EXAMINING THE EFFICACY OF METADISCOURSE USAGE IN ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING AMONG EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT SUDANESE INSTITUTIONS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The study aims to assist students who are learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in effectively incorporating meta-discourse into their academic essay writing and to raise their awareness of the significance of utilizing these elements in their writing assignments. The study employed a descriptive analytical approach and employed pre and post-tests as data collection tools. The study's sample consisted of sixty (60) randomly selected EFL undergraduate students from Sudanese institutions. Initially, the participants were asked to complete a pre-test on the use of meta-discourse in writing. Subsequently, they received over three weeks of instruction on applying Hyland's (2000) model of meta-discourse markers in essay writing before taking the post-test. The collected data were statistically analyzed using the SPSS program. The findings indicated that many EFL students struggle to incorporate meta-discourse into their academic essays. The study recommends enhancing the instruction of meta-discourse usage in EFL classes to help students write essays that demonstrate the appropriate application of meta-discourse, and emphasizes the importance of students being mindful of incorporating linguistic elements into their writing tasks.

Keywords: Metadiscourse, Linguistic-devices, Academic-writing, Writer-reader interaction, Writing-strategies, Discourse-markers.

1.0 Introduction

The term "metadiscourse" originated from the field of discourse analysis and was first introduced by linguist John Swales in the late 1970s(Swales, 1990). Metadiscourse is a term used by writers to properly connect a text so as to enable the readers to interpret the text more easily(Hyland, 2017; Pearson & Abdollahzadeh, 2023; Qin & Uccelli, 2019). According to Hyland,(2005), meta-discourse refers to the concepts that writers use to engage readers through more friendly discourse.However, creating reader-friendly text is generally a difficult task for many writers.

That is to say, writers-readers' interaction in a text isrequired for achieving successful communication as stated by Akbarpour and Sadeghoghli (2015: 270),that "writer-reader interaction in a text is "an integral part of achieving communicative purposes in every discourse community". Thisclearly means that,by using meta-discourse, writersenable readers to follow their writing through more friendly texts.The effective use of metadiscourse in academic writing is crucial for conveying meaning, guiding readers, and establishing credibility. Metadiscourse is a linguistic approach utilized by writers to engage with readers, express their stance, and organize their ideas. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) undergraduate students at Sudanese institutions, the investigation of metadiscourse usage in academic essay writing is of particular significance due to its potential impact on students' writing proficiency and academic success.

This study examines the efficacy of metadiscourse usage in academic essay writing among EFL undergraduate students at Sudanese institutions. By conducting a case study, this research explores the patterns, strengths, and weaknesses of metadiscourse employed by students in their writing. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by EFL students in using metadiscourse effectively and provide insights into instructional strategies that can enhance their writing skills.Sudanese institutions have witnessed a growing emphasis on English language instruction as English serves as a medium of instruction and communication in various academic disciplines. However, despite the importance of metadiscourse in academic writing, limited research has been conducted on its usage among EFL students in Sudan. Many EFL undergraduate studentsdo not have perfect knowledge regarding the correct application of meta-discourse markers in their writing. Most of them lack the ability to perform good essay writing or misuse the meta-discourse in academic articles. Therefore, this study fills a significant gap in the existing literature by focusing on the specific context of Sudanese EFL undergraduate students.

By examining metadiscourse usage in academic essay writing, this research addresses several key research questions. Firstly, it seeks to identify the types of metadiscourse employed by EFL undergraduate students in their essays and analyze their frequency and distribution. Secondly, it investigates the effectiveness of metadiscourse usage in conveying the intended meaning and guiding readers' comprehension. Finally, it explores potential challenges and difficulties that EFL students encounter in employing metadiscourse and examine possible factors that influence

their use of metadiscourse.The findings of this study possess the practical implications for English language teaching and learning in Sudanese institutions. By identifying the areas where students struggle with metadiscourse, educators can design targeted instructional interventions to support students in improving their academic writing skills. Furthermore, the study contributes to the development of writing materials and curricula that address the specific needs of EFL students in Sudan.

2.0 Literature Review

Zaini and Mazdayasna, (2014) examined the impact of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) on the development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' writing. The conceptual framework of the study revolves around the use of CALL in enhancing EFL learners' writing skills. The study emphasizes the role of word processing software, such as Microsoft Word Office, in providing automatic feedback and facilitating the revision process. It explores the benefits and challenges associated with using computers for writing tasks and highlights the potential for improving discourse features and producing high-quality texts. The findings of the study indicate that the students in the experimental group, who received computer-based instruction, outperformed their counterparts in the control group in terms of using appropriate articles and tense in their writing.

In a comparative metadiscourse analysis, Dafouz-Milne, (2008)explores the role of metadiscourse markers in the construction and attainment of persuasion in newspaper discourse. The study adopts a cross-linguistic perspective and analyzes a corpus of 40 opinion columns, with 20 written in English and 20 in Spanish. The selected newspapers for analysis are The Times (British) and El País (Spanish). The study considers both the textual and interpersonal aspects of metadiscourse. The findings suggest that both textual and interpersonal metadiscourse markers are present in English and Spanish newspaper columns.

Akbarpour and Sadeghoghli (2015) adopts Hyland's interactional model as its conceptual framework. The model distinguishes between interactive and interactional metadiscourse. Interactive metadiscourse refers to the writer's organizational attempts to direct readers towards their intended interpretation, while interactional metadiscourse focuses on the writer's expression of a textual 'voice' and their engagement with readers. The study utilizes a quantitative methodology. The researchers selected a total of 70 research articles from diverse fields, including Economics, Humanities, Life Sciences, Social Sciences, Law, Mathematics and

Physical Sciences, and Medicine. The findings provide insights into the teaching of writing research articles and is helpful for writing teachers and students. Sample size limitations, potential bias in the selection of articles, generalizability of findings to other contexts, and the complexity of analyzing and interpreting metadiscourse in research articles are the limitations of the study (Akbarpour and Sadeghoghli 2015).

Qin and Uccelli (2019), investigates how EFL learners utilize metadiscourse markers (MDMs) in both academic and colloquial writing. Each participant in the study produced two texts on the same topic: a personal email to a close friend (colloquial writing) and an academic report to school principals (academic writing). The entire corpus consisted of 704 texts, which were then analyzed using Hyland's metadiscourse model (2005). The study provided a distributional map that showcased the occurrence of MDMs in both the EFL academic and colloquial writing corpora. Following that, multi-level models were employed to identify similarities and differences in the use of various MDM subtypes, each serving distinct communicative purposes. For instance, there were more instances of code glosses in academic writing, while boosters and engagement markers were more prevalent in colloquial writing. Furthermore, the research examined the relationship between the use of MDMs and the overall writing quality within and across the different communicative contexts. By doing so, the study identified the strengths and weaknesses in EFL learners' utilization of MDMs. The results of the study contribute to a better understanding of EFL learners' proficiency in using MDMs and offer insights for designing effective pedagogical strategies that consider the communicative functions of these markers (Qin & Uccelli, 2019).

Ghahremani and Biria (2017)argue that by usingmeta-discourse, the writers enable the readers to pay attention to the informationin the written text.Khedri and Kritsis (2018, p. 51) state "*engagement markers help writers bring readers into discourse, inviting them into argumentations*." It is really that the use of engagement markers leads the readers to follow the text.

Multiple studies have provided evidence to support the notion that skilled writers employ meta-discourse markers in their writing (Carrió-Pastor, 2021; Ghahremani & Biria, 2017; Gholami et al., 2014; Ho, 2018; Hyland, 1999, 2017; Khedri & Kritsis, 2018; Li & Wharton, 2012; Li & Xu, 2020; Martín-Laguna & Alcón, 2015; Pearson & Abdollahzadeh, 2023; Qin & Uccelli, 2019; Rahimi-Rad, 2020; Salam El-Dakhs, 2020). This means that proficient writers make use of

linguistic devices or expressions that help guide readers through their text, establish coherence, and indicate the writer's stance or intentions. These meta-discourse markers serve as important tools for effective communication and are indicative of a writer's competence in producing well-structured and coherent written discourse.

2.1 Classification of Meta-discourse and Its Theoretical Framework

Meta-discourse can be categorized based on its relation to the three key communicative functions of language, as outlined by Hyland (2005, p. 26):

I. The Ideational function: This refers to the use of language to represent personal experiences, thoughts, and ideas. Within the context of meta-discourse, the ideational function involves the expression of the writer's understanding, analysis, and interpretation of a topic or subject matter. Writers employ meta-discourse markers to signal their analysis, evaluation, and argumentation. For example, phrases like "It is evident that," "According to research," or "This study demonstrates" are used to convey the writer's stance, provide evidence, and support their claims. By utilizing ideational meta-discourse, writers can demonstrate their expertise, present a well-informed perspective, and contribute to the scholarly discourse.

II. The Interpersonal function: This pertains to the use of language to encode social interactions and relationships. In the realm of meta-discourse, the interpersonal function involves the writer's engagement with readers, the establishment of a writer-reader relationship, and the expression of evaluations, opinions, and emotions. It enables writers to adopt different roles, such as persuader, expert, or collaborator, and facilitates effective communication and reader engagement.

III. The Textual function: This involves the use of language to organize and structure the text itself, ensuring coherence and cohesion. The textual function of meta-discourse involves using language to ensure coherence, cohesion, and logical flow within the written piece. Writers employ various textual meta-discourse markers to guide readers through the text and establish connections between ideas. These markers include transitional phrases, signposts, referencing strategies, and explicit metatextual statements.

2.2 Hyland's Taxonomy of Metadiscourse and Its Conceptual Framework

Hyland's taxonomy of metadiscourse, as outlined in his 2000 publication "Disciplinary Discourses," is a framework used to analyze the interactive and interpersonal features of written

texts(Hyland, 2000). It focuses on how writers use language to guide readers and negotiate meaning within a specific discourse community (Gholami, et al., 2014). Hyland's taxonomy consists of two main categories:

I. Interactional Metadiscourse:

Interactional metadiscourse refers to language features that establish a writer-reader relationship and engage the reader in the text. It includes the following subcategories:

a. Hedges: Hedges are linguistic devices used to mitigate or soften claims, indicating a degree of uncertainty or caution. Examples include adverbs like "possibly," "probably," or phrases like "it seems that."

b. Boosters: Boosters, on the other hand, are used to strengthen or emphasize claims, expressing confidence or certainty. Words like "definitely," "clearly," or phrases like "it is certain that" are examples of boosters.

c. Attitude Markers: Attitude markers convey the writer's evaluation or stance towards the information presented in the text. They can indicate agreement, disagreement, doubt, or approval. Examples include expressions like "fortunately," "unfortunately," "I believe," or "it is unlikely that."

d. Engagement Markers: Engagement markers aim to involve the reader in the text and create a sense of interaction. They include questions, directives, rhetorical statements, and other devices that directly address the reader. For instance, "Have you ever wondered?" or "Consider this example."

Overall, Hyland's interactional model provides a framework for analyzing and understanding the ways in which writers utilize metadiscourse to engage with their readers, express their viewpoints, and negotiate interpersonal meanings within texts.

II. Textual Metadiscourse:

Textual metadiscourse focuses on the organization and structure of the text itself. It helps guide readers through the content and enhances the coherence of the writing. The subcategories of textual metadiscourse are as follows:

a. Transitions: Transitions are words or phrases that establish connections between different parts of the text, aiding in the smooth flow of ideas. Examples include "however," "in addition," "on the other hand," etc.

b. Frame Markers: Frame markers signal the structure and organization of the text by indicating the beginning, middle, or end of sections. Words or phrases like "firstly," "in conclusion," or "on the contrary" serve as frame markers.

c. Endophoric Markers: Endophoric markers refer back to information mentioned earlier in the text. They include pronouns, demonstratives, and other referencing devices that help connect ideas and maintain coherence.

d. Code Glosses: Code glosses occur when the writer defines or explains technical terms or concepts, providing readers with necessary explanations. These glosses help readers understand specialized vocabulary and complex ideas.

3.0 Material and Method

The study applied descriptive-analytical method. A Pre-test and post-tests in essay writing had been used to collect the data from EFL undergraduate students at Sudanese Universities. Then, the collected data was analyzed statistically by Statistical Package for the Social Sciences(SPSS) Program.

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were (60) EFL undergraduate studentswho were randomly selected from Sudanese Institutions. They were requested by the researcher to perform pre-test and post-tests of writing essays. They were given relevant topics to their profession. After the pre-test they received three weeksof instructions on how to use meta-discourse, then they were given the post-test. Then the results were statistically analyzed by the SPSS program. The analyses of the data are shown in the ensuing sections.

3.2 Data Analysis

3.2.1 The Analysis of the Pre-TestData

According to the findings presented in Figure 1, the analysis reveals that among the total of sixty writers examined, five of them (50%) demonstrated a higher frequency of employing meta-discourse in their essay introductions. Out of these five writers, only one (10%) misused meta-discourse, indicating that they used it inappropriately or inaccurately. On the other hand, a significant portion of the sample, comprising forty percent (40%), did not utilize meta-discourse at all in their essays. This implies that they did not incorporate meta-

discourse markers or linguistic devices that serve the functions of meta-discourse in their introductory sections.
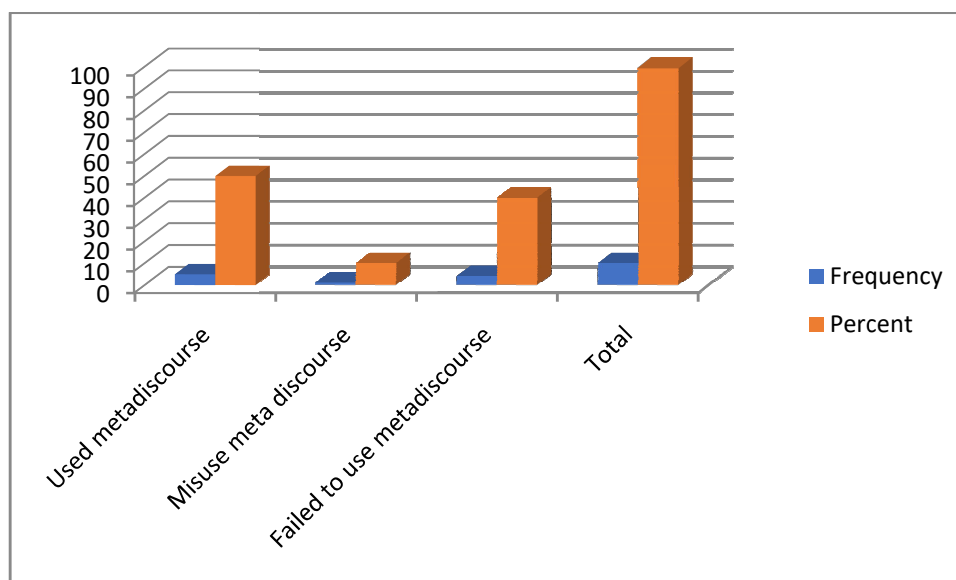

Figure 1. Student's Metadiscourse Analysis in Essay Writing(Pre-Test)

3.2.1.1 Using Metatextual Items in the Essay

Based on the analysis presented in Figure 2, it can be observed that out of the total sample, four writers (40%) demonstrated a higher usage of meta-textual items in their essays. These meta-textual items refer to elements or features within the text that contribute to its organization, coherence, and structure. On the other hand, a portion of the sample, comprising 20%, misused meta-textual items, indicating that they may have employed them incorrectly or inappropriately, potentially affecting the clarity or effectiveness of their writing. Additionally, an equal proportion of the sample, consisting of 40%, failed to make proper use of meta-discourse in their essays, suggesting that they did not effectively incorporate meta-textual items to enhance the organization and coherence of their written work.
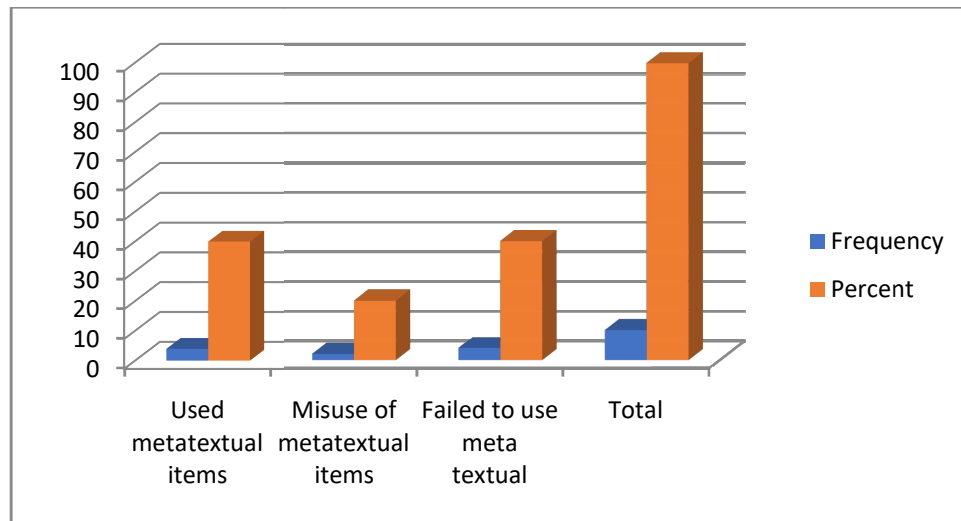
Figure 2. Plot of Metatextual Items usage, misuse and failed-to-use in the Essay writing

3.2.1.2.Using Both Metadiscourse and Metatextual Items in Essays

The findings presented in Figure 3, indicate that within the sample, a significant proportion of writers, accounting for 40%, demonstrated a higher overall usage of meta-discourse in their essays. This implies that they effectively incorporated various types of meta-discourse markers or meta-textual items throughout their written work to enhance communication and textual organization.
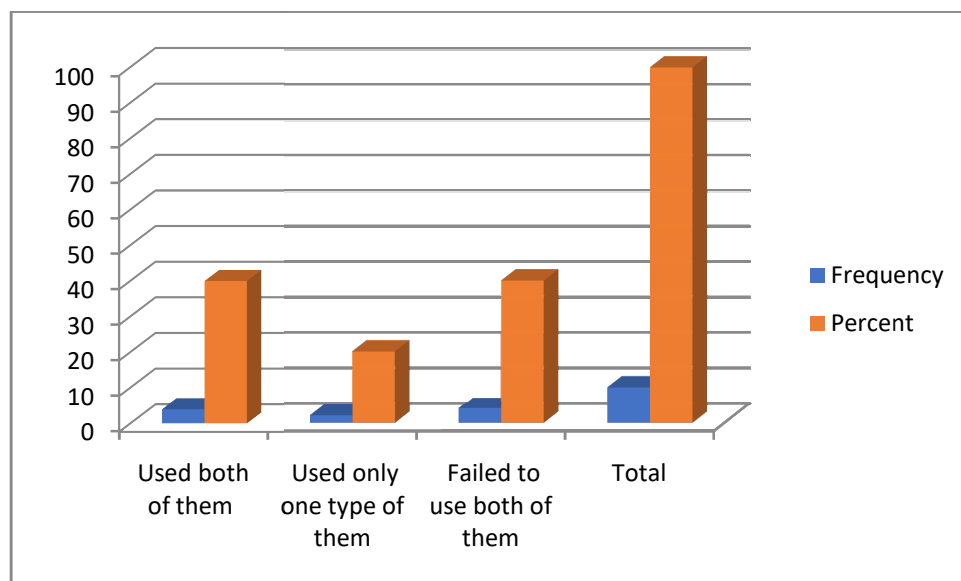

Figure 3. Plot of Students Using Both Metadiscourse and Metatextual Items in Essay.

On the other hand, a smaller portion of the sample, comprising 20%, utilized only one specific type of meta-discourse or meta-textual item in their essays. This suggests that they focused on a particular aspect of meta-discourse without incorporating a diverse range of linguistic devices or markers.

However, it is noteworthy that 40% of the sample failed to use any form of meta-discourse in their essays. This indicates that these writers did not employ meta-discourse markers or meta-textual items to enhance coherence, reader engagement, or text organization. The absence of meta-discourse in their writing may impact the clarity and effectiveness of their communication, potentially leading to a less coherent or engaging essay

3.2.1.3 Using interactional items in essay introductions

Based on the analysis presented in Figure 4, it is observed that among the sample of writers, three of them (30%) demonstrated a higher usage of interpersonal items in their essay introductions. These interpersonal items are linguistic elements that facilitate interaction and engagement with the reader, such as expressions of opinion, evaluation, or addressing the reader directly.
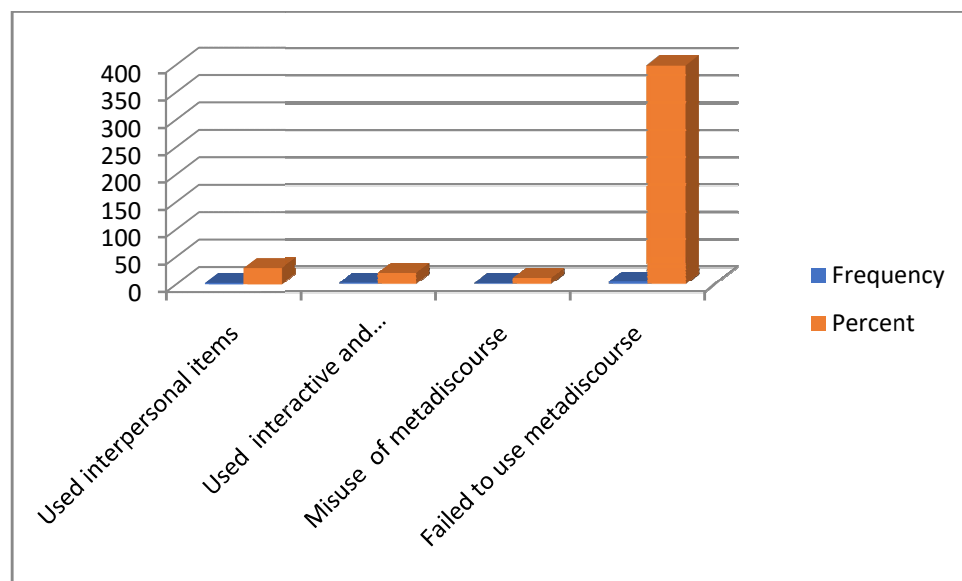

Figure 4.Graphical representation of the Usage of Interactional Items by Students in Their Essay Introductions.

Additionally, within the same sample, 20% of the writers utilized both interactive and interpersonal items in their introductions. This suggests that they effectively incorporated elements that encourage reader interaction and also employed language to establish a personal connection and express their evaluations or opinions.

However, it is worth noting that 10% of the sample exhibited a misuse of meta-discourse. This indicates that they may have employed interactional items inappropriately or inaccurately, potentially affecting the intended meaning or impact of their writing.

Furthermore, a significant portion of the sample, accounting for 40%, failed to utilize meta-discourse altogether in their essay introductions. This implies that they did not incorporate any interactional or interpersonal items to engage the reader or establish a connection. The absence of meta-discourse in their writing may impact the overall effectiveness and reader engagement of their introductions.

3.3 The Analysis of the Post-TestData

3.3.1. Using metadiscourse in essay writing

The statistical analysis presented in Figure 5 reveals the impact of three weeks of instructional intervention on students' usage of meta-discourse in their essay introductions. The results indicate that within the sample, a significant majority of students, comprising 80%, demonstrated an increased utilization of meta-discourse in their writing. This suggests that the instructional intervention effectively enhanced their understanding and application of meta-discourse markers, enabling them to incorporate them more proficiently in their essay introductions.
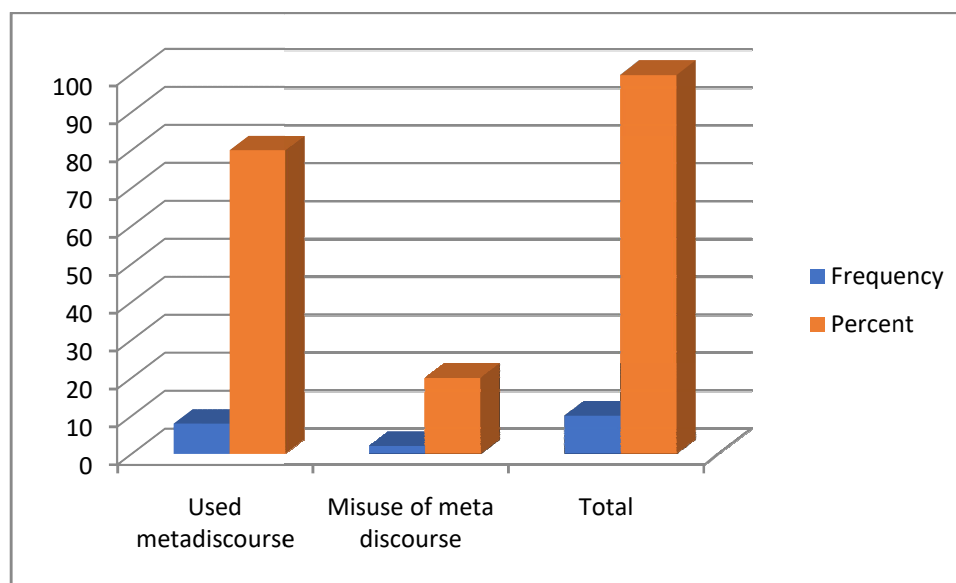
Figure 5. Using Metadiscourse in Essay Writing (Post-Test)

However, it is noteworthy that a minority of students, accounting for 20% of the sample, exhibited a misuse of meta-discourse in their writing despite the instructional intervention. This implies that they may have used meta-discourse markers inaccurately or inappropriately, potentially affecting the clarity or effectiveness of their written work.

Overall, the findings of Figure 5 highlight the positive impact of the three-week instructional period on students' usage of meta-discourse in essay introductions, with a majority demonstrating improvement in their abilities. Nonetheless, the presence of a subset of students who still struggled with the proper application of meta-discourse suggests the need for further support or clarification in their understanding and implementation of these linguistic devices.

3.3.2 Using Both Metadiscourse and Metatextual Items in Essays

Based on the statistical findings presented in Figure 6, the post-test results revealed important insights regarding the usage of meta-discourse and meta-textual elements in the essay writing of the sample.
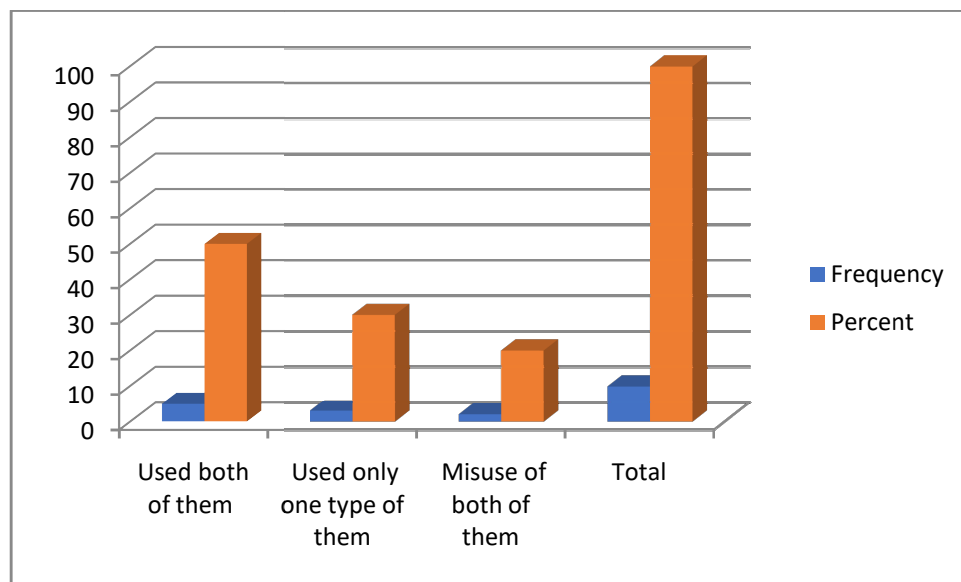

Figure 6. Plot of Both Metadiscourse and Metatextual Items in Essays

Firstly, it was observed that 50% of the sample demonstrated an increased usage of both meta-discourse and meta-textual elements in their essays. This indicates that these writers effectively incorporated a variety of linguistic devices and structural features to enhance coherence,

organization, and reader engagement in their writing. Furthermore, within the same sample, three individuals (30%) exhibited the use of only one type of meta-discourse in their essay writing. This suggests that they focused on employing a specific category or aspect of meta-discourse to enhance their communication, but may not have utilized a diverse range of linguistic devices.

However, it is important to note that 20% of the sample misused meta-discourse, specifically referring to the misuse of punctuation marks in their essays. This implies that these writers may have used punctuation marks inappropriately or ineffectively, potentially impacting the clarity or readability of their writing. Overall, the statistical results presented in Figure 6 highlight the improvement in the usage of meta-discourse and meta-textual elements in the post-test essays. A significant portion of the sample demonstrated a greater incorporation of these linguistic devices, while a smaller subset utilized only one type of meta-discourse. However, there was a notable proportion that still struggled with the appropriate use of meta-discourse, particularly in relation to punctuation misuse

4.0 Discussion of Results

The analysis conducted during the pre-test phase revealed variations in the frequency of different metadiscourse markers in students' writing. The statistical analysis encompassing Figure 1 to Figure 4 indicated that only 50% of the sample incorporated metadiscourse or metatextual elements in their essays. Notably, the majority of students employed metadiscourse primarily in the introductions of their essays(Hyland, 1999).

However, the statistical analysis conducted during the post-test phase demonstrated a notable improvement in the learners' writing when compared to the pre-test results, this is in line with the report of Pearson and Abdollahzadeh, (2023) along with Nikbakht and Miller, (2023). This indicates that the instructional intervention focusing on the use of metadiscourse positively impacted the students' academic writing performance, as evidenced by Sun and Wang, (2020) and buttressed in Figure 5 and Figure 6. In the post-test, a significant 80% of the student sample exhibited a higher level of writing proficiency, in contrast to the 50% observed in the pre-test. Based on these findings, the study recommends emphasizing the instruction of good writing practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes, with a specific focus on guiding students in effectively utilizing metadiscourse markers in their essay writing as recommended by several reports (Chandrasegaran, 2013; Keller et al., 2020; Li et al., 2023; Nikbakht & Miller,

2023; Yang et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2020). This intervention has proven beneficial in enhancing students' writing skills and elevating their ability to incorporate metadiscourse elements.

Nonetheless, the implementation of teaching instructions focusing on meta-discourse had a positive impact on the students' writing performance. The post-test results demonstrated a significant improvement, with 80% of the sample exhibiting good writing skills compared to the initial 50% in the pre-test. This suggests that the explicit instruction on meta-discourse effectively enhanced the students' understanding and application of these linguistic devices, leading to improved academic writing outcomes.

The study's recommendation emphasizes the importance of incorporating instructions on good writing practices, specifically highlighting the use of metadiscourse, in EFL classes(Teng, 2016). It is worth noting that the study's findings are specific to the sample and context in which the research was conducted. However, the recommendation to prioritize instruction on good writing practices and meta-discourse can be applied more broadly in EFL settings. By integrating explicit instruction, modeling, practice opportunities, and feedback, instructors can support students in developing their writing skills and mastering the effective use of metadiscourse markers(Hosseinpur & Kazemi, 2022; Teng, 2016; Yang et al., 2023).

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

The statistical analysis of the results of the pre-test and post-tests showed that:

1.Many of EFL students do not use meta-discourse properly in their academic writings.

2. The majority of students mostly use meta-discourse in the introductions of their articles.

3.Good teaching instructions have a positive impact on students' performance of meta-discourse in academic writing.

The findings of this study possess the practical implications for English language teaching and learning in Sudanese institutions. By identifying the areas where students struggle with metadiscourse, educators can design targeted instructional interventions to support students in improving their academic writing skills. Furthermore, the study contributes to the development of writing materials and curricula that address the specific needs of EFL students in Sudan.

In summary, this research examines the efficacy of metadiscourse usage in academic essay writing among EFL undergraduate students at Sudanese institutions. By conducting a case study, the study seeks to shed light on the patterns, strengths, and weaknesses of metadiscourse usage by students and provide insights into instructional strategies that can enhance their academic writing skills. The findings of this research add to the existing literature on metadiscourse in the EFL context and have practical implications for English language teaching and learning in Sudanese institutions.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study recommends that:

1. Instruction on using meta-discourse in academic writing in EFL classes should be enhanced to help students write essays that reflect the proper use of metadiscourse.

2. Students should be aware of their success in writing tasks, which need to be enhanced through the use of linguistic elements.

When instructors identify students who struggle with meta-discourse markers, they can provide additional support and clarification through various strategies such as:

i.   Explicit instruction: Instructors can dedicate specific class sessions or activities to explicitly teach meta-discourse markers. They can explain different types of meta-discourse, provide examples, and discuss their functions and appropriate usage. This instruction can include interactive discussions, exercises, and practice opportunities for students to apply their understanding.

ii. Modeling and analysis: Instructors can model the effective use of meta-discourse markers in their own writing or through examples from texts. By analyzing and discussing these examples together with students, instructors can help them identify the purpose and impact of different meta-discourse markers.

iii. Scaffolded practice: Instructors can design scaffolded activities that gradually guide students through the process of incorporating meta-discourse markers. This can involve providing sentence starters, templates, or guided prompts that encourage students to use meta-discourse appropriately. As students gain confidence, the scaffolding can be gradually reduced to promote independent use.

By implementing these strategies, instructors can provide additional support and clarification to students who struggle with meta-discourse markers, helping them improve their understanding, usage, and incorporation of metadiscourse in their writing.When providing personalized feedback on students' usage of meta-discourse markers, here are some effective approaches instructors can consider the following:

i. Highlight specific instances: Identify specific sentences or paragraphs where students have used meta-discourse markers and provide feedback directly on those instances. This allows students to see concrete examples of their own work and understand how their usage can be improved.

ii. Explain the purpose and impact: Clarify the purpose and intended impact of different meta-discourse markers in the context of the students' writing. Help them understand how specific markers contribute to coherence, reader engagement, or rhetorical effectiveness.

iii. Offer alternative phrasing: Suggest alternative phrasing or examples to demonstrate how certain meta-discourse markers can be employed more effectively. This helps students see different possibilities and encourages them to experiment with different linguistic devices.

By providing personalized feedback on students' usage of metadiscourse markers, instructors can guide them towards enhancing their writing skills and developing a stronger command of these linguistic devices.

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