see” (37 items), “chapter” (4 items), “figure” (3 items), and “table” (3 items). Endophoric markers such as “figure” and “table” are not commonly used in expository writing but are prominent in academic writing, especially when presenting findings of a study. Similar to the findings by Mohamed and Ab Rashid (2017), the participants in this study also employed endophoric markers the least, apart from evidentials. However, the corpus analysis of Scopus journals by Geng and Wei (2023) found that endophoric markers are the second most frequently used interactive markers. The findings contradict due to non-linear text references, like figures or tables, being unlikely to be used in expository essays. Therefore, it is evident that the writing genre significantly influences the selection of metadiscourse resources, ensuring adherence to the appropriate format (Chou et al., 2023; Cuevas-Alonso & Míguez-Alvarez, 2021; El-Dakhs, 2020; Qin & Uccelli, 2019). In addition to the writing genre, the length of the essays also influences the use of endophoric markers (El-Dakhs, 2020; Ho & Li, 2018; Pavlovic & Dordevic, 2020). When the participants are expected to write within 200 to 300 words, especially for the expository writing test, the short expository essay does not require much use of endophoric markers to remind the reader of earlier or later parts of the essay.

DISCUSSION

The analysis of interactive metadiscourse markers in expository writing by Malaysian ESL undergraduates reveals distinct patterns regardless of the participants' disciplinary backgrounds. Thus, these findings lead the researchers to discuss some challenges that students face when using interactive metadiscourse markers in the expository writing genre are complex and significant, particularly in the context of ESL learners in Malaysia. These challenges can largely be attributed to limited understanding, inadequate instruction, and varying proficiency levels, which hinder students' ability to deploy these markers in their writing effectively.

One of the primary challenges is the lack of explicit instruction in using interactive metadiscourse markers. Research by Ho and Li (2018) emphasizes that novice academic writers benefit from explicit teaching strategies that incorporate metadiscourse, noting that the teaching and learning of metadiscourse should aim to introduce various categories of interactive and interactional metadiscourse. Without targeted instruction, many students remain unaware of the specific functions and appropriate contexts for using various types of metadiscourse, such

as transition markers, frame markers, or evidentials. Mat Zali et al. (2021) further highlight that students' familiarity with these markers varies significantly between disciplines, impacting their ability to employ them effectively. Consequently, students may struggle to integrate these markers cohesively into their writing, leading to less clear and engaging essays.

Corpus analysis from this study further reveals that students heavily overuse transition markers, with a dominant preference for simple items such as "and", "or", "also", "because", and "so". These transitions constituted 74.87% of all interactive markers, suggesting an overreliance on familiar, syntactically simple connectors. While transitions are essential for coherence, excessive use of fundamental transitions can lead to repetitive and monotonous prose, ultimately hindering clarity and reader engagement. Hyland (2017) noted that such overuse may dilute textual quality and obscure the logical flow of ideas.

In contrast, other interactive metadiscourse categories, such as frame markers, code glosses, evidentials, and endophoric markers, were underutilized. Students used frame markers at 13.08%, code glosses at 9.11%, evidentials at 1.69%, and endophoric markers at 1.24%. This imbalance suggests that while students are familiar with transitions, they lack awareness of the broader rhetorical toolkit for organizing and clarifying text. Even when markers like frame markers were used, such as "first", "in conclusion", and "next", students often did so unconsciously and without rhetorical precision. This limited repertoire underscores a significant gap in students' metalinguistic knowledge and suggests a need for more diversified and explicit metadiscourse instruction.

Another significant issue is the challenge of contextualizing interactive metadiscourse markers within the norms of academic writing. Many ESL students, including those in Malaysia, face difficulty in engaging with their readers appropriately through metadiscourse. Li and Wharton (2012) note that maintaining engagement and shaping argumentative coherence is particularly challenging for second-language writers. This challenge is compounded by the varying expectations regarding metadiscourse usage across different academic genres, as students tend to exhibit varying proficiency levels in different types of essays. For instance, findings by Rahmat et al. (2020) suggest that gender differences can influence the use of metadiscourse, with variations observed in how students employ specific markers based on social and cultural backgrounds. Such disparities illustrate that understanding audience engagement is critical yet often lacking among ESL learners.

The analysis of code glosses showed that students mostly relied on repetitive expressions such as "such as", "for example", and "for instance". The lack of lexical variety here indicates limited vocabulary and unfamiliarity with alternative forms like "namely", "specifically", or "as an illustration". This repetition not only reflects linguistic limitations but also reveals the students' struggle to elaborate or explain propositional content in a reader-friendly manner. According to Yüksel and Kavanoz (2018), novice writers often fail to predict readers' background knowledge, which hinders their ability to clarify meaning through explanation or exemplification.

Similarly, evidentials were sparingly used, with only basic terms like "studies", "said", and "believe" appearing. Their limited use may result from minimal training in citation practices, exam settings that restrict access to references, and a lack of emphasis on source integration in expository writing tasks. As Tan and Wong (2014) argue, evidentials are vital for asserting credibility in academic writing. Their minimal presence in student texts highlights the need for more structured exposure to academic writing conventions, particularly source attribution and evidence-based argumentation.

Endophoric markers were the least utilised, likely due to genre and task constraints. Short expository essays of 200–300 words typically do not require intra-textual referencing, such as referring to earlier or later parts of the essay. Nonetheless, the unfamiliarity with endophoric markers and their rhetorical utility in more extended academic writing signifies an instructional shortfall. The writing context and essay length, as well as students' limited exposure to academic research writing, may restrict their understanding of how to guide the reader through the internal structure of a text.

Moreover, the relationship between metadiscourse usage and overall writing performance adds another layer of complexity. Erarslan (2021) suggests a correlation between increased use of certain interactive markers and improved text readability and cohesion. However, many Malaysian students may not possess the requisite skills to apply these markers effectively, which can result in a less persuasive and coherent writing style. The

challenged capacity to strategically employ metadiscourse reveals a significant gap in the pedagogical approaches currently adopted for teaching writing in ESL contexts. As emphasized by Mat Zali et al. (2022), students often rely heavily on basic markers without fully understanding their nuanced roles in academic discourse.

Lastly, the impact of cultural differences on writing styles cannot be overlooked. Hayisama et al. (2019) highlight that variations in rhetorical preferences between cultural backgrounds, such as those between Malaysian and Thai students, can influence how metadiscourse markers are perceived and utilised. Hinds' (1987; as cited in Prommas, 2020) contrastive rhetoric framework further supports this, explaining that in writer-responsible cultures like English, the writer must explicitly guide the reader through logical argumentation. Many Malaysian ESL learners, coming from reader-responsible cultural traditions, may not naturally adopt these conventions, leading to mismatches between expected and actual textual organisation.

The challenges students face in employing interactive metadiscourse markers in expository writing encompass a range of interrelated issues, including insufficient explicit instruction, difficulties in contextual application, overreliance on limited markers, genre constraints, and cultural influences. Addressing these challenges through targeted pedagogical strategies, such as metadiscourse awareness training, genre-based instruction, and scaffolded academic writing tasks, is essential for enhancing students' competence in reader-oriented academic writing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research provides invaluable insights into the use of interactive metadiscourse markers in expository writing among ESL Malaysian undergraduates. The key lesson from this research is that transition emerges as the most prominent interactive metadiscourse marker in expository writing. Transitions are used frequently because Malaysian ESL students in this study are more familiar with the markers categorised under this category, with “and”, “or”, “also”, “because”, “so”, and “but” being the most frequent transition markers used.

This study narrowly focused on expository writing, but its insights can also be applied to other prescribed writing assessments for diploma students, such as email writing, narrative writing, and argumentative writing. Language educators should implement an intervention to encourage students to utilise a diverse range of interactive metadiscourse markers, rather than relying solely on transition markers to improve their students' achievement in the areas of cohesion and coherence. The stark disparity in the usage percentage of interactive metadiscourse markers indicates that students require exposure to various types of interactive markers, including frame markers, code glosses, evidentials, and endophoric markers. The high use of interactive metadiscourse markers informs language educators to teach students not only text-based markers but also communicative-based markers.

This research contributes to the practical use of Hyland's interpersonal framework in the context of Malaysia among diploma students. There are still some open questions remaining regarding the identification and retrieval of metadiscourse markers when writing expository essays. There is a need to delve deeper into the cognitive process of metadiscourse marker application in written discourse to clarify the diverse ways in which students know which metadiscourse markers are suitable to be included in their expository essays. This cognitive process can be categorised under cognitive linguistics, and past studies such as Fuze (2023) have implemented cognitive linguistics in identifying semantic preferences between the use of two lexical terms, “perempuan” and “wanita,” that can be translated into the exact word in English, which is female. Therefore, the application of cognitive linguistics will enhance metadiscourse study by enabling language instructors to comprehend the reasons behind students' preference for one type of metadiscourse marker over the other.

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