

A Qualitative Account of Writers' Perceptions of Thesis Writing in Applied Linguistics: The Case of Interactional Meta-Discourse Markers

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Research Paper

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Abstract: Writing an academic thesis study has received much attention over the last decades as it is a crucial facet of most post-graduation programs. The current study aimed to explore the perceptions of Iranian writers of theses with a focus on the application of meta-discourse markers. To achieve the goal, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 female and five male Iranian M.A. EFL graduates recruited based on convenience sampling. The interview questions were designed following Hyland's (2004) protocol comprising 25 questions derived from five basic concepts, namely, general, audience, language support, organization, and attitude. The interviewees' responses were analyzed following a content analysis approach and later inductively classified based on five themes: general, audience-related, language support, organization, and attitude. The analysis of students' opinions revealed that they preferred a subject for conducting research which could be attractive and practical. The participants referred to their worries about writing up a thesis in a calm and self-confident manner as well as their difficulty in establishing cohesion and coherence of their writing. The interviewees asserted that using attitude and engagement markers as well as hedges in an efficient way can help them express their own viewpoints in their theses. Meanwhile, they stated that writing a thesis could be an ongoing process and organized in a step-by-step movement, and writers need to pay a careful attention to the words which fulfill various functions in the text. The outcomes of this study may yield practical implications for students in writing classes in TEFL and ESP at M.A. and PhD levels.

Keywords: Interactional meta-discourse markers, Thesis writing, Writers' perceptions.

Introduction

Writing in general and academic writing in particular is dynamic and has got its typical nature in every context; therefore, in advanced academic level, particular linguistic and rhetorical choices must be applied by authors to make their research claims acceptable for the members of their discourse communities. Hyland (2009) stated that academic writing will be effective if writers incorporate conventions that are familiar to other members of the community. In academic writing, the writer-reader interactions in the form of meta-discourse markers are of prime importance (Yoon, 2021). Meta-discourse is particularly vital for both graduate and postgraduate students while they are writing

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master theses or PhD dissertations as well as research articles for publication (Akoto, 2020). A thesis is among the most remarkable written academic outputs that a person can produce and is prepared and organized based on a set of standards and frameworks. A written thesis should be precise and persuasive enough to have a deserved impact on the readers. In this way, interactional meta-discourse markers play a significant role in demonstrating writers' identity, evaluations, and attitudes toward the ideational content and readers' responses to the ideational meaning of the written material (Vande Kopple, 2002).

Meta-discourse, as the umbrella term for discourse features, projects writers into the academic discourse and helps them engage with readers via interactive and interactional markers (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Harris (1970) proposed the phrase meta-discourse and defined it as a writer's or speaker's technique of elucidating their language use in order for the receiver to understand it properly. Williams (1981) further developed the idea and defined meta-discourse as writing about writing, regardless of the subject matter being addressed. He mentioned that meta-discourse qualities allow the writer to converse with the reader about the topic or propositional material. To put it another way, meta-discourse is a form of interaction between the reader and the writer.

Meta-discourse is a broad concept with a hazy definition that is easy to accept but difficult to define (Nash, 1992; Swales, 1990). Some writers have limited the word to rhetorical organization aspects by covering only those text components that refer to the actual text (Bunton, 1999; Valero-Garces, 1996). Others have defined explicit illocutionary predicates as the term (Beauvais, 1989). Hyland (2005), on the other hand, refers to meta-discourse as the numerous linguistic tokens used to lead or direct a reader through a book in order to understand both the text and the writer's viewpoint.

As a crucial pragmatic concept, meta-discourse also allows writers to affect readers' interpretation of the writing and their attitudes about its content and audience. Besides, it aids communication, strengthens a writer's position, and establishes a connection with the audience (Hyland, 1998). Furthermore, the role of meta-discourse as a vital factor in academic writing is approved (Farrokhi & Ashrafi, 2009). The notion of meta-discourse linked to academic writing is becoming highly prevalent in academic studies of various languages, cultures, and disciplines. The link between meta-discourse and students' projects such as theses cannot be ignored because theses and dissertations are complex student-produced research genres that most graduate pupils must submit before receiving Master's or PhD degrees (Lee & Casal, 2014). Moreover, authors' knowledge of these interactional meta-discourse markers can help bring to the light the writers' stance on their written products.

Writers can utilize meta-discourse to accomplish two goals: first, to aid readers in text processing, to encode linkages between concepts, and to present the components of their work logically and compellingly so that readers find the topic suitable and reasonable. The second goal of employing meta-discourse markers is to address the urge to pay attention to the people taking part in the interaction (Estaji & Vafaeimehr, 2015).

Literature Review

Metadiscourse can be defined, as an inherent part of a written work, as the spectrum of strategies writers employ to explicitly structure their writings, engage readers, and communicate their views toward both their material and their audience (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Metadiscourse, according to Vande Kopple (1985), is a language element that does not provide propositional information but rather signals the presence of an author. Crismore (1989) expanded on the concept of meta-discourse, defining it as an author's explicit or implicit entry into his own discourse, but not in a way that informs the reader about the author. Meta-discourse, defined as a significant component of a text made up of "sentences that cluster according to a certain sequence of logic" (Coşkun, 2011, p. 881), assists authors in generating a reader-friendly text, which is an essential factor for academic writing (Mirshamsi & Allami, 2013). These definitions and explanations demonstrate that meta-discourse is linked to the relationship between authorship and authorship. Meta-discourse is indeed the linguistic

and rhetorical structuring of the text by the writer to frame the discourse organization and expressive implications of what is being said (Schiffrin, 1980).

According to Hyland (2005) in his book "meta-discourse," meta-discourse expresses the writers' or speakers' intent in the text and may make the transmission of the text's content possible. Meta-discourse, moreover, presents a framework for viewing communication as a social endeavour. As a result, meta-discourse indicators are employed in order to facilitate text understanding.

Beauvais (1989) described meta-discourse as illocutionary force markers that identify expository illocutionary acts, and placed it inside speech act theory. He asserted to have already borrowed the concept of illocutionary force indicators from Searle (1969), which pertains to how a proposition should be assumed, and the expository illocutionary act from Austin (1962), who claims that "acts of exposition involve the expounding of views, the conducting of arguments, and the clarifying of references" (p. 161), underscoring that these acts are strongly tied with communicational situations. As a result, Beauvais stated that meta-discourse serves the same purpose as expositives, demonstrating how a proposition or statement fits into the context of conversation, dialogue, and explication in general. Meta-discourse exposes the writer's communicative aim in providing discourse within a purposeful work in this way. Beauvais (1989) presents a taxonomy of meta-discourse indicators based on their form and function in his research.

Textual and interpersonal meta-discourse features have traditionally been separated. Hyland (2004, 2005) and Hyland and Tse (2004), on the other hand, proposed a more powerful interpersonal interpretation of meta-discourse: "all meta-discourse is interpersonal in that it takes into account the reader's knowledge, textual experiences, and processing needs" (p. 161). Similarly, they are incompatible with the Hallidayan textual and interpersonal levels of discourse, in which textual elements serve as encoding elements, aiding discourse development by allowing writers to produce texts that are both cohesive and coherent. It has also been stated that the propositional and interpersonal functions influence the role of textual elements. Texts, from this perspective, are seen as processes in which writers simultaneously construct propositional content and interpersonal involvement. As a result, the writers' linguistic choices serve many purposes. Hyland's (2004, 2005) and Hyland and Tse's (2004) conception of meta-discourse is much more in accord with Thompson's (2001) characterization of interactive and interactional resources as two connected modalities of interaction. As a consequence, interpersonal components of writing include both interactive and non-interactive elements that organize contents based on readers' needs and expectations, and also interactional meta-discourse characteristics that aim to gather the writer and the readers together (Halliday, 1994).

There have been several meta-discourse models proposed (Adel, 2006; Crismore, 1989; Hyland, 2005; Vande Kopple, 1985, 2002). These models rely on Halliday's (1994) tripartite conception of meta-functions, which differentiates between ideational components of a text—the ways we express our experiences of the world—textual components of a text—the ways the ideational and interpersonal meanings are realized (Halliday 2007, p. 184), and interpersonal functions—ways to establish the "participatory function of language" (Halliday 2007, p. 184). Although the categories are unclear and overlap functionally, Vande Kopple (1985) presented the first taxonomy, which led to a slew of studies and new taxonomies. To put it another way, he presented two major categories of meta-discourse: "textual," which includes the four strategies of text connectives, code glosses, illocution markers, and narrators, and "interpersonal," which includes the three strategies of validity markers, attitude markers, and commentaries. In addition, Crismore et al. (1993) offered an updated model in 1993. They retain the two core classifications of textual and interpersonal communication in their model intact, but broke the subdivisions into two major categories of "textual" and "interpretive" markers to differentiate organizational and evaluative purposes.

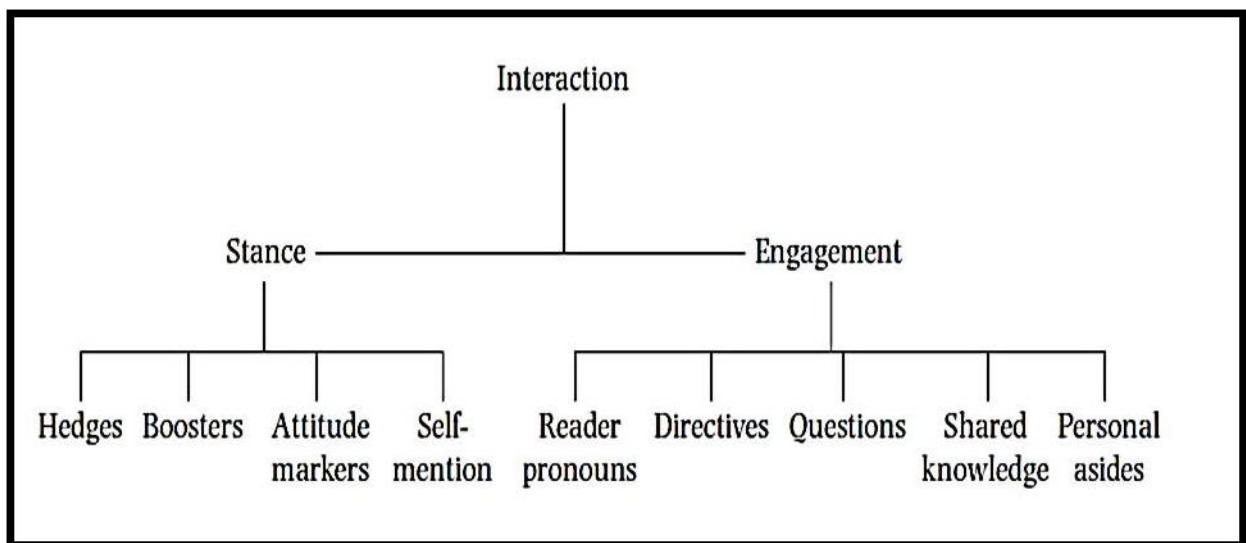
Hyland (2005) proposes a model that divides meta-discourse markers into two basic categories: "interactive" and "interactional." This model is based on Thompson and Thetela's (1995) notion, albeit the addition of stance and engagement markers has enlarged its scope (Hyland, 2001a). Transition markers, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses are among the

five categories of interactive aspect of meta-discourse (Hyland, 2005, p. 49), which is concerned with the writer's efforts to "shape and constrain a text" in an attempt to meet the readers' interests and needs while also presenting a rational and proper argument (Hyland, 2004). The interactional aspect of meta-discourse, on the other hand, focuses on "readers' engagement with the text (Hyland, 2005, p. 49)." and the writer's efforts to keep a good relationship with his or her data, opinions, and audience (Hyland, 2004).

The current study is conceptually supported by and aligned with Hyland's (2005) model of interaction, in which he proposes a comprehensive model for writer-reader interaction. Hyland's concept is made up of two primary components: stance and engagement. Hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mention are among the four categorical aspects of stance. Reader pronouns, directives, questions, shared knowledge, and personal asides are the five elements that make up engagement. The entire model is depicted in the diagram below (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Hyland's Model of Interactional Meta-discourse Markers



The first characteristic, stance, can be considered as an attitudinal dimension, according to Hyland (2005), and contains features that refer to how writers portray themselves and transmit their judgements, ideas, and commitments. It relates to how writers enter their arguments to stamp their personal authority on them, or how they step back and hide their involvement. The writer's hesitation to deliver propositional information categorically is signalled by the first aspect of stance, hedges (e.g., might, possible, perhaps). The second feature is boosters, which communicate conviction and underline the power of propositions (e.g., definitely, clearly, it is evident). The third feature is attitude markers, which indicate the writer's assessment of propositional information through conveying surprise, obligation, agreement, and importance (e.g., amazingly, it is disappointing, even x). Finally, the application of first-person pronouns as well as possessive adjectives to express propositional, emotional, and interpersonal information is referred to as self-mention (Hyland, 2001).

By utilizing second person pronouns, imperatives, questions, and asides, engagement markers openly address readers, either by deliberately directing their attention or by involving them as participants in the writing (Hyland, 2001). The most straightforward method that readers are pulled into a discourse is through the reader pronoun, which is one of the engagement factors. In this part, the words "you" and "your" are the most transparent ways for a writer to concede the reader's presence. Directives, according to Hyland's (2005) definitions, tell the reader to perform an activity or see things in a certain manner defined by the writer. In Hyland's (2005) paradigm, questions are the ultimate method for dialogic involvement, soliciting engagement and bringing the interlocutor into an

environment where they can be guided to the writer's point of view. They inspire and drive the reader to investigate an unresolved topic alongside the writer as a conversational partner, sharing his or her curiosity and following the discussion to its conclusion. Hyland (2005) considers the concept of appeal to shared knowledge, in which writers attempt to place readers into what appears to be normalized disciplinary boundaries.

A variety of research studies have been integrated into the concept of meta-discourse in disciplinary and cross-disciplinary academic fields (e.g., Abdi, 2002, Abdollahzadeh, 2011, Harwood, 2005, Hyland, 1998, Hyland & Tse, 2004, Vazquez & Giner, 2008). Harwood (2005), for example, undertook a qualitative corpus-based analysis of self-promotional *I* and *we* in academic writing across four fields, while Vazquez and Giner (2008) investigated the use of epistemic markers as hedging rhetorical devices in English research publications. Abdollahzadeh (2011), also, investigated hedges, emphatics, and attitude markers as 60 conclusion sections of applied linguistics research articles were included in three interactional meta-discourse markers. The findings showed both writer groups tended towards hedging their propositions, which the differences related to elements such as the degree of rhetorical sensitivity and awareness of the audience, objective, and the biases of the disciplinary genre.

Khedri et al. (2013) focused on interactional meta-discourse markers in the conclusion and discussion parts of academic research publications across four disciplines. Results indicated that there were not statistically significant differences excepting in terms of boosters, between disciplines in the use of interactional metadiscourse markers. Jomma and Yunus (2020) investigated meta-discourse application in the abstracts of 100 journal articles published in ten Scopus-indexed journals identified as the best free-access journals depending on the Scientific Journal Ranking (SJR) website. The findings revealed that the two groups of writers used finite modal operators, verbs, mood adjuncts, and comment adjuncts in expressing modalities that were different in types, orientation, and value. Nugrahani and Bram (2020) also examined the practice of meta-discourse markers in scientific articles. Varastehzad and Gorjian (2018) compared and analysed the use of meta-discourse markers in research articles produced in English and Persian from two disciplines of Applied Linguistics and Politics and explored the high differences between the two groups of authors. Huang et al.(2020) created a corpus of 30 English travel blogs. The study used qualitative and quantitative analysis to show how blogger writers engage with readers inside narrative travel blogs and how they influence the reader's future travel experiences by calculating the occurrences and assessing the functions of interactional meta-discourse.

Although several studies have been done on the use of meta-discourse markers in academic texts such as scientific research articles (e.g., Akbas, 2012; Wu, & Paltridge, 2021; Yoon, 2021), only scantily have focused on the employment of meta-discourse markers in the master or doctoral theses. Besides, regardless of the high interest in meta-discourse by instructors and applied linguists, it has failed to gain its potential due to the research discrepancies and empirical confusion (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Most of the studies mentioned above were corpus-based studies analysed quantitatively; however, there is a paucity of studies that examine interactional meta-discourse markers qualitatively, to niche the gap existed in the literature, the current study aimed to explore the Iranian M.A. Applied Linguistics theses writers' overall perceptions of using interactional meta-discourse markers using semi-structured interviews. Gaining the ability to recognize the meta-discourse markers in various texts, particularly master's, can be of great help to L2 learners. Therefore, the present study made an attempt to answer the following research question:

Research Question: What are the overall perceptions of Iranian M.A. Applied Linguistics theses writers' of using interactional meta-discourse markers?

Method

Participants

The participants in this study were comprised of 20 postgraduate students from universities in Iran. All participants had submitted their M.A. theses in different subfields of Applied Linguistics, including Translation studies, English literature, Teaching English as a second language, and Linguistics in a time period from 2014 to 2017. Qualitative samples are purposive, meaning that they are chosen for their ability to provide highly textured information pertinent to the phenomena being studied (Sandelowski, 1996). Accordingly, based on a convenience sampling procedure, the participants in the present research, including 5 males and 15 females majoring in Applied Linguistics, with the age range of 24-30, were selected from different universities in Iran, namely Isfahan University, Khatam University in Tehran, Semnan University, Islamic Azad University (Tabriz Branch), and Payam Nour University (Tabriz and Khoy Branches). Consent was sought from the department heads and supervisors in each university to approach the participants. Afterwards, the participants were asked via email whether they were willing to cooperate in the study Table 1 represents the number of participants in this study.

Table 1

Number of Participants in Each University

Gender	Khatam University	Isfahan University	Semnan University	Islamic Azad University (Tabriz Branch)	Payam-e-Noor University (Khoy and Tabriz Branches)
Male	2	1	0	1	1
Female	7	4	1	1	2

Instrument(s)

In this study, 20 postgraduates whose theses were related to Applied Linguistics were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. This allowed the researcher to ask questions focusing on nearly identical themes in order to compare answers of all the respondents. The questions used in this interview were based on the interview protocol provided in Hyland (2004). The interview questions comprised 25 questions, all of which were based on five basic concepts, namely, general, audience, language support, organization, and attitude.

The first set of questions included several general questions which were based on the issues related to thesis writing procedure and thesis writers' background knowledge. The next set of questions was designed in such a way that reflected the writer's used language as his/her medium of instruction. One of the most critical parts of the interview was dedicated to organization questions which tapped the ways any thesis was arranged and those tools which were employed for highlighting information. These organization questions also examined the writers' taste in references placed at the end of any thesis. Finally, the last set of questions was crafted based on the writers' stance and engagement with their readers and the ways of expressing themselves throughout a written thesis.

Data collection and analysis

To explore the perceptions of the writers of Iranian theses concerning the use and application of meta-discourse markers, semi-structured interviews were conducted, based on a set of questions presented in Hyland (2004), with 20 postgraduate students from several universities in Iran to evaluate their conscious awareness over using meta-discourse markers. Most of the interviews were conducted face-

to-face and the interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Few of the interviews were held online by sending the questions to the interviewees and asking them to answer the questions in written form owing to the lack of access to distant geographical locations in which participants were living. Some of the interviews were held by means of a phone call. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes. In all three settings for conducting the interview sessions, after asking each question, there was a 30-second time interval, on the part of interviewees, to prepare themselves to answer the question.

All interview conversations were recorded through a Sound Recording Application on a smart phone platform. Then, by taking the principles of content analysis into account, the researchers tried to transcribe the interviews as precisely and meticulously as they could. For the aim of dependability, 20% of the interview results were re-checked by two of the researcher's colleagues who were familiar with the data analysis section, and the inter-rater reliability results were estimated via Cohen's kappa and reported to be around .9. The audio recording files of the interviews were checked carefully and transcribed accordingly based on the principles presented by content analysis procedure in order for further evaluative statistical investigation. All collected information was classified in regard to their writers' gender orientation.

Results

It seems essential to reiterate the fact that the main aim of the present research was to investigate the attitude of Iranian theses writers regarding the use of meta-discourse markers. To fulfil this objective, a set of interviews were held with a group of Applied Linguistics students who had successfully completed their theses. The interviews were analysed depending on five notions: general, audience-related, language support, organization, and attitude. Based on the answers which were given by the participants of both genders, they were unanimous in selecting a subject for conducting a research which could be attractive and practical. According to the answers, they believed that a good thesis would make difference and help others to get involved with new findings. On the one hand, female participants were approaching the issues related to their worries about writing up a thesis in a calm and self-confident manner, but on the other hand, male participants felt uneasy toward cohesion and coherence of their writing. They also asserted that writing the initial draft of thesis was much a burden to be accomplished. Both groups of participants were in the same boat as they noticed that writing a thesis could be an ongoing process and be organized in a step-by-step movement.

As it was revealed by reviewing the answers, the results showed that all of the participants had the same opinion toward a sequence for writing the chapters of their studies. They also stated that the second chapter of any thesis could be done in the first step, then others would be done respectively. To male and female participants, the advisor and supervisor of their studies played a major role in order to choose their topics and organize the contents. All participants believed that if the writer wanted to have a comprehensive understanding of writing a thesis, it would be fully noteworthy to read and analyze as much as they could.

Considering the content validity, few modifications were made to some of the following transcribed responses provided by the interviewee participants in order to edit and amend the probable grammatical and structural errors. Moreover, some sorts of alterations were made to the interview questions so as to avoid any probable incomprehensibility or vagueness on the part of interviewee participants. As follows, the results obtained from the interviews are explained in light of each interview question as regards each aspect of the interview, namely general, audience, language support, organization, and attitude.

General

Question No.1: What qualities do you consider to be important in a thesis?

Excerpt 1: ...Well, there is a set of criteria which needs to be included and taken into account when writing a thesis. But I think the most important thing behind a good thesis is the main idea of the research, its novelty, origin, and validity. I mean a thesis statement needs to be something debatable and challenging, not a neutral, usual type of idea. In addition, the topic must have been narrowed down as much as possible. You can't work on a broad general topic. You need to narrow it down to a very specific topic and then make justifiable claims on it. Your thesis needs to be clear regarding the claims and also inclusive of some indications that your argument is true. For sure next comes other factors, such as the organization and content of the thesis, writing style, ... (FI)

Excerpt 2: ...A good thesis is a balance between specific and general. It should be clear and easy to grasp for the intended readers. It should deal with a real and concrete question in that field of the study and make some progress in answering that question. (MI)

Question No. 2: Do you have any reservations about completing your thesis? What concerns you the most?

Excerpt 3: ... The primary step is to choose a good topic for a thesis and then to limit the scope of the investigation. The style of writing and the organization of materials are also of primary concerns. (FI)

Excerpt 4: ...The most worrying aspect of writing a thesis is whether you can spot the weaknesses and improve the initial draft in a constructive manner. A good advisor is vital in this stage of your thesis project. (MI)

Question No. 3: Do you plan to write your thesis while conducting research or will you wait until the end? Why?

Excerpt 5: ...I guess thesis writing is an ongoing process that should be carried out step by step. Data collection procedure is the most challenging and time-consuming part of an experimental study. However, it is a good idea to start collecting and writing the theoretical sections of the second chapter of thesis (Review of Literature) at the early stage. So, it is impossible to write a thesis overnight. (FI)

Excerpt 6: ...I think some parts of the research can be done parallel to the ongoing research project. The only part that should be left for after the end of research activities is reporting the results and discussing the implications of what you found out during the research. (MI)

Question No. 4: In what order do you plan to write it? What will be the first thing you write, and what will be the last thing you write?

Excerpt 7: ...First of all, I design the outline of my study through which I wrote the chapters one by one, from introduction to conclusions. (FI)

Excerpt 8: ...The literature can go first but as a draft. After introduction part, literature review can be revised and written down. In the introduction part, the gap that made you to investigate the matter of the question can be first and the significance which is resulted from it can be the next. (MI)

Questions No. 5 & 6: Why are you going to write it that way? Is there somebody who gave you the idea? Do you consult with anyone regarding your thesis? What topics do you talk about? (Content, structure, and language)

Excerpt 9: ...When I designed the outline of my study, I got the full picture of the steps that I should follow, therefore it makes the work easier for me. I got the idea from my supervisor. Yes, I talk

to my professors, friends, family. I discuss about everything such as title, outline, organization, academic language, content and APA style of writing. (FI)

Excerpt 10: ...Of course students should follow and obey the procedures or frameworks devised by their university; however, I found the framework logical and sound which I would choose the same myself. My advisor was the first person who guided me and walked me through the whole thesis but I surely discussed the content, organization, and language of my thesis with my friends who were my classmates at the university. (MI)

Question No. 7: Have you ever come across a thesis in your field? Where do you get your ideas for thesis writing? (Do you have any books, journal papers, or supervisor friends?)

Excerpt 11: ...I personally go to different university libraries and get the idea. In between, the online e-journals and theses are also the useful resources. (FI)

Excerpt 12: Yes, I have, because that's one of the most valuable sources available to you when you're doing your thesis and in addition to ideas that you get from books and journals, dissertations in your field of study can give you some interesting hints when you hit a roadblock in your thesis project. (MI)

It is important for the participants to recognize to whom the writer writes. Interviewee participants asserted that all their theses could be read by advisors and to some extent by other MA students, too. Therefore, the quality of these studies would be examined based on some rules and standards. Since writers made attempts to write in an academic genre, it was worth to be aware of writing style which differentiates the writer's style from the other written records. Sometimes, the level of one's proficiency in using General English knowledge would be counted as one's overall language performance, in this regard, it was recommended to double check errors to save the writers' face at least.

Audience

Question No. 8: Who will read your dissertation? Is it just you and your supervisor?

Excerpt 13: ...At first the thesis advisor But later on, if the research paper is published, the researchers of the field will become the audience. (FI)

Excerpt 14 I certainly hope not, ideally, it will be useful for other students who are conducting research in this field of study as a background to their research. (MI)

Question No. 9: Do you consider your readers when you write?

Excerpt 15: Yes, most of the time I think about the readers of my study. (FI)

Excerpt 16: Mainly yes. (MI)

Question No. 10: Do you believe this has an impact on your writing? In what respects? (Have you made any changes?)

Excerpt 17: The academic style and the brevity and clarity of ideas are the fundamental aspects when writing a thesis (and later on a research paper). (FI)

Excerpt 18: Yes, it does, Writing for an academic audience demands a certain style of writing which differentiates it from other types of writing. When I'm writing in the academic context I'd try to observe and follow the rules set for this type of writing and create a more structured and systematic text. (MI)

Based on the answers provided by the participants, since a thesis was regarded as an academic output, the readers of it would be divided into several groups, including thesis advisors, co-advisors, examiners, students from the same major, and those who might be interested in the field you had

studied. It was worth attracting the attention of all types of readers by using a uniform academic style in order to avert them of being confused while they were reading the text.

Language Support

Question No. 11: Do you believe that the quality of English in a thesis is important?

Excerpt 19: It is definitely important since readers are those whose first or second language are English. (FI)

Excerpt 20: I think it is. You're creating an academic document by writing a thesis so you're writing should be of highest quality. (MI)

Question No. 12: Do you have any concerns regarding your personal English proficiency when writing at this level?

Excerpt 21: Not that much, but I try to check it for many times and also ask others to edit it. (FI)

Excerpt 22: Yes, I am. English is not my mother tongue so I always double check everything to be sure that I got it right. (MI)

Question No. 13: When you discuss your thesis with your supervisor, does he or she provide you any assistance with your English? Is he or she giving you any linguistic feedback? Do you know if there is any writing assistance available, such as a Language Center, Websites, or a self-access center? Are you a fan of any of these?

Excerpt 23: ...At the early stage, I get the feedback on the style, structure, and language of the in-progress work. Later on, I will apply them all. . (FI)

Excerpt 24: ...Yes. He revised both the content and the language. My friend was doing research on the CALL so I used some help. (MI)

Organization

Question No. 14: Is it critical that you explain how your thesis is structured to your reader? What method will you use to do this?

Excerpt 25: ...An introductory paragraph is required for each thesis chapter—to give an overview of the whole chapter. (FI)

Excerpt 26: ...I would do that in moderation because I think most academic readers are familiar with the typical structure of an academic thesis so constant reference to the structure can make my writing feel tedious and repetitive. (MI)

Question No. 15: Can you highlight content with lists, bullet points, boxes, or other methods?

Excerpt 27: ...It is not that much common. But I can use lists and bullet points to name some categories. (FI)

Excerpt 28: ...Sure. They help to present the information clearer and therefore easier to comprehend. (MI)

Question No. 16: Is it necessary for you to provide references? Which area of the thesis do they primarily go in?

Excerpt 29: ...Of course. I referred to the main writers the moment I finished each sentence of them. And at the end I brought the bibliography I utilized all over my research. (FI)

Excerpt 30: Yes, we absolutely do! Giving references is how you connect your project to the existing network of knowledge in your field of study. I think, the literature review and discussion of results section have the largest number of references in the thesis. (MI)

Question No. 17: In your field, how many references are customary in a thesis? Is the reference's age relevant at all? Will you have numerous references beyond the age of five?

Excerpt 31: ...It depends on the novelty of the work—for which a few empirical studies may be available—and even the bulkiness of the literature review. However, it is well accepted that the recent up-to-date references are infinitely preferable. (FI)

Excerpt 32: ...I am not sure about any limits on the quantity of the references but I think there are not any. The newer references add to the significance of the research. But if there are not any new references, old ones are sufficient. (MI)

Most of the addressees of any thesis written in English would be among those who were aware of the Standard English language and they had at least a direct or indirect familiarity with formal structures of English. However, as answers revealed, just a few of the thesis writers had any tendency to form and organize them based on the taste of readers. They unanimously agreed that the first source of creating a standard text in English while you were writing a thesis would be your thesis supervisor. They also believed that every excerpt from the work of other researchers presented into your work should have a valid reference. Using those results of studies conducted recently could increase the weight and value of your writing.

Attitude

Question No. 18: Is it necessary to express your feelings on what you're writing about, or should you remain neutral?

Excerpt 33: ...Both of them, but at times I felt like I was willing to express my own idea, though I didn't feel enough freedom to do that. (FI)

Excerpt 34: ...The researcher can insert their attitude in the suggestion and conclusion part. However, they should be neutral in choosing the participants and methods and analyzing the data. (MI)

Question No. 19: Is it all right for you to say what you think? Are you able to convey your feelings? What kind of feelings do you have?

Excerpt 35: ... Regarding the objectivity of scientific work, I guess, the emotional language (which is subjective in tone) is not permissible. However, regarding the qualitative (grounded theory analysis), the emotional, subjective, and personal expressions are the key factors when analyzing the data qualitatively. (FI)

Excerpt 36: ...It's necessary to express your opinion but talking about your emotions is not that common in academic writing maybe the exception is when you're discussing some personal experience. (MI)

Question No. 20: What can you say if you're not sure whether or not anything is correct? If you're unsure about a concept or an outcome, what should you do?

Excerpt 37: ...Hedging devices are useful in such situations. They downgrade certainty. Still we can be that much confident about any result. (FI)

Excerpt 38: ...You keep your distance and take results with a pinch of salt and report those results in a conservative manner, using hedging devices. (MI)

Question No. 21: What can you say if you're certain on a particular idea or outcome?

Excerpt 39: ...We should justify the findings (in line with the findings or contrary to the findings) with reference to the previously conducted studies. (FI)

Excerpt 40: ...It's very difficult to be completely sure about something in academia so usually you convey those ideas in a way that somehow shows that you know about the probability of it being wrong. (MI)

Question No. 22: Is it okay to include the word "I" in your thesis? Will this be acceptable to your examiner/supervisor?

Excerpt 41: ...I guess an objective position should be taken (rather than a subjective tone). (FI)

Excerpt 42: ...Actually this refers back to the academic style that I talked about earlier. I don't think that it's forbidden to use it but overusing it severely undermines the scientific nature of your writing. (MI)

Question No. 23: What kinds of people can you discuss "I" with? (For example, what is your method? What are your thoughts? (What were your findings?)

Excerpt 43: ...If you analyse the data qualitatively (the results section), sometimes the subjective tone is used. (FI)

Excerpt 44: ...It seemed using 'I' was kind of selfishness which a student should prevent. 'The researcher' was the prevalent word. (MI)

Question No. 24: Can you address your argument to the person who will read it directly by stating "you"?

Excerpt 45: ...Mainly it may be read by some future MA or PhD students who have a similar topic. Also, by those who are doing a thesis on other thesis! (FI)

Excerpt 46: ...I don't think so. I myself addressed them as teachers, publishers, and syllabus designers. (MI)

Question No. 25: Can you directly address your reader by asking questions, directing them to certain areas, or explaining how to interpret your meaning or results?

Excerpt 47: If it is used (from time to time), it would be more user-friendly. However, the objectivity should be always followed. Otherwise, the voice would become more didactic. (FI)

Excerpt 48: That's another thing which is ok in other settings but not so much in academic writing. (MI)

According to the answers revealed from the Attitude part of interview, thesis writers asserted that expressing their own ideas and thought into every part of thesis was not fully admired and it was needed to be neutral enough except for suggestion and conclusion parts. During the completion of thesis writing process, it would be more appropriate to use a scientific and logical language instead of emotional one in order to ensure the objectivity of the work.

Based on the uncertainty about results and ideas of other researchers, thesis writers mentioned that it would be more reasonable to use hedging devices, such as *suppose, seem, might*, etc., to depict our distance from the findings of the other studies. By providing justifiable references for any idea presented in the thesis, you could be assured toward what you were talking about. Most of interviewees asserted that using a subjective tone like *I* in the process of writing a thesis would have a negative impact on the scientific nature of writing; but they also believed that utilizing this subjective tone could be permissible in the process writing about analysis of data gathered qualitatively.

However, they had a stricter opinion not to use "you" as a subjective tone in their theses. Preferring a more direct talk to the readers of theses and instructing them on where to look or how to

comprehend the writer's meaning could not be much effective based on the ideas collected through interview.

Discussion

The current study focused on writer-reader interaction and aimed to explore the point of views of MA students in Applied Linguistics towards the employment of the interactional meta-discourse markers while writing theses. To this end, a semi-structured interview was conducted. According to the data gathered from interviews, in general, the majority of students find it quite hard to establish a balance between what they are trying to present as an academic output and what expectations they have to fulfill. The interviewees claimed that they sometimes violated writer-reader interaction rooted in meta-discourse due to the low familiarity with the general appearance of any written research based on the standards introduced in academic frameworks. It seems that increasing the awareness would help students to reduce the level of fear and anxiety they might deal with through thesis writing procedure. In fact, university professors during MA course are needed to attract the attention of the students to the role of meta-discourse, as a rhetorical tool, for the effective use of language facilitates writers in guiding their readers, transferring their ideas, and finally assisting the learners in establishing and determining the social distance of the reader-writer relationship (Jasim Al-Shujairi, 2018). Although, the interviewees violated writer-reader interaction while writing MA theses, the results indicated that the students paid attention to the importance of any written thesis according to the academic level of its addressees. This finding is consistent with that of Alyousef and Picard (2011), who found that ESL business students are conscious of their audience. Since any thesis can be regarded as a determining factor in the students' quality of knowledge and competence in the related field of study, it deserves extraordinary and long-term attention on the part of the writers.

Interviewee participants also asserted that to prove one's identity as the writer of any academic output and present one's role as the prominent researcher in one's written thesis, it is worth noting that the appropriate use of self-mention markers can be helpful for the researcher not to be immersed in the ideas of others entirely. The results can be justified by the point that Iranian EFL learners were aware of the role of self-mention markers as a sub-category of interactional meta-discourse markers in writing MA theses. The justification can be approved by the quote from Excerpt 44 that one of the male students stated, "It seemed using 'I' was kind of selfishness which a student should prevent. 'The researcher' was the prevalent word". Furthermore, the students were aware of the objectiveness or the subjectivity of different texts. As one of the interviewees (in Excerpt 43) mentioned in analyzing the data qualitatively (the results section), sometimes the subjective tone in the form of "I" can be used. The statement is in congruent with Hyland's idea (2001) that believed the adoption of a particular viewpoint and contextually situated authorial identity is determined by what the writer wants to do. In terms of attitude category of meta-discourse markers, the thesis writers were reluctant to use extra attitude markers and they preferred being neutral in transferring the ideas to readers. The justification can be related to the genre of writing that is academic writing and the academic settings such as universities which prefer standard and informative academic writing in writing theses and dissertations. The other reason can go back to the proficiency level of the students in the current study. The general English level of MA students was not high enough to use specific meta-discourse markers such as attitude markers and hedges, as using them appropriately needs complicated English (Wu & Paltridge, 2021). The results of the current study are in line with some studies (Wei & Ying, 2011; Wood, 2006; Yang & Sun, 2012) that found a positive association between the level of proficiency and the use of markers. The high proficiency level can be confirmed by the results of this study concluded that during the completion of thesis writing process, it would be more appropriate to use scientific and logical language instead of an emotional one to ensure the objectivity of the work.

In terms of self-mention, the participants of this study believed that the fewer the number of self-mention markers used, the more the results would seem objective and thus, the level of selfishness in the findings could be prevented. Furthermore, different results were obtained in this

field related to the gender variable. According to interviewees, overall, there is no absolute significant difference between both genders regarding the use of self-mention markers. The results are in contrast with Yeganeh and Ghoreyshi (2015) that similar to the current study used Hyland's (2005) meta-discourse taxonomy to explore the role of gender differences in employing meta-discourse markers in both abstract and discussion sections of scientific articles written in English by Iranian learners. The findings revealed that gender differences play a significant role on using markers in which male learners preferred boosters to hedges in writing texts.

The other interactional meta-discourse marker postulated by Hyland (2005) includes hedges which are linguistic tools for expressing writers' uncertainty about a proposition and by words such as maybe and usually accept the possibility of alternative ideas. The qualitative data analysis showed that the interviewees as thesis writers mentioned that it would be more reasonable to use hedging devices such as suppose, seem, might, etc., when they are uncertain about results and ideas of other researchers. In the case of uncertainty about the results and findings of the researcher and others, and to express one's distance with the credibility of the other writers' research outcomes, interviewee participants assert that they can employ hedges markers as a device for downgrading certainty. The extracts 35 to 40 indicated that that the students were aware of the functions of hedges and during or before MA courses, they were instructed to use hedges differently in their argumentative texts like thesis. Of particular relevance to the current study is the finding that the Chinese applied linguistics authors, as EFL writers, used fewer hedges in writing abstracts in English for academic journals than the native English speakers (Wu & Paltridge, 2021). The researchers justified the results regarding the Chinese writers' inadequate English proficiency and believed that using hedges needs a highly sophisticated command of the language (Hu & Cao, 2011). Similar results were observed in the studies such as Chen and Zhang (2017) that concluded EFL writers used significantly fewer hedges and overused or underused certain hedging items when compared to American writers.

The findings of this study align with Hyland's (2005) findings, which showed that while "professional writers" employ personal pronouns and interjections to assert affinity with their audience, students like to use these traits less. Nonetheless, this finding contradicts Yeung's (2007) argument that the use of first-person pronouns "does not appear to be a defining trait of business reports as asserted" (p. 177). Although writers employed this authorial presence resource in business reports on occasion, according to Yeung (2007), it appears to be related substantially with explanations of methods of research in order to introduce professionalism. Academic evaluation genres, according to Hyland (2005), lack the writer-reader equality found in peer-oriented research papers because they are influenced by the prevalent ideas of the genre they are employing.

The participants agreed unanimously that to enhance the quality of a thesis, it is highly recommended to insert one's ideas and thought into their written thesis utilizing attitude markers and engagement markers to the appropriate extent. As already stated, this study was qualitative in nature and it was not a comparative one; however, the results can be compared and contrasted by comparative studies. For instance, comparing theses and research articles, some researchers such as Dahme and Sastre (2015) found that master's students use fewer attitude markers in their writing in comparison to the research articles' authors. The same results were found by Abdollahzadeh (2019) that the researcher justified the discrepancies in the frequency of meta-discourse markers between master's or doctoral dissertations was ascribed to the factors such as writing proficiency and genre differences. In particular, they claimed that student writers have less awareness and knowledge of the rhetorical rules of their majors (Abdollahzadeh, 2019; Dahme & Sastre, 2015) and increase in that awareness can be resulted in more appropriate use of stance expressions. In sum, as evidenced by previous research (Abbuhl, 2006; Yoon, 2021), to promote students' ability in using interactional meta-discourse markers, instructors and higher educators can employ focused instruction, and interested researchers can conduct studies in which they investigate the impact of explicit and interventionist instruction on EFL learners' appropriate use of interactional meta-discourse features in their academic writings such as master's theses or PhD dissertations.

Conclusions

According to the ideas collected through interviews, the participants had approximately the same stance on employing different categories of interactional meta-discourse markers in their written theses. The findings of this study could be beneficial for the English students especially those who are going to write a thesis. Informing students about meta-discourse markers can guide them to care about coherence and cohesion in their writing. Any writing could be regarded as an internationally interactional means to help writers develop an appropriate connection with readers. It is expected to plan some courses for university students in order to establish sufficient familiarity with diverse types of interpersonal meta-discourse markers. These courses can enhance students' rhetorical competence for establishing a purposeful and meaningful interaction with their theses' addressees.

A variety of limitations apply to this research. The corpus of the study is bounded by a 20-member group of students from universities in Iran who submitted theses in the field of applied linguistics between 2014 and 2017, according to the convenient sampling approach utilized in this study. A bigger sample size might have been more reliable, and replicating these experiments with larger groups might yield different results. Given that this study only looked at 20 MA theses, it is possible that they don't represent the entire pool of MA theses in applied linguistics. The qualitative results of this study may be influenced by the fact that the number of male and female participants in the interview was not equal, and females made up the majority of interviewees.

Future research could compare the usage of meta-discourse markers in theses and dissertations produced by Native English/International students with those written by Iranians. They could look into the impact of culture on the extent to which meta-discourse markers are used in M.A. theses and PhD dissertations. They can also compare MA and PhD students' General English skill levels, as well as the extent to which M.A. students use meta-discourse markers. They can look at how non-linguistic psychological factors like self-confidence and anxiety affect the amount to which meta-discourse indicators are used in M.A. theses and PhD dissertations.

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