The Taken-for-Granted Role of Metadiscourse in Teaching Reading: Iranian EFL Learners' Achilles Heel[1]

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Abstract

As a feature of text and talk, metadiscourse refers to how authors structure their writing so that readers can make sense of the text in greater depth. In navigating the process of structuring texts, proficiency level (i.e., mastery over language) has been discussed as a key variable influencing both writers' language and readers' understanding of those texts. However, there has not been research that fully explores the role of learners' proficiency level in metadiscourse instruction. Thus, the current study aimed to investigate the effect of metadiscourse instruction on Iranian tertiary-level English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' reading comprehension in relation to their language proficiency level. A group of undergraduate students majoring in Teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) was chosen to participate in the research through purposive sampling. Students were randomly assigned to an experimental or a control group. The experimental group received instruction on metadiscoursal features of expository reading texts, while the control group received no instruction on metadiscourse. Data was collected in two phases: pre-and post-intervention. The results showed that the instruction of metadiscourse had a significant effect on tertiary EFL learners' reading performance. All students of different levels of language proficiency in the experimental group outperformed their counterparts in the control group on the post-reading comprehension test. Knowledge of interactional and interactive metadiscourse equipped (EFL) learners with means that improved their understanding of the text by engaging them in a dialogue with the writer. The results have implications for EFL teachers, especially reading teachers. Therefore, reading teachers are encouraged to integrate metadiscourse instruction into their lesson plans and make students aware that reading is more than extracting facts from the texts.

Resumen

Como característica del texto y del habla, el metadiscurso se refiere a cómo los autores estructuran sus escritos para que los lectores puedan entender el texto con mayor profundidad. Al navegar el proceso de estructuración de textos, el nivel de competencia (es decir, el dominio del lenguaje) se ha discutido como una variable clave que influye tanto en el lenguaje de los escritores como en la comprensión de esos textos por parte de los lectores. Sin embargo, no se han realizado investigaciones que exploren plenamente el papel del nivel de competencia de los alumnos en la instrucción del metadiscurso. Por lo tanto, el presente estudio tuvo como objetivo investigar el efecto de la instrucción del metadiscurso en la comprensión lectora de los estudiantes iraníes de inglés como lengua extranjera de nivel terciario en relación con su nivel de dominio del idioma. Se seleccionó a un grupo de estudiantes universitarios de la carrera de Enseñanza del Inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) para participar en la investigación mediante muestreo intencional. Los estudiantes fueron asignados aleatoriamente a un grupo experimental o de control. El grupo experimental recibió instrucción sobre las características meta-discursales de los textos de lectura expositiva, mientras que el grupo de control no recibió instrucción sobre el metadiscurso. La recogida de datos se realizó en dos fases: pre y post-intervención. Los resultados mostraron que la instrucción del metadiscurso tuvo un efecto significativo en el rendimiento lector de los estudiantes de inglés terciario. Todos los estudiantes de diferentes niveles de dominio del idioma en el grupo experimental superaron a sus homólogos en el grupo de control en la prueba de comprensión posterior a la lectura. El conocimiento del metadiscurso interaccional e interactivo proporcionó a los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) medios que mejoraron su comprensión del texto al involucrarlos en un diálogo con el escritor. Los resultados tienen implicaciones para los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera, especialmente los de lectura. Por lo tanto, se anima a los profesores de lectura a integrar la instrucción del metadiscurso en sus planes de lecciones y concienciar a los estudiantes de que leer es más que extraer hechos de los textos.

Introduction

The dominance of English as a language both within and outside academia has significantly impacted the demand for reading in English as a second or foreign language. The importance of English reading skills has also led to considerable research on reading practices (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Duke et al., 2021; Koda & Zehler, 2008; Smith et al., 2021; Urquhart & Weir, 1998). The main concern of this line of research has been to help students acquire meaning from text. Research has shown that a lack of adequate reading proficiency and failure to comprehend various text types can hinder students' progress in academic contexts (Koda & Zehler, 2008; Yapp et al., 2021).

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Reading is considered an interactive process between the reader's many cognitive processes and between the reader and the text (Cao & Kim, 2021; Grabe, 2009). Reading is a communicative act, in which the reader is not a passive receiver of information, and according to Fenner (2001, p. 24), acts as a "co-producer of language and meaning." One way to facilitate communication between the reader and the writer is through rhetorical features called metadiscourse. Metadiscourse, defined as "embodying the interaction necessary for successful communication" (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 161), has attracted the attention of researchers for the last two decades (e.g., Ädel, 2023; Al-Subhi, 2022; Tang, 2021). For Hyland (2017), metadiscourse refers to the way writers select language out of consideration for readers, to help them process and comprehend what they are reading, through elaboration, clarification, guidance, and interaction. Understanding metadiscourse and how to use it when reading helps readers comprehend the author's textual strategy. Readers can discern the structure of a text—introduction, body, conclusion, or shift of topics, and realize the author's attitudes toward the content and the reader (Crismore, 1982). Readers can also distinguish accepted claims from those disputed by the author (Vande Kopple, 1997). Thus, metadiscourse involves how writers and readers share their worlds and how such a world connects them discursively.

Metadiscourse has been the subject of many studies in different fields and genres. However, most of these studies explored the effect of metadiscourse on students' writing skills rather than reading skills (e.g., Deng et al., 2021; Nesi, 2021; Yoon, 2021). Considering the importance of reading in educational settings, especially English as a second language (ESL)/English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, and the crucial role that reading plays in the academic achievement of learners (Koda & Zehler, 2008), the role that knowledge of metadiscourse elements can have on students' reading comprehension is worthy of study.

In the EFL context of Iran, metadiscourse has been indicated to have facilitative effects on the students' EFL reading comprehension (Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007; Parvaresh & Nemati, 2008; Soltani & Shokrpour, 2021; Tavakoli et al., 2010; Vasheghani, 2020; Zakeri & Samimi, 2021); however, few experimental studies have been conducted to examine the effect of teaching metadiscourse on students' reading comprehension of English texts. Previous studies showed intriguing results regarding the impact of metadiscourse awareness on EFL learners of varying levels of language proficiency (Hashemi et al., 2011; Jalilifar, 2011; Parvaresh & Nemati 2008).

To clarify the role metadiscourse plays in EFL readers' reading comprehension, this study aimed to investigate the effect of teaching metadiscourse on the reading comprehension of EFL students with varying levels of language proficiency as defined by the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a standardized test of the English language for non-native speakers of English. Based on these objectives, the present study attempted to address the following research question: Does instruction about metadiscourse enhance the reading comprehension of EFL learners with different levels of language proficiency?

Literature Review

Strategy-based reading instruction

Over the last few decades, research in second language reading comprehension has focused on identifying strategies directly associated with comprehension performance. It is widely accepted that a critical component of comprehension is the ability to use appropriate reading strategies (Fathi & Afzali, 2020; Grabe, 2002; Koda, 2005; McBreen & Savage, 2021; Muhid et al., 2020; Wissinger et al., 2021). Another category of related studies has compared the patterns of strategies used by readers across different proficiency levels. Findings have indicated that, compared to poor readers, good readers use a more extensive repertoire of strategies, use strategies more effectively, and are actively engaged in reading comprehension (Grabe, 2009). Recent trends in this domain have shifted the emphasis from merely identifying and classifying strategies to strategy instruction and its benefits for learners' reading comprehension performance. It has been found that explicit teaching of effective text-processing strategy helps students become strategic readers (Dignath & Veenman, 2021; Grabe, 2009; Janzen, 2002; Kavani & Amjadiparvar, 2018; Zhang, 2008). In strategy-based reading instruction, it is recommended that the teacher incorporate instruction of reading strategies through direct explanation, consistent modeling, scaffolding, extensive practice, and feedback (Grabe, 2009). It is this incorporation that helps learners effectively make sense of input in general and texts in particular.

Iranian university EFL learners have problems with reading comprehension partly due to the language teaching system in Iran, since the primary English teaching method in school and university is still the

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Grammar Translation method (Hadad Narafshan & Yamini, 2011). In schools, teachers spend most of the class time translating the texts into Persian, explaining grammatical structures, and providing Persian equivalents for new words during each lesson. Lack of explicit instruction in effective reading strategies is one of the main factors contributing to reading comprehension problems (Milaghardan, 2016). The goal of English instruction and learning is mainly for students to acquire linguistic knowledge of English, as it is all they need to know to pass their exams and be well-prepared for the university entrance exam. Beside emphasizing linguistic forms, they are also taught test-taking strategies that help them in the national university entrance exam. Farhady et al. (2010) considered this situation narrow instruction, which naturally leads to many problems for students who enter university and need to read texts in English.

Because English is a foreign language in Iran with no or very little use in the everyday lives of EFL learners, English texts for university students majoring in English are the primary source of language input. Thus, reading comprehension ability is of great importance for them to progress in their academic performance. However, most students have not acquired this ability in school, resulting in poor reading ability at university. The over-reliance on lower-level text processing strategies, such as paying attention to single words, translation, and looking up new words, which are regarded as insufficient reading strategies, takes EFL reader's attention away from higher-order strategies (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007). This is because lower-level text processing skills, though essential components of reading, do not guarantee reading comprehension. Reading is not a single-factor process; instead, it is a complex process requiring both low-level and high-level text processes to work together interactively as part of the reading process (Nassaji, 2003). The complex nature of reading processes at the tertiary level requires EFL/ESL readers to go beyond the word and sentence levels and expand their repertoire of reading strategies.

Recognizing and understanding the authors' implicit message is one of the difficulties Iranian EFL learners at the tertiary level encounter while reading their academic English texts (Ahmadi et al., 2013). They regard reading as extracting facts from a written text rather than a communicative act in which they should participate in the co-construction of meaning (Wilson et al., 2004). One way to help students at the tertiary level cope with academic reading materials is to teach them metadiscourse strategies. Attention to these reading strategies is primarily neglected in reading classes at Iranian schools and at tertiary levels. An awareness of these features as facilitative means of communication can help EFL readers to engage in a dialogue with the writer, understand the authors' text plan, and grasp the writer's stance when reading academic material.

Modified version of Hyland's Taxonomy of Metadiscourse

The present study adapted Hyland's (2005) taxonomy of interpersonal metadiscourse to teach metadiscoursal features of English tests to students in the experimental group. In Hyland's model, metadiscourse comprises two dimensions of interaction: the interactive dimension and the interactional dimension. These two dimensions are believed to be defining characteristics of any spoken or written communication and are expressed through various rhetorical features. Interactive resources help organize propositional information in ways that readers find coherent and persuasive. These include *transition markers* that connect ideas, *frame markers* that structure and signal stages of the text, *endophoric* markers that refer to other parts of the text, *evidentials* that attribute information to sources, and *code glosses* that clarify or elaborate meanings for readers. The interactional dimension reflects the writer's stance toward both the content and the reader. It includes *hedges*, which limit commitment and allow alternative views; *boosters*, which express certainty; *attitude markers*, which convey the writer's evaluation or affect; *self-mentions*, which signal authorial presence; and *engagement markers*, which directly involve readers and guide them toward particular interpretations.

To suit the purpose of the study, a few changes were applied to the model: the category of evidentials and endophoric markers were omitted from the model, and the punctuation category was incorporated into it instead. The reason to omit the evidential and endophoric markers from the model is that these categories are most applicable to long passages such as academic articles, and the reading passages used to teach metadiscourse features in this study are of one- or two-page length and general genre, not discipline-based. The reason to include punctuation marks is that it has a vital role in reading comprehension. As Crismore et al. (1993) stated, "these marks can signal text glosses and clarification as well as uncertainty, certainty, and attitude" (p. 48). The classification of the modified model of metadiscourse is presented in Table 1 below.

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Category	Function	Example
Interactive	Help to guide the reader through the text	Resources
Transitions	express semantic relation between main clauses	*In addition/but/thus/and*
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences, or text stages	*finally/to conclude/my purpose is*
Punctuation	signal text glosses and clarification, uncertainty, certainty, and attitude	*punctuation and typographical marks*
Code glosses	help readers grasp the meanings of ideational material	*namely/e.g./such as/in other words*
Interactional	Involve the reader in the argument	Resources
Hedges	withhold the writer's full commitment to the proposition	*might/perhaps/possible/ about*
Boosters	emphasize force or writer's certainty in the proposition	*in fact/definitely/it is clear that*
Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to pro-position	*unfortunately/I agree /surprisingly*
Engagement markers	explicitly refer to or build a relationship with the reader	*consider/note that/you can see that*
Self-mentions	explicit reference to author(s)	*I/we/my/our*

Note: Adapted from Hyland (2005)

Table 1: Hyland's (2005) Adapted Model of Metadiscourse for Use in Reading Instruction

Methodology

The present study is quantitative research employing a survey and experimental design. In many educational research studies, when it is impossible to select subjects randomly, it is recommended that the researcher employs a quasi-experimental design and uses intact classrooms as the experimental and control groups (Ary et al., 2009). Since administrative constraints imposed by the university where this experimental research was conducted made it impossible to select subjects randomly, a quasi-experimental design was employed. However, Seliger and Shohamy (1989) recommended that the researcher match subjects in groups in a quasi-experimental design to make groups more comparable. To increase the subjects' comparability in this study, the researcher administered the Oxford Placement Test (OPT).

The study was conducted with two groups of subjects: the experimental group (EG) and the control group (CG). The EG received instruction on metadiscoursal features of expository texts following Hyland's (2005) modified model of interpersonal metadiscourse. Students' scores on a reading comprehension test (developed to assess students' metadiscourse knowledge) were the dependent variable, and instruction of metadiscoursal features were the independent variable. A widely used quasi-experimental design in educational research, namely a nonrandomized control group, pretest-posttest design was used in this study (Ary et al., 2009), as presented in Table 2 below. To meet ethical standards, we asked the participants to sign a consent form, which involved expressing their agreement to participate in the study and that the data would only be used for research purposes.

Group	Pretest	Independent Variables	Posttest
E	Y_1	X	Y_2
C	Y_1	-	Y_2

Note: E: Experimental Group; C: Control group; Y1: Pretest; Y2: Posttest; X: Treatment (Metadiscourse Strategy Instruction)

Table 2: Non-randomized control group, pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design

Participants

The participants of this study were 113 undergraduate students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at the Islamic Azad University in Tehran, Iran. The students were informed that information that could be used to identify them (students' details, as well as their responses) would not be shared with third-party agencies or researchers not affiliated with the current research; further, they were assured that all the responses would be kept anonymous in the research report. They were chosen through purposive sampling to participate in the research. All related data was collected in their Advanced Reading classes, a compulsory course. According to the academic administration timetable, these 113 students were split in four different classes. For the purpose of this study, the four classes were randomly divided into two groups 57 students in the experimental group and 56 students in the control group.

Instruments

In order to collect the data, two instruments were employed: OPT and a Reading Comprehension Test (RCT). The Oxford Placement Test was used as a test of English language proficiency. The students' scores on it

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were standardized by mapping them onto the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and four levels of language proficiency were identified (Table 3).

Common European Framework Level Description	Common European Framework Levels	Pen and Paper OPT Test out of 60	Students' OPT Scores of the Present Study
Mastery (Upper Advanced)	C2	55–60	
Effective Proficiency (Lower Advanced)	C1	48–54	48–54
Vantage (Upper Intermediate)	B2	40–47	40–47
Threshold (Lower Intermediate)	B1	30–39	30–39
Waystage (Elementary)	A2	18–29	18–29
Breakthrough	A1	10–17	
(Beginner)	–	0–9	

Table 3: The Oxford Placement Test scores mapped onto the Common European Framework of Reference.

In order to assess students' knowledge of metadiscourse, an RCT was developed. This instrument was used as a pre- and post-test. It consists of four expository texts on general topics. A large sample of expository texts from different reading textbooks currently in use in universities across the country of Iran along with some from the internet were reviewed to select the appropriate texts. These were meticulously reviewed to ensure that they include all interactional and interactive metadiscourse resources defined by the modified model. The texts were checked by two experts who hold a PhD in Applied Linguistics to ensure the accuracy and appropriacy of the texts for the present study. Other criteria in selecting texts included: text types, number of paragraphs, readability index, and text length. Based on the four selected passages, reading comprehension questions were developed. Each text was followed by five multiple-choice questions. The RCT and the outline of Hyland's (2005) modified model of metadiscourse were given to three instructors to examine the content and face validity of RCT. The lecturers who were chosen for their expert judgments met the following criteria:

- EFL university lecturers
- Had taught reading courses for more than six years
- Knowledgeable in metadiscourse

The RCT was deemed appropriate for the intended purpose following some modifications suggested by the expert judges. A reliability procedure called internal consistency was used to determine the reliability of RCT. Internal consistency indicated that all the items in the test were measuring the same thing. An adequate level of reliability (.71) for RCT was shown by the computed internal consistency reliability coefficient.

Two textbooks, Reader's Choice and Active Reading, were selected by the university to be used in the reading classes. Reading instructors were required to utilize these two textbooks as the main course material. Besides these two textbooks, which were the standard materials for both groups, experimental and control, a further 18 passages were selected to be used in classes for the experimental group. These passages on general topics were chosen by the researcher from other available reading textbooks or the internet. The passages were selected meticulously to include all the metadiscourse resources defined by the modified model of metadiscourse.

Data collection procedures

Data collection procedures began at the start of the semester for students in Advanced Reading classes. In the first session of the semester, the OPT was administered to both groups to determine the students' level of language proficiency. In the second session, the RCT was administered to both groups as a pretest.

After administering the OPT and Pre-RCT in the first two sessions of the semester, the teaching procedures began in the second week of the semester. The same teaching materials were used for the control and experimental groups during the same instructional period (16 instructional sessions), except that metadiscourse instruction was incorporated into the reading instruction for the experimental group.

In the first session of the second week, the instructor introduced the concept of metadiscourse and its function as a comprehension strategy that can help students improve their reading skills. The purpose of this general information on metadiscourse was to help students acquire an overall picture of the concept. The instructor explained the general function of interactive and interactional metadiscourse. Students were also made aware of the major function of interactive metadiscourse as devices that make a text easy to

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follow by conforming to conventional text patterns and predictable directions, enabling the reader to process the text by recognizing relationships and ordering material. The primary function of interactional metadiscourse as devices that focus more on the interaction between the writer and the reader were also explained.

Metadiscourse instruction

Teaching metadiscourse markers, or the actual process of teaching reading, began in the second part of the second week of the semester. Every week, students were introduced to one kind of metadiscourse based on the modified model of metadiscourse. For each kind of metadiscourse, two texts were chosen and named accordingly for the instructor to keep in a file.

Through discourse analysis of different passages during this study, the students were taught different metadiscourse forms and their functions. Metadiscourse was first introduced and explained, then practiced giving students metacognitive awareness of metadiscourse functions as discourse organizing and an indication of the writer's attitudes towards the reader and the text. The instruction of metadiscourse strategies in every session was based on the following guidelines in reading strategy instruction proposed in earlier research (Grabe, 2009; Janzen, 2002):

- Explicit teaching of the metadiscourse element in its context
- Explanation and definition of its function through mental modeling and asking questions,
- Practice through discourse analysis: asking students to identify the element by doing different exercises
- Constant recycling of the strategies over new texts

The introduction and teaching all metadiscourse categories were completed by the end of the tenth session. During these ten weeks, all metadiscourse markers were introduced, explained, practiced, and reviewed. From the eleventh session on, the class worked with just the course books while working on instances of metadiscourse markers they encountered. In this way, in the five remaining sessions, all metadiscourse markers were reviewed again. When teaching from the textbooks, the instructor called students' attention to metadiscourse markers they encountered and pointed out their functions in different contexts. The instructor also asked students questions and responded to their answers with feedback.

Data Analysis and Results

In order to compare students' performance in the experimental and control groups on pre-RCT, a two-way between-group analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted. The analysis revealed that both groups were different in their performance on pre-RTC. The descriptive statistics, Table 4, indicated that the students' pre-RCT mean scores in the control group for all proficiency levels (lower advanced (M=15.91, SD=0.83), upper-intermediate: 14.70, lower-intermediate: 12.26, elementary: 9.92) were higher than those of the experimental group (lower-advance: 14.17, upper-intermediate: 11.70, lower-intermediate: 8.35, elementary: 8.61). The result showed that the groups' performances on the pre-test were not similar. When a pretest indicates that the groups are not equivalent on the dependent variable, the literature suggests using ANCOVA to statistically adjust the post-test scores for the pre-test differences (Ary et al., 2009).

Group	OPT Levels	Mean	SD	N
Treatment	Lower-advanced (C1)	14.17	1.16	6
	Upper-intermediate (B2)	11.70	1.33	10
	Lower-intermediate (B1)	8.35	2.20	23
	Elementary (A2)	8.61	2.76	18
	Total	9.63	2.93	57
Control	Lower-advanced (C1)	15.91	.83	11
	Upper-intermediate (B2)	14.70	2.00	10
	Lower-intermediate (B1)	12.26	2.24	23
	Elementary (A2)	9.92	2.57	12
	Total	12.91	2.93	56

Table 4: Descriptive statistics for pre-reading comprehension test

Consequently, ANCOVA was conducted to compare groups' mean scores on post-RCT analysis of covariance. A 2-by-2 between-group analysis of covariance was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the intervention (metadiscourse strategy instruction) on students' reading comprehension performance. The independent

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variables were the intervention and students' levels of language proficiency. The dependent variable was students' post-RCT scores, administered after the intervention's completion. By using ANCOVA and setting the pre-RCT scores as the covariate and the post-RCT scores as the response variable of interest, the study statistically controlled for the initial difference between the groups.

The between-subjects test effects indicated a significant main effect for independent variables (groups and levels within them) and whether the interaction between these two variables was significant. The results in Table 5 show that the interaction effect of the two independent variables is not significant, GROUP*OPT LEVEL: F (3, 10)=2.49, p=.06>.05. This indicates that there is no significant difference in the effect of levels of language proficiency on groups' differences on post-RCT. This finding means that the treatment effect was the same across different levels. According to Pallant (2013), when the interaction effect is not significant, the researcher can safely interpret the main effect. As Table 5 shows, there is a significant main effect for the independent variable Group: F(1, 10)=38.85, p=.000<.05. That is, both groups significantly performed differently in the post-RCT.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	503.43[a]	8	62.93	19.43	0.00	0.59
Intercept	196.26	1	196.26	60.62	0.00	0.36
Reading_pre	132.02	1	132.02	40.77	0.00	0.28
Group	125.78	1	125.78	38.85	0.00	0.27
Group * OPT_Levels	24.19	3	8.06	2.49	0.06	0.06

Note: [a] R Squared=.59 (Adjusted R2=.56)

Table 5: Tests of between-subjects' effects on Post-Reading Comprehension Test

Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics of post-RCT scores for the experimental and the control group. It shows that students' mean scores in all four levels of language proficiency in the experimental group (*C1*, *M*=16.67, *SD*=1.03), (*B*2, *M*=15.20, *SD*=2.48), (*B1*, *M*=13.57, *SD*=1.37), (*A*2, *M*=13.06, *SD*=2.20) are higher than those of the control group (*C*1, *M*=15.73, *SD*=1.00), (*B*2, *M*=15.30, *SD*=2.49), (*B*1, *M*=12.00, *SD* =2.89) (*A*2, *M*=10.08, *SD*=1.73). Although the upper intermediate group in the experimental group showed a lower mean (15.20) score than the control group (15.30), incorporating the initial difference that existed between the two groups by the ANCOVA revealed that the upper intermediate students in the treatment group performed significantly better than the students in the control group at the same level of language proficiency. The results are in line with studies that investigated the influence of metadiscourse instruction on language learners' reading comprehension performance with intermediate (Tavakoli et al. 2010; Vasheghani, 2020), and pre-intermediate (Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007) levels of language proficiency.

Group	OPT Levels	Mean	SD	N
Treatment	Lower advanced (C1)	16.67	1.03	6
	Upper-Intermediate (B2)	15.20	2.48	10
	Lower Intermediate (B1)	13.57	1.37	23
	Elementary (A2)	13.06	2.20	18
	Total	14.02	2.16	57
Control	Lower advanced(C1)	15.73	1.00	11
	Upper-Intermediate (B2)	15.30	2.49	10
	Lower Intermediate (B1)	12.00	2.89	23
	Elementary (A2)	10.08	1.73	12
	Total	12.91	3.14	56

Table 6: Descriptive statistics of Post-Reading Comprehension Test scores for both groups

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the metadiscourse instruction had a significant effect on tertiary EFL learners' reading performance. It was found that despite the control group's initially higher proficiency, the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-Reading Comprehension Test. This finding indicates that metadiscourse instruction could help students in the experimental group improve their reading comprehension. The results of the present study lend further support to previous research demonstrating the facilitative role of metadiscourse in EFL learners' reading comprehension where learners at all proficiency

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levels performed better with metadiscourse-enriched texts (Zarrati, et al., 2014). These results are also consistent with earlier studies by Jalilifar and Alipour (2007), Tavakoli et al. (2010), and Vasheghani (2020) which similarly reported the positive impact of metadiscourse on reading comprehension. As Nesi (2021) argues that because metadiscourse provides a multidimensional representation of text construction/comprehension, it helps readers develop their understanding through various strategies, including elaboration and clarification. It seems that the participants of this study have also developed such competencies, enabling them to comprehend the texts from multidimensional aspects.

Furthermore, by comparing students' mean scores across the four levels, the study found no statistically significant difference in the effect of language proficiency level on groups' differences in post-RCT. The positive effect of metadiscourse instruction was similar across the four levels. This finding suggests that metadiscourse instruction was a practical approach to helping students progress in their reading skills regardless of their levels of language proficiency.

Previous studies provided different results on the effect of metadiscourse markers in reading English texts, and instruction of these markers on reading comprehension for other proficiency groups. Some studies showed that students with a high level of language proficiency benefited more from the instruction of metadiscourse (Jalilifar, 2011). Other studies showed that low-proficiency language learners benefited more from metadiscourse markers (Parvaresh & Nemati, 2008). Still, other studies showed that while these markers helped the advanced students perform significantly better on a reading comprehension test, they had no significant effect on the reading performance of the intermediate group unless they were consciously aware of them (Hashemi et al., 2011). These inconsistent findings reveal that proficiency level may be a key variable in how metadiscourse affects students' reading comprehension.

Implications

While metadiscourse may be an essential part of instruction in English reading classes, Iranian EFL learners are overly reliant on lower-level text processing strategies at the word and sentence level, so they have difficulties deciphering the global meaning and intention of English texts. Thus, to help EFL learners improve their reading comprehension, reading instructors are encouraged to integrate teaching metadiscourse in their classes. One of the salient implications of the present study is its classroom application. As the results of the present study indicate that university students of varying levels of English proficiency benefited from the intervention. Drawing on the findings, the study provides a few general guidelines for effectively implementing metadiscourse strategy instruction in EFL reading classes.

The first issue in teaching metadiscourse in reading classes is selecting a model that best suits its purpose. This study adapted Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse to teach metadiscourse elements. The researcher made a few changes to the model to make the model more applicable to reading classes. The practical application of the model showed some positive outcomes in this study. Thus, the adjusted model is recommended to be used by reading teachers when teaching metadiscourse strategies in their classes.

The second issue concerning metadiscourse instruction is the period and procedures of teaching metadiscourse strategies. Metadiscourse must be integrated into the overall class time. As a ubiquitous aspect of everyday communication (Hyland, 1998), metadiscourse is not separated from general language use; hence it should not be taught separately. Having regular class time for teaching reading and allocating a portion of class time to teaching metadiscourse may suggest that metadiscourse is not as crucial as discourse. Students' attention should be directed to these elements during class time when reading passages, doing exercises, explaining expression and vocabulary, and whenever else the teacher thinks it is necessary.

The third issue is following a systematic lesson plan in metadiscourse instruction. It is recommended that teachers organize their lesson plans to allocate enough time to introduce each category of metadiscourse, explain its function, practice it in different contexts, and provide students with various examples of each category. The lesson plan organized to incorporate metadiscourse instruction in this study could also be used in similar reading courses.

The fourth issue concerning metadiscourse instruction is the student's level of language proficiency. To teach metadiscourse strategies to EFL learners, it is reasonable to think that they need to have a minimum level of language proficiency. At the tertiary level, however, as this study indicated, students across the four levels of language proficiency (lower advanced, upper intermediate, lower intermediate, elementary) benefited equally from metadiscourse instruction.

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Besides classroom applications, the findings of this study also have implications for materials developers who oversee the design and selection of materials to be used in reading classes. They can include sections for introducing, defining, and practicing metadiscoursal features. However, metadiscourse elements must be presented in ways that highlight their primary function in influencing the interaction between writer and reader (Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995).

Conclusion

The results of this study add to this key variable by showing that proficiency level may not feature significantly in metadiscourse. Yet, this study was limited in terms of the number of students. We believe that if proficiency level were defined distinctly (i.e., elementary versus advanced), how learners of different levels differed could be explored more effectively . This issue could be explored in future research.

It is hoped that the present study's findings cast new light on the relationship between metadiscourse knowledge and EFL/ESL learners' reading comprehension, and have filled an existing gap in the metadiscourse literature. As Hyland (2005) states, metadiscourse is a new and growing field of investigation with considerable potential for description and explanation, promising to reveal the underlying interaction of all communication and help us see how discourse is produced and received.

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