A Study of EFL Graduates' Meta-Discourse Cognition and Construction

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Abstract[3]

There has been a shift of interest of linguistic study into the social dimension of language in recent years by more and more scholars, motivating the development of corpus-based empirical studies. Within the theoretical model of meta-discourse [3], this paper attempts to study EFL graduates' meta-discourse cognition by the method of corpus-based content analysis in the form of individual interviews. Meta-discourse refers to language resources used to mark the structure of a discourse, engage the reader, or signal the writer's attitude. Meta-discourse is classified into two categories: interactive resources and interactional resources. The former consists of transitions, endophoric markers, frame markers, code glosses, and evidential markers, while the latter involves hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self- mentions, and engagement markers. The findings of the study indicate the imbalance in the cognition of meta-discourse of graduates specializing in different majors. This study raises the issue of attaching importance to the cognition and construction of meta-discourse in university English teaching, which could improve EFL graduates' academic discourse construction abilities.

Keywords: meta-discourse; graduate; cognition; construction

1. Introduction

Linguistic study has been experiencing a "social turn" that more and more scholars turned their interest of study into the social dimension of language in recent years. Linguistic study has been attaching increasing importance to empirical study by using the theoretical framework of cognitive linguistics combined with the empirical study of sociolinguistics to explore the language used in practice. Linguistic study also conducts quantitative and qualitative analysis of language by using test-based data, questionnaire surveys and language databases instead of elicited linguistic data [4, 6]. In the study of cognitive discourses, the term "meta-discourse" is put forward in relation to the term "primary discourse." "Primary discourse" refers to the propositional information, or ideological content, of a discourse, while "meta-discourse" is the construction of propositional information or ideological content. Linguistic research involves the author's organization of the propositional information, his or her stance in respect to the ideological content, his or her attitude toward the readers of the discourse, and his or her expectations of the readers' engagement. Hyland and Tse proposed a theory model of meta-discourses which divided English discourses into two major categories: interactive resources and interactional resources [3]. Based on this analysis framework, they investigated meta-discourses of 240 English papers by post and doctoral graduates from universities of science and engineering. Through interviews, they explored the cognition of authors of excellent English theses in meta-discourses. Hyland and Tse found that meta-discourse cognition helps authors in establishing discourse, explaining ideas, and declaring stance and attitude, which can effectively enable the textual function and interpersonal function. By an empirical study method, this paper, from the view of cognitive text linguistics, will explore the cognition of non-English major graduates (hereinafter referred to as "graduates") in English meta-discourses through interviews and corpus. The paper develops from the following aspects: the cognitive framework in English meta-discourses, the empirical study of graduates' English meta-discourse cognition, the results, the conclusion and implications in teaching.

2. English Meta-discourse Cognitive Framework

Central to essay writing is the thesis statement, as the thesis sentence should reflect both the position that the writer will argue and the organizational pattern with which he or she will present. Apart from the thesis statement, the author will need to guide the reader through the text and involve the reader in

the argument. Meta-discourse refers to language resources used to mark the structure of a discourse, engage the reader, or signal the writer's attitude. Thus, the writer needs to make the reader aware of the meta-discourse used in the academic text. This study used the theoretical model put forward by Hyland and Tse as a meta-discourse cognitive framework. Based on the theory of cognitive linguistics, Hyland and Tse divided English meta-discourses into two major categories: interactive resources and international resources. The former consists of transitions, endophoric markers, frame markers, code glosses and evidential markers, while the latter involves hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers [1, 2]. Interactive resources, as the resources to guide readers to interpret the discourse, refer to the organization of textual information by the author [1, 2].

1) Transition Markers (TM) express a semantic relation between main clauses.
   Typical words: although, yet, nonetheless, whereas, however, as a result, in addition, but, thus, and …
2) Frame Markers (FM) refer to discourse acts, sequences, or text stages.
   Typical words: in the first place, secondly, finally, to conclude, overall, my purpose here is to…
3) Endophoric Markers (EnM) refer to information in other parts of the text.
   Typical words: as noted in Fig.1, as mentioned above, as indicated in the table X, noted above…
4) Evidential Markers (EvM) refer to source of information from other texts.
   Typical words: according to, from the perspective of, in the light of, as X states…
5) Code Glosses (CG) help readers grasp functions of ideational material.
   Typical words: namely, such as, in other words …
   Interactional resources involve the reader in the argument.
6) Hedges Markers (HM) withhold writer's full commitment to proposition.
   Typical words: probable, likely, tend, seem, appear, would, could …
7) Booster Markers (BM) emphasize force or writer's certainty in proposition.
   Typical words: definitely, clearly, obviously, in fact, it is clear that…
8) Attitude Markers (AM) express writer's attitude to proposition.
   Typical words: unfortunately, more importantly, luckily, surprisingly …
9) Self Mentions (SM) show explicit reference to author(s)
   Typical words: I, we, our …
10) Engagement Markers (EgM) – explicitly build relationship with reader.
   Typical words: consider that, suppose that, note that, you can see that…

In summary, interactive meta-discourse organizes and adjusts the discourse, and interactional meta-discourse guides readers to better understand the discourse, engages the readers, or evaluates the content of discourse in order to promote the interaction between the writer and the reader [4].

3. A Study

3.1 Design
This study explored the cognition of graduates in English meta-discourses through corpus and interviews. The participants in the study include 152 non-English majored graduates respectively from the schools of management science, social science, mechanical and electrical engineering, and computer science. This study proposes two questions: 1) How do graduates from different majors cognize English meta-discourses? 2) Is there a difference in their cognition of English meta-discourses?

3.2 Procedures
This study is divided into two steps. The first step by the language database method collects English academic discourses of these graduates. The graduates participating in this study were required to write an English academic paper of no less than 3000 words/phrases independently, and submit it to the course teacher in the 15th week, by which the data for the quantitative study was collected. In the second step, three students from each major were selected, totalling 12 students, to have a thirty-minute individual interview. To improve the efficiency of the interview and avoid deviation from the subject, an outline for the interview is prepared (See Appendix 1). The interview is carried out in Chinese, in order to make it easy for graduates to understand the question accurately and express their true feelings, by which the data for qualitative study was collected.

4. Results

The *corpus-based* content analysis showed the graduates' cognition in meta-discourses tended to be imbalanced. The graduates used more interactive resources than international resources. It can be seen from Table 1 that, compared to the graduates majoring in mechanical and electrical engineering and computer science, graduates majoring in management science and social science use more meta-discourse markers, such as frame markers, transitions, evidential markers, boosters and engagement markers. It seemed that there is a certain difference in meta-discourse cognition between graduates from "soft sciences" and from "hard sciences".

Table 1: EFL Graduates' Meta-discourse Cognition

Meta-discourse in Graduates' paper (per 10000 words)	management science	social science	mechanical and electrical engineering	computer science	
Transition markers	91.2	92.7	88.6	87.5	
Frame markers	33.1	28.6	23.7	21.6	
Endophoric markers	14.5	15.3	28.7	32.1	
Evidential markers	68.1	63.2	32.2	35.6	
Code glosses	23.6	29.8	30.5	32.3	
Interactive markers	**230.5**	**229.6**	**203.7**	**209.1**	c
Hedges markers	78.2	71.6	53.5	55.2	
Boosters markers	23.5	20.1	18.3	17.6	
Attitude markers	15.6	17.2	13.5	11.8	
Self-mentions	37.2	34.1	29.8	23.6	
Engagement markers	33.6	34.5	19.1	23.6	
Interactional markers	**188.1**	**177.5**	**134.2**	**131.8**	c
Totals	**418.6**	**407.1**	**337.9**	**340.9**	

As interview analysis shows, the cognition of graduates majoring in management science, social science, mechanical and electrical engineering and computer science in English meta-discourses is complicated and varied. They gained direct or indirect cognition of meta-discourses mainly through the channels such as classroom English learning, after-class English article reading, participation in academic activities and guidance from mentors. While graduates from different majors know that there is a macrostructure guiding the entire paper in academic discourses, they know little about the microstructure of academic discourses. They don't know how to build a core paragraph or provide evidence supporting it in thematic progression. They have inadequate cognition of "the elaboration, evaluation, justification, evidence, otherwise and restatement" in English academic discourses [5], which jumbles their English texts.

Through interviews, it seemed that the graduates majoring in mechanical and electrical engineering and computer science developed a consensus, trying as much as possible to avoid the subjective mood in writing academic papers. However, many graduates do not know that using self-involvement helps to demonstrate their own academic contribution and innovation. They are unaware that it is available to choose subjective and recessive method, objective and dominant method, or objective and recessive method to express subjective and dominant propositional information. This demonstrates that graduates are restricted to a certain extent in academic discourse cognition.

It can be seen from the above analysis that the results of the qualitative and quantitative study are basically consistent, and the graduates' English meta-discourse cognition develops in an unbalanced way.

5. Conclusion and Implications in Teaching

This paper explored graduates' English meta-discourse cognition from the view of cognitive text linguistics by empirical study. The findings suggest graduates from different majors acquire English meta-discourse cognition mainly by means of classroom learning, English article reading after class, participation in academic activities and guidance from mentors. They have different cognition in English meta-discourse. The cognition of graduates from the schools of management science and social science in terms of evidential markers, hedges markers and engagement markers is different from that of graduates majoring in mechanical and electrical engineering and computer science.

The teaching implications of this research are that the study of meta-discourse cognition widens the dimensions of English teaching. English teaching should attach importance to graduates' academic discourse cognition and construction in the context of academic exchange, investigating the meta-discourse cognition of graduates with higher and lower English proficiency from the same major to find their different characteristics in meta-discourse and problem solving, which will continue to promote the reform of graduate English teaching.

Appendix 1. Interview outline
1) How do you understand English meta-discourses?
2) Are you familiar with discourse framework? Please give examples.
3) Can you use evidential markers? Direct or indirect references?
4) Do you use transitions in English academic discourse?
5) Do you use hedging? Please give examples.
6) How do you understand endophoric markers?
7) How do you evaluate engagement markers?
8) What difficulties do you have in English meta-discourse cognition?

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