Study of Teachers' Use of Metadiscourse in EFL Instruction

-- A Case Study of the SFLEP National Foreign Language Teaching Contest

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Abstract

Metadiscourse is "discourse about discourse". It is used to organize the discourse and express views of the discourse creator on the content, so as to bring the recipient into the discourse and establish interaction between the creator and recipient. By analyzing instructional videos of five prize-winning teachers from the sixth to tenth SFLEP National Foreign Language Teaching Contest, this study focused on teachers' use of metadiscourse in EFL instruction, to probe into the effect of metadiscourse on EFL teaching and learning, and provide suggestions for teachers on how to effectively use metadiscourse in EFL instruction. The study adopted Hyland's classification standard of metadiscourse. Based on data analysis of self-built corpus, it was found that EFL teachers have used engagement markers most frequently during their instruction, which was conducive to binding themselves closer with students, encouraging students to better participate in classroom activities, and stimulating students' initiative in English language learning.

Keywords

Teachers' use; Metadiscourse; EFL instruction.

1. Introduction

Metadiscourse is defined as discourse about a discourse (Williams, 1981). It is used to organize the discourse and express views of the discourse creator on the content, so as to bring the recipient into the discourse and establish interaction between the creator and recipient. Metadiscourse has become a hot topic in discourse analysis and foreign language teaching (He & Yan, 2020). During EFL classroom instruction, the teacher's oral discourse is an important input for students. Language used by teachers in the classroom has affected the quality of education directly (He, 2001). In this sense, metadiscourse is an effective teaching tool which plays a vital role in imparting knowledge and organizing teaching. Teachers' proper use of metadiscourse in the process of teaching can better realize the transmission and understanding of basic discourse information, meanwhile, it can establish a harmonious interaction between teachers and students.

Hence, this study, by analyzing data of self-built corpus, is aiming to explore the following two questions: 1) what kinds of metadiscourse are used by teachers in their EFL instruction? And 2) how does the use of these metadiscourses contribute to effective EFL instruction? The corpus was constructed based on the instructional videos of five prize-winning teachers from the sixth to the tenth SFLEP National Foreign Language Teaching Contest. Through analyzing EFL teachers' use of metadiscourse, this study proves the effect of metadiscourse on EFL teaching and learning, and provides suggestions for teachers on how to effectively use metadiscourse in EFL classroom to ensure the quality of their language teaching.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Metadiscourse

The term metadiscourse was coined by Zellig Harris in 1959 to offer a way of understanding language in use, representing a writer's or speaker's attempts to guide a receiver's perception of a text (Hyland, 2005). Thereafter, many scholars further developed this concept.

Different researchers hold different attitudes towards the definition of this term. Williams (1981) defines metadiscourse as discourse about discourse, including everything that does not involve the content of the topic. Vande Kopple (1985) considers metadiscourse as some reader-oriented writing strategies employed to help readers better understand the text. According to Hyland (1998, 2000), metadiscourse refers to a set of mechanisms that reflect the various characteristics of the text, including the organization of the discourse, the writer's views on the content of the discourse, and the attitude of the readers etc.; As a part of the text, metadiscourse indicates the discourse structure or the writer's standpoint on the discourse content/readers. Afterwards, Hyland & Tse (2004) further elaborated metadiscourse in both a narrow sense and a broad sense. The narrow point of view focuses on the text-organizing; while the broad one emphasizes that metadiscourse embodies the writer's methods of using language and rhetoric in the text, as well as methods of combining organization and implication of the discourse. Metadiscourse is the commentary on a text made by its producer in the course of speaking or writing and it is a widely used term in current discourse analysis and language teaching (Hyland, 2017).

2.2. Classification of Metadiscourse

Due to different understandings of the definition of metadiscourse, different scholars classify metadiscourse in different ways.

According to Vande Kopple (1985), there are two dimensions of metadiscourse—textual metadiscourse and interpersonal metadiscourse. There are seven categories under these two dimensions: 1) Textual connectives. They are divided into several subcategories, including sequencers, logical connectives, reminders, and topicalizers. 2) Code glosses. 3) Illocution markers. 4) Validity markers. Validity markers include hedges, emphatics, and attributors. 5) Narrators. 6) Attitude markers. 7) Commentary markers.

Williams (1999) divides metadiscourse into three categories, each of which contains two subcategories— 1) Hedges and emphatics. 2) Sequencers and topicalizers. 3) Attributors and narrators.

Hyland & Tse (2004) divide metadiscourse into interactive resources and interactional resources. The specific classification is shown in Table 1, and this study adopted the classification.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

This research attempts to explore the following questions:

1 What kinds of metadiscourse are used by teachers in their EFL instruction?

2 How does the use of these metadiscourses contribute to effective EFL instruction?

3.2. Research Subjects

In this study, the research subjects are transcripts of the instructional videos of five prize-winning teachers from the sixth to the tenth SFLEP National Foreign Language Teaching Contest. The duration of each instructional video is 20 minutes, and there are various topics in these videos which are shown in Table 2.

SFLEP National Foreign Language Teaching Contest provides a rigorous and innovative competition system, and a fair and authoritative stage for demonstrating the level of Chinese EFL teachers. It is a benchmark event in the field of foreign language education in China.

Table 1. A model of metadiscourse in academic texts (Hyland, 2005)

Category	Function	Examples
Interactive resources	Help to guide reader through the text	
Transition markers	Express semantic relation between main clauses	in addition/ but/ thus/ and finally/ to conclude/ my purpose is
Frame markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences, or text stages	noted above/ see Fig./ in section 2
Endophoric markers	Refer to information in other part of the text	according to X/ (Y, 1990)/ Z states
Evidentials	Refer to source of information from other texts	namely/ e.g./ such as/ in other words
Code glosses	Help readers grasp meanings of ideational material	
Interactional resources	Involve the reader in the argument	might/ perhaps/ possible/ about
Hedges	Withhold writer's full commitment to proposition	in fact/ definitely/ it is clear that
Boosters	Emphasize force or writer's certainty in proposition	unfortunately/ I agree/ surprisingly
Attitude markers	Express writer's attitude to proposition	consider/ note that/ you can see that
Engagement markers	Explicitly refer to or build relationship with reader	I/ we/ my/ our
Self mentions	Explicit reference to author(s)	

Table 2. Description of research subjects

Teachers	Sex	Topics
Teacher 1	Male	Life as a House Father
Teacher 2	Female	AlphaGo: Using Machine Learning to Master the Ancient Game of Go
Teacher 3	Female	Career and Life: Where Are All the Plumbers?
Teacher 4	Female	Knowledge and Wisdom
Teacher 5	Male	Breaking Stereotypes: Are They Typical?

3.3. Research Instruments

The instruments used to carry out the study are IFLYTEK and Microsoft Word. IFLYTEK is a software used to transcribe the instructional videos into text, and Microsoft Word is used to retrieve specific words and count the numbers of those words.

3.4. Research Procedures

The study was conducted according to the following procedures:

1. Considering the purpose of the research, select the typical EFL teachers' instructional videos from online resources.

2. Transcribe these videos into texts by IFLYTEK. Then, revise the texts manually and name them from T.1 to T.5.

3. Use Microsoft Word to retrieve specific words and manually identify whether they are metadiscourse or not.

4. Use Microsoft Word to calculate the number of each category of metadiscourse.

5. Analyze the frequency and functions of the metadiscourse used by these teachers.
6. Draw a conclusion according to the analysis.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Overall Distribution of Metadiscourse

The corpus contains 10,377 words in total. The overall distribution of 10 categories of metadiscourse is listed in Table 3.

Table 3. The overall frequency of metadiscourse

Dimensions	Category	Occurrences					Total
		Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5	
Interactive resources	Transition markers	85	86	88	86	84	429
	Frame markers	54	25	72	30	45	226
	Endophoric markers	0	0	1	2	3	6
	Evidentials	2	7	9	2	3	23
	Code glosses	16	4	7	9	13	49
	Total	157	122	177	129	148	733
Interactional resources	Hedges	20	6	9	13	11	59
	Boosters	3	0	2	0	1	6
	Attitude markers	5	1	1	3	2	12
	Self mentions	30	16	27	23	38	134
	Engagement markers	120	119	153	77	138	607
	Total	178	142	192	116	190	818
Total		335	264	369	245	338	1,551
Teaching discourse		2,245	2,159	2,306	1,537	2,130	10,377

Table 3 reveals that the total occurrences of metadiscourse markers were 1,551 in the five teachers' discourse. Interactive metadiscourse had 733 occurrences, which took up 47.26% of the total number of metadiscourse. Interactional metadiscourse had 818 occurrences, taking up 52.74% of the total number of metadiscourse. Therefore, the statistics showed that interactional metadiscourse was more frequently used than interactive metadiscourse.

It was found that among the 10 categories of metadiscourse markers, engagement markers had the highest frequency with 607 occurrences in total, accounting for 39.14% of the total number of metadiscourse. It indicated that teachers used engagement markers most frequently in EFL instruction, aiming to bind themselves closer with their students and enhance interaction, encourage students to better participate in classroom activities, and stimulate students' initiative in English language learning.

Transition markers were the second most frequently used metadiscourse with 429 occurrences in total, taking up 27.66% of the total number of metadiscourse. Frame markers had the third highest frequency with 226 occurrences, accounting for 14.57%. The teachers used transition markers and frame markers to organize their discourse, make students know what will happen next, and help students understand teacher's discourse more easily.

Self mentions had the fourth highest frequency with 134 occurrences in total, which took up 8.64% of the total number of metadiscourse, followed by hedges (59, 3.80%), code glosses (49, 3.16%), evidentials (23, 1.48%), attitude markers (12, 0.77%), boosters (6, 0.39%) and endophoric markers (6, 0.39%). Boosters and endophoric markers were rarely used by these teachers, which may be explained by the following reasons. Firstly, in order to avoid using too affirmative or tough tone in class, teachers seldom use boosters, which can leave more possibilities for students and arouse students to think actively. Secondly, the duration of the class is short, and generally, the content taught in one class is limited, so, most of the time, teachers do not need to refer to what has been said. Thus, teachers seldom use endophoric markers. The detailed proportion of 10 categories of metadiscourse is shown in Figure 1.
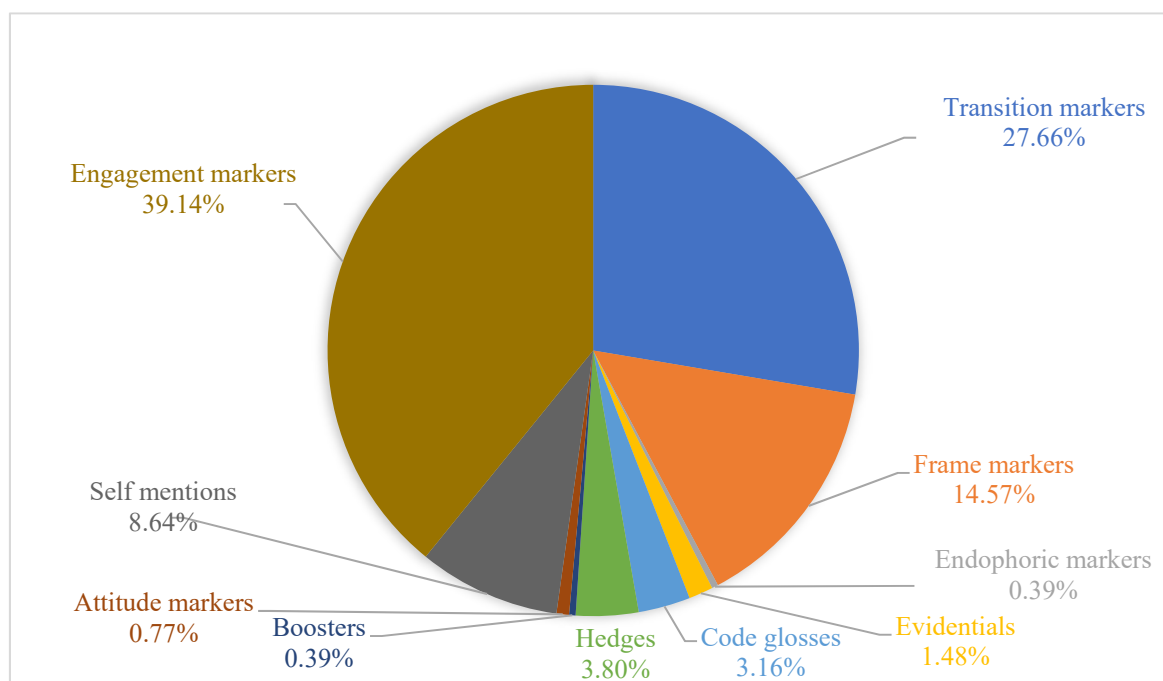

Figure 1. Proportion of ten categories of metadiscourse

4.2. Detailed Analysis of Interactive Metadiscourse

Hyland (2004, 2005) divides metadiscourse into two dimensions—interactive resources and interactional resources. Interactive resources are classified into five categories—transition markers, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses. The research analyzed the five teachers' use of interactive resources, and illustrated the functions of each category in this dimension.

4.2.1. Transition Markers

Transition markers can be further divided into three subcategories—addition, comparison, and consequence. Addition adds elements to an argument; comparison marks arguments as either similar or different; consequence relations either tell readers that a conclusion is being drawn or justified, or that an argument is being countered.

1 Plumbers install and repair the ...? Louder place. (From Teacher 3)

2 But each coin has its two sides, right? And so does stereotype. (From Teacher 5)

In the above two examples, both two and are additions, and they were used to add information. In Example 1, and was used to arouse students' thinking and invite them to add more information about the previous topic. While in Example 2, and was used to add information by the teacher himself, aiming to connect two propositions and express relationships between the

two sentences. This enabled students to know that there would be more information that required their attention.

3 We're gonna see more of that in a second part. But before that, we're going to learn a new word, subtlety. (From Teacher 2)

4 Comfort the other one, right? However, this friendly gesture is not appreciated by the writer. (From Teacher 5)

In Example 3 and 4, But and However are comparisons. In Example 3, Teacher 2 used but to tell students that what they were going to do next was different from the one just mentioned, which could help students get prepared for what they were going to do. In Example 4, however was used to emphasize the difference between the writer's thoughts and those of common people. It could attract students' attention and provoke their thinking.

5 The color in art, the fragrance in nature. Both are beautiful things, but not so obvious. So in these cases, we can use the word subtle. (From Teacher 2)

6 ...that is the intention. And his thesis, therefore, is to define wisdom 1.and also how to teach it. (From Teacher 4)

In these two examples, the bold So and therefore are consequence transitions. They were used to signal causative relations of the teachers' discourse, helping students understand the logical relationship. The bold So in Example 5 was used to tell students that a conclusion was being drawn, which required their attention. This could help students grasp the important information in EFL class. However, it should be noted that the first so in Example 5 is not metadiscourse. It was just used to modify the word obvious.

4.2.2. Frame Markers

Frame markers can be used to sequence parts of the text or internally order an argument; they can also be used to label text stages, announce discourse goals, and indicate topic shifts.

7 First, we are going to explore the theme of this essay through contrast. And then, we are going to exercise some of the connectives to show contrast. And finally, we're going to appreciate some of the humor of this essay. (From Teacher 1)

8 So we put TM beside it. Then what about these two? (From Teacher 3)

The bold words in these two examples are frame markers which order and sequence the discourse. The first, then, and finally in Example 7 were used by the teacher to show students his organization of this session, which could help students clearly know what they were going to do so that they could be well prepared for the class. In Example 8, then had similar function to the frame markers in Example 7.

9 So to sum up, well, Russell was actually saying "without wisdom, knowledge may be harmful". (From Teacher 4)

10 I want to summarize our idea with a famous quote. (From Teacher 5)

In these two sentences, to sum up and summarize are frame markers used to label stages of the discourse. The use of these words meant a conclusion was being given about what had being talked.

11 In order to illustrate the meaning of this word, I'm going to show you a metaphor. (From Teacher 1)

12 I want to ask you a question. (From Teacher 1)

In these two examples, in order to and I want to are frame markers employed to announce discourse goals.

13 So, now please read Paragraph One and Two really quickly, sentence by sentence, and try to find out the answers to these five hints. (From Teacher 2)

14 let's learn how English people describe the exact job duties of plumbers. (From Teacher 3)

In Example 13 and 14, now and let's learn are frame markers which are used to indicate that the topic is going to change. Teachers used these words to tell students that the ongoing topic was over, and they were turning to a new topic. In this way, teachers could attract the attention of students and prepare them for the next topic.

4.2.3. Endophoric Markers

In oral discourse, endophoric markers are expressions that refer to what the speaker said before. But they were not used by the teachers very frequently. This may be ascribed to the short duration of a session and limited content.

15 In the lead-in part, we talk about our stereotypes on a certain profession. (From Teacher 5)

16 You have mentioned with wisdom, knowledge is useful, very good, beneficial. (From Teacher 4)

In these two sentences, teachers used endophoric markers to refer to what had been talked about. Thus, students could recall what they had learnt and strengthen their memories.

4.2.4. Evidentials

Evidentials are used to refer to information from other texts or other persons. By quoting from other people, the use of evidentials can make teachers' discourse more interesting and persuasive.

17 On the right-hand side is another interface worth talking to his creator, Harold Finch. Mr. Finch said, "You're my creation. I can't let you die". The machine said, "Father, I'm sorry. I failed". (From Teacher 2)

18 They are not learning a trade. Instead, they become salesmen. And it is very strange according to the author. (From Teacher 3)

In Example 17, the teacher used evidentials to show students some interesting quotes, aiming to catch their attention. In Example 18, evidential was used to introduce the author's opinion to students, helping them gain insights from the text being taught.

4.2.5. Code Glosses

Code glosses are used to rephrase, explain, or elaborate what has been said so as to supply additional information. They can help the audience to recover the speaker's intended meaning.

19 And remember, he writes article for the daily newspaper, which means he has to constantly beat the deadlines on a regular basis. (From Teacher 1)

20 In fact, in our lives, we have many people who are working with their hands. For example, the electrician, the welder, the carpenter, the mechanics. (From Teacher 3)

In Example 19, code gloss was used by the teacher to further explain what he had said. That may be because that he thought it was difficult for students to understand what he said. In Example 20, code gloss was used to illustrate what the teacher said. In this way, students could more intuitively understand the content.

4.3. Detailed Analysis of Interactional Metadiscourse

According to Hyland (2005), interactional resources are used to engage readers in the argument. In teachers' classroom discourse, the use of interactional resources helps students participate in the classroom activities, and narrow the distance between teachers and students. Interactional resources are classified in to five categories—hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self mentions, and engagement markers.

4.3.1. Hedges

The use of hedges indicates that the writer or speaker decides to recognize alternative voices and viewpoints and so emphasize the subjectivity of a position by allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact and therefore open that position to negotiation

(Hyland, 2005). In teachers' classroom discourse, hedges are used to leave room for students to think by themselves, and give them more possibilities rather than one fixed idea.

21 Here are some of connectives at our disposal. Maybe you can use them in the future, in your own writing to show contrast. (From Teacher 1)

22 But in my opinion, I think it doesn't matter which job you choose. (From Teacher 3)

In these two examples, hedges were used by the teachers to tell the students that they were just expressing their own opinions, and students could have different points of view.

4.3.2. Boosters

Boosters are the opposite of hedges. According to Hyland (2005), boosters are used to close down alternatives and head off conflicting views.

23 In fact, in our lives, we have many people who are working with their hands. (From Teacher 3)

24 No, they are very serious, right? And They always show a professional attitude, right? (From Teacher 5)

In these two examples, the teachers used boosters to tell students facts and there should be no different opinions from the students.

4.3.3. Attitude Markers

In teachers' classroom discourse, attitude markers can be used to express teachers' attitudes towards some propositions or students' answers of questions. Proper use of attitude markers can encourage students and express teachers' expectations of students.

25 Good. I agree with you. That's right. (From Teacher 4)

26 Wow, I'm very impressed by your performance, especially by those ups and downs and stresses you have created in your dialogue. (From Teacher 5)

27 I hope all of you can identify the reason behind it and also justify the values of the blue-collar workers. (From Teacher 3)

In Example 25 and 26, attitude markers were used by teachers to show their positive attitudes towards students' performances, which could encourage students and increase their confidence. In Example 27, attitude marker was used by the teacher to express her expectation of her students.

4.3.4. Self Mentions

In classroom discourse, self mentions are used by the teachers to express their points of view and show their presence. The use of self mentions can also narrow the gap between teachers and students.

28 The word AlphaGo trigger my mystical feeling in this cyber age. (From Teacher 2)

29 And they did what kind of job? Can you tell me? Louder, please. (From Teacher 3)

In Example 28, self mention was used by the teacher to express her own point of view. In Example 29, self mention was used to show the teacher's presence.

4.3.5. Engagement Markers

In teachers' classroom discourse, engagement markers are mainly used to narrow the distance between teachers and students, make students better participate in the class, and stimulate students' initiative.

30 So, here, we have just one step away from the theme. (From Teacher 1)

31 Um, what do you think artificial intelligence is? (From Teacher 2)

32 You see, the author mentioned that now more young people coming out of school, what kind of young people? (From Teacher 3)

33 So, you see, this is another important impact in intercultural communications. (From Teacher 5)

In Example 30 and 31, engagement markers were used to involve students into the class, arouse their passion, and make them think actively. In Example 32 and 33, engagement markers were used to catch students' attention and arouse their thinking.

5. Conclusion

Some major findings of this study are as follows:

1. The five studied teachers all used many metadiscourses in their EFL instruction. As for the two dimensions of metadiscourse, interactive metadiscourse took up 47.26% of the total number of metadiscourse used by teachers; and interactional metadiscourse accounted for 52.74%. It can be found that teachers use interactional metadiscourse more frequently, aiming to help students participate in classroom activities and arouse their thinking.

2. Among the ten categories of metadiscourse, engagement markers were used by the teachers most frequently. Transition markers and frame markers were also used in a relatively high frequency. The use of engagement markers can bind teachers closer with their students, encourage students to better participate in classroom activities, and stimulate students' initiative in English language learning. Transition markers can be used to signal additive, causative, and contrastive relations in teachers' discourse so as to help students better understand the logical relationships in teachers' discourse. The use of frame markers can make the teachers' discourse clearer, more cohesive, and easier to understand for students.

From these findings, some pedagogical implications and suggestions are given:

1. EFL teachers should be equipped with the awareness of using metadiscourse in EFL instruction. According to this study, it is suggested that teachers try to use more engagement markers, transition markers, and frame markers in their classroom discourse. Thus, the students' sense of participation in class will be improved, and students will be willing to think actively.

2. EFL teachers should have a full understanding of the functions of different categories of metadiscourse. The use of interactive metadiscourse can help teachers make a discourse that meets the needs of students and is clear and easy for students to understand. Using interactional metadiscourse helps teachers to involve students in classroom activities and bind themselves closer with students, encouraging students to participate in classroom activities actively. Therefore, teachers should choose the proper metadiscourse based on the teaching content, teaching objectives, the characteristics of students, etc..

(There are a total of 3,873 words in this paper exclude the abstract and the list of references.)

Acknowledgments

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