

# **A corpus-based error analysis of metadiscourse markers: In case of Japanese learners**

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## **Abstract**

This study reports on the results of a corpus-based error analysis of metadiscourse markers used by Japanese learners. Our primary aim was to offer guidance for teaching metadiscourse markers by investigating essays written by Japanese learners that an English-speaking proofreader reviewed. The current study indicates that the native English proofreader did not always correct learners' overused and underused metadiscourse markers but instead made more corrections in certain metadiscourse markers. This led to the conclusion that it is difficult if not impossible for English-speaking teachers to correct learners' metadiscourse markers.

## **1. Introduction**

The advancement of learner corpus studies has revealed learner English, including metadiscourse markers (Granger, 1998). In English writing classes for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, metadiscourse markers such as *first*, *for example*, and *as a result* are called “transitions,” “link words,” or “connectors” (Oi, Uemura, & Mary, 2011). Metadiscourse markers make texts consistent and logical, and they facilitate readers' comprehension of the propositions, the development of texts, and a writer's position toward invisible readers. They do not affect propositional content but serve as a lubricant in a text (Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993). Therefore, metadiscourse

can be defined as “discourse about discourse” or “communication about communication” (Hyland, 2005; Vande Kopple, 1985; Williams & Bizup, 2016). It is important for learners to know not only what a writer discusses but also how he or she conveys his or her message (Connor & Mbaye, 2002; Kobayashi & Yamada, 2008). In argumentative writing, which is commonly practiced in society; for example, editorials, the writing section of TOEFL and TOEIC<sup>1</sup> Speaking & Writing, a variety of metadiscourse markers are exploited. Therefore, many researchers have investigated metadiscourse markers in academic writing and in learners’ essays, then indicated their various characteristics, both among different disciplines and between native English speakers and non-native speakers (Ädel, 2006; Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004).

The development of computer technology makes it possible not only to determine which words learners significantly overuse or underuse but also to show different overused and underused words used by those with first languages other than English. However, the application of such findings to actual teaching has yet to be fully realized, specifically regarding corrective feedback of L2 writing. In general, writing teachers correct their students’ essays, or request students to rewrite them, by referring to a model essay. Although Tono, Satake, and Miura (2014) investigated how corpus-based information actually helped in revising different types of lexico-grammatical errors in compositions in English as a foreign language, there is little application of corpus research to corrective feedback of L2 writing with a focus on metadiscourse markers. Ishikawa (2012) conducted one of a handful of existing corpus-based studies on EFL learners’ rewriting essays. He compared three kinds of revisions: native speakers’ proofread writing, learners’ model-based rewriting, and learners’ corpus-based rewriting; his aim was to show how close or distant these types of rewriting are from the learners’ original writing or the native English speakers’ writing. He concluded that a native

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1 TOEFL and TOEIC stands for the Test of English as a Foreign Language and the Test of English for International Communication respectively and they are operated by Educational Testing Service (ETS).

speaker's direct correction of the learners' writing is not as effective as having learners rewrite their essays while referring to a model essay. However, several points remain unclear; for example, though Ishikawa indicated statistically outstanding words against the reference corpus—keywords—in these rewritings before and after revision, learners' misuse of metadiscourse markers was not categorically clarified.

The main reason for fewer applications of corpus study of metadiscourse markers to corrective feedback is that it is difficult to identify metadiscourse markers as errors. As Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) and James (1998) have indicated, it is not easy to define errors or to clearly distinguish between grammaticality and acceptability or between absolute errors and dispreferred errors. The non-native likeness, or lack of idiomaticity of learners' production is based on more subjective and stylistic judgments that move beyond a review of grammatical errors. Moreover, errors at the discourse level are more difficult to identify than at the clausal level (Lennon, 1991). Despite such difficulties, this study attempted to identify metadiscoursal errors by reconstructing samples that would have been produced by native English speakers, that is, by examining learner' essays corrected by a native English proofreader (cf. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005)).

It should be noted that learners' errors suggest an essential step toward the mastery of a target language. Moreover, typical types of errors vary according to the learners' developmental stages and therefore errors can prove a benchmark for identifying the process of language acquisition (Izumi, 2017). Learners' errors should be regarded as developmental signs, not just a deviance from the target language. However, the fact is that errors cannot be identified unless we compare them with a "normative" language, that is, native speakers' language. As many researchers have indicated that EFL learners' non-native likeness is due to the misuse of metadiscourse markers, explicit or implicit teaching of metadiscourse markers is needed.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Aims and research questions**

It is debatable whether learners' different uses of metadiscourse markers from native English speakers are errors, but by investigating how a native English proofreader approaches Japanese learners' metadiscourse markers in argumentative writing, this study aims to provide insights to teaching metadiscourse markers. This research will address the following research questions:

- (1) What kind of error type is most or least frequent among Japanese learners at different levels?
- (2) What metadiscourse markers were most and least corrected, depending on learners' proficiency levels?
- (3) Does a native English proofreader's correction of metadiscourse markers work out?

### **2.2. Data**

This investigation selected essays with a TOEIC score from NICE (the Nagoya Interlanguage Corpus of English) Version 3.2. NICE includes argumentative essays written by Japanese undergraduate and graduate students. Japanese participants were required to write about one of three writing topics, such as education, money, and sports, with a one-hour time limit and without using dictionaries; the participants did have access to a spell-checker.

To investigate the relationship between Japanese learners' English proficiency and their developmental stage, Japanese university students' essays were divided into three categories, according to their TOEIC scores. See each corpus size in Table 1:

Table 1: Data employed in this study<sup>2</sup>

	High	Middle	Low
TOEIC score	830–990	600–770	330–550
No. of essays	7	36	23
Tokens (No. of words)	6,315	10,649	2,373

As our learner corpora vary, raw frequency was normalized per 100,000 words and was statistically compared.

As a native speaker's sample, the current research used Japanese learners' essays corrected by a proofreader. In NICE, there are not all but 107 essays which were corrected by a professional native English proofreader. The proofreader, a Canadian editor in her thirties, has more than five years of professional experience. She was required to make minimum corrections to the NICE participants' essays, working sentence-by-sentence to make the content more accurate and the prose more natural. Japanese students' use of metadiscourse markers were compared with hers.

### 2.3. Hyland List of metadiscourse markers

Metadiscourse markers vary in shapes and functions. Table 2 shows the so-called Hyland List, the taxonomy of metadiscourse markers based on the functions (Hyland, 2005; Hyland & Tse, 2004).

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<sup>2</sup> Because not all Japanese learners' files include the score of TOEIC, I made most of the essays with a TOEFL score by converting the TOEFL score into the TOEIC score, based on the formula:  $\text{TOEIC score} \times 0.348 + 296 = \text{TOEFL PBT score}$ . This formula used to be found on the official ETS website.

Table 2: Hyland List

	Category	Functions	Examples
Interactive category	Transitions	express relations between clauses	<i>in addition, but, and, because, so</i>
	Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	<i>first, second(ly), third(ly), finally</i>
	Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	<i>noted above, see Fig. in Section 2</i>
	Evidentials	refer to information from other texts	<i>According to X, Z states</i>
	Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings	<i>e.g., such as, in other words</i>
Interactional category	Hedges	withhold commitment and open dialog	<i>might, perhaps, possible, about</i>
	Boosters	emphasize certainty or close dialog	<i>in fact, definitely, in is clear that</i>
	Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to propositions	<i>important, interesting, unfortunately</i>
	Self-mention	explicit reference to author(s)	<i>I, we, my, me, our</i> (excluding readers)
	Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader	<i>you, we</i> (including readers), <i>must, should</i> , imperatives and questions

Note. Based on Hyland (2005) and Hyland and Tse (2004), revised by the author.

Transitions and frame markers have several subcategories, as shown in Tables 3 and 4:

Table 3: Subcategories of transitions

Subcategory	Functions	Examples
Addition	add arguments	<i>and, furthermore, moreover</i>
Comparison	compare and contrast arguments and evidence	<i>similarly, on the other hand, however</i>
Consequence	draw conclusions or counter arguments	<i>therefore, so, though, nevertheless</i>

Table 4: Subcategories of frame markers

Category	Functions	Examples
Sequencing	sequence parts of the text or to internally order an argument	<i>first, next, then</i>
Label stage	label text stages	<i>to sum up, overall, in sum</i>
Announce goal	announce discourse goal	<i>my purpose is..., there are several reasons why...</i>
Shift topic	indicate topic shifts	<i>well, now</i>

With the Hyland List, Kobayashi (2009) investigated the metadiscourse markers in writing by Japanese junior and senior high school and university students (see also Kobayashi and Yamada (2008)) and showed that self-mentions were the most frequent, followed by transition markers, frame markers, and engagement markers. Evidentials and hedges were less frequent in the Japanese corpus than in English natives'. However, Miki (forthcoming), who examined the Japanese university students' metadiscourse markers, had similar but slightly different results. Japanese learners at all levels revealed an overuse of engagement markers (e.g., questions, modals of obligation) and self-mentions (e.g., *I*), which suggests a highly involved writing style. Unlike Kobayashi (2009), hedges were also overused, especially at the low and middle levels, but in most cases, hedges were misused. For example, hedges such as *I think* downplayed the role of engagement markers such as *should* and *have to*. This conflicting writing style likely contributes to a reader's misunderstanding. Like Kobayashi (2009), *because* and *so*, which were the most frequent among the low and middle-level college students, were frequently found at a sentence-initial position. It is expected that native English proofreaders would correct the Japanese learners' overuse and underuse of metadiscourse markers.

## 2.4. Annotations

Although the Hyland List includes about 500 metadiscourse markers, the list is not complete. Metadiscourse markers can take on such a variety of forms that the Hyland List cannot cover every metadiscourse marker. Also, some linguistic items can be classified

into several metadiscourse categories depending on the context. For example, the first-person plural *we* can be categorized into self-mentions or engagement markers depending on whether the meaning is exclusive or inclusive.

Toward resolving the problems inherent to the Hyland List, metadiscourse markers were first contextualized and annotated with special tags (e.g., <EM>should</EM>). Next, I compared learners' errors in using metadiscourse markers with native English speakers' corrections and classified the discrepancies into four types of errors: addition errors (in short, "add"); omission errors ("oms"); selection errors ("sel"); and order errors ("odr").<sup>3</sup> Addition errors occur when native English speakers add a metadiscourse marker that learners did not use. In contrast, omission errors refer to cases in which English-speaking proofreaders deletes the learners' metadiscourse marker. Selection errors are made when English-speaking writers select another metadiscourse marker than the learners' originals. Order errors occur when a metadiscourse marker is moved to another position in the correction of the learners' writing. In the opening tag of metadiscourse markers, these errors are enclosed with double quotations after *cr=*, which stands for correction (Izumi, Uchimoto, & Isahara, 2004; Tono, 2013). For example, when a native speaker corrected a learner's *so* into *therefore*, that is to say, when he or she selected *therefore* instead of *so*, the annotation of *so* is given as follows:

- (1) *So* I think doing sports is good... [JPN505 Middle]
- (2) *Therefore* I think doing sports is good... [Correction]
- (3) <TR\_Consequence\_sel cr="Therefore">So</TR\_Consequence\_sel><SEM>I</SEM><HE>think</HE> doing sports is <AM>good</AM> ...

It should be noted that this study targets only metadiscourse markers and not lexicogrammatical errors.

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3 For the taxonomy of grammatical errors, see Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Japanese learners' most and least frequent errors of metadiscourse

First, we will consider what kind of errors Japanese learners made in metadiscourse, depending on their levels of proficiency. It can be expected that the less proficient the writers were, the more errors there were in their production, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: The frequencies of error types at three levels

Error types	Upper level		Middle level		Lower level		Total	
	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	%
Selection errors	9	142.5	100	939.1	74	3,118.4	183	61.8
Omission errors	4	63.3	33	309.9	24	1,011.4	61	20.6
Addition errors	3	47.5	23	206.6	17	716.4	42	14.2
Order errors	0	0.0	1	9.4	9	379.3	10	3.4

Note. RF = raw frequency, NF = normalized frequency per 100,000

Table 5 can be visualized into Figure 1:

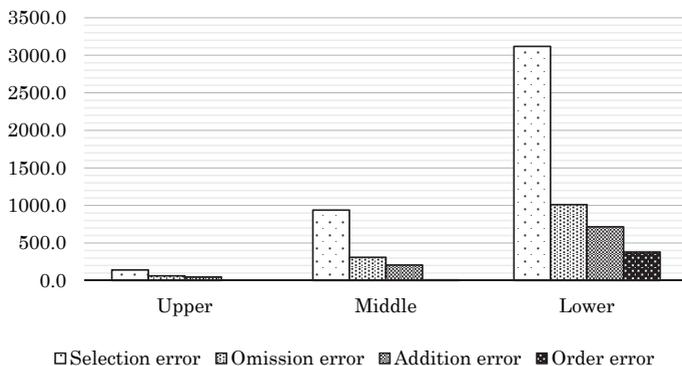


Figure 1: The normalized frequencies of four types of errors

Results indicate that selection errors were dominant across the proficiency levels, followed by omission errors and addition errors, though a few order errors of metadiscourse markers were also found. Figure 1 also shows that as proficiency increases, the number of errors decrease, which aligns with Ishikawa (2012).

Selection errors mean that the English-speaking proofreaders selected another metadiscourse marker than what a learner originally selected. Table 6 indicates that Japanese learners most frequently made errors in selecting transition markers.

Table 6: The frequency of corrected metadiscourse markers and error types

Metadiscourse categories	Addition error		Omission error		Selection error		Order error	
	RF	%	RF	%	RF	%	RF	%
Transition markers: Consequence	7	16.7	11	18.0	50	27.3	2	20.0
Transition markers: Comparison	5	11.9	8	13.1	56	30.6	0	0.0
Transition markers: Addition	2	4.8	15	24.6	20	10.9	3	30.0
Engagement markers	5	11.9	9	14.8	13	7.1	0	0.0
Hedges	6	14.3	7	11.5	14	7.7	0	0.0
Frame markers: Sequencing	5	11.9	1	1.6	5	2.7	5	50.0
Self-mention	6	14.3	3	4.9	3	1.6	0	0.0
Attitude markers	5	11.9	2	3.3	5	2.7	0	0.0
Boosters	0	0.0	1	1.6	6	3.3	0	0.0
Code glosses	1	2.4	1	1.6	6	3.3	0	0.0
Frame markers: Label stages	0	0.0	2	3.3	2	1.1	0	0.0
Frame markers: Announce goals	0	0.0	1	1.6	2	1.1	0	0.0
Endphoric markers	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.5	0	0.0
Frame markers: Shift topic	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
total	42	100.0	61	100.0	183	100.0	10	100.0

The highest frequency of “transition markers: consequence” was caused by the overuse of sentence-initial *so*, which is unique to Japanese learners compared with other Asian learners of English (Ishikawa, 2013). This overused metadiscourse marker was the English-speaking proofreader’s target of correction. Also, sentence-initial *but* and *and*, which are overused transition markers of comparison and addition, respectively, are another target of correction. See (4) to (6).

- (4) <TR\_Consequence\_sel crr="therefore">So</TR\_Consequence\_sel><SEM>I</SEM><HE>think</HE><EM>it is <AM>important</AM> to</EM> have both money and what enjoys ourselves. [JPN541 Middle]
- (5) <TR\_Comparison\_sel crr="However">But</TR\_Comparison\_sel><EM>we</EM> need money to live. [JPN597 Low]
- (6) <FM\_Sequencing>Third</FM\_Sequencing>, everyone have become happy when they watch the game and player's performance. <TR\_Addition\_sel crr="Moreover">And</TR\_Addition\_sel> everyone have excited when they play sports. [JPN547 Low]

Biber, Johansson, Leech, and Conrad (1999) have demonstrated quantitatively that *but* and *and* in the beginning of a sentence are characteristic of conversation. As Altenberg and Tapper (1998) and Crewe (1990) have indicated, an inferable relation from the text does not have to be explicitly marked. That is, a high frequency of connectors in a text does not necessarily improve cohesion; rather, overuse and misuse of connectives can reduce the comprehensibility of the text. In fact, some were deleted as an omission error, which means that they are not necessary.

Table 7 gives us the distribution of errors of metadiscourse markers at different levels of proficiency.

Table 7: The frequency of corrected metadiscourse categories at three levels

Metadiscourse category	Upper level		Middle level		Lower level		Total	
	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	%
Transition markers: Consequence	3	47.5	33	319.3	34	1,432.8	70	23.6
Transition markers: Comparison	6	95.0	37	347.5	26	1,095.7	69	23.3
Transition markers: Addition	2	31.7	20	206.6	18	758.5	40	13.5
Engagement markers	2	31.7	16	150.2	9	379.3	27	9.1
Hedges	1	15.8	21	197.2	5	210.7	27	9.1
Frame markers: Sequencing	1	15.8	7	65.7	8	337.1	16	5.4
Self-mention	0	0.0	4	37.6	8	337.1	12	4.1
Attitude markers	0	0.0	6	56.3	6	252.8	12	4.1
Boosters	1	15.8	1	9.4	5	210.7	7	2.4
Code glosses	0	0.0	5	47.0	3	126.4	8	2.7
Frame markers: Label stages	0	0.0	2	18.8	2	84.3	4	1.4
Frame markers: Announce goals	0	0.0	3	28.2	0	0.0	3	1.0
Endphoric markers	0	0.0	1	9.4	0	0.0	1	0.3
Frame markers: Shift topic	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0

Note: RF = raw frequencies, NF = normalized frequencies per 100,000

In the subcategory of transition markers, comparison was the top metadiscourse category corrected at the upper and middle levels, while the subcategory, consequence was most frequently corrected at the lower level due to the higher frequency of *so*. However, there were fewer errors of engagement markers such as the overused *should* and questions and self-mentions such as the first-person singular. This suggests that unlike the stylistic error of transition markers, the proofreader did not regard most of these metadiscourse markers as errors, even at the stylistic level. The correction of engagement markers was made for brevity or due to the wrong word choice, as in:

- (7) <FM\_Sequencing>Second</FM\_Sequencing>, <EM>we</EM> can have a fun  
 <TR\_Addition>and</TR\_Addition><EM\_oms cr="“”>we</EM\_oms> can be  
 relaxed by doing sports.[JPN505\_Middle]
- (8) These plays don't <EM\_sel cr="“require”>have to</EM\_sel> use money.

In (7) *we* was deleted after *and* because it is the same subject of the previous clause. These kinds of errors of engagement do not affect learners' involvement style.

In sum, the native English proofreader seems to correct the selection errors of transition markers for stylistic reasons. For example, the proofreader selected a more formal expression, *however*, instead of a transition marker of comparison, sentence-initial *but*. The same is true of a transition marker of consequence, sentence-initial *so* and a transition marker of addition, sentence-initial *and*; they were changed into *therefore* and *moreover*.

#### 4. Discussion

We have seen what the professional English-speaking proofreader corrected about metadiscourse and how, with respect to two points: error types and metadiscourse categories dependent on learners' proficiency levels. The result clearly shows the highest frequency of the selection error and the transition markers, though previous studies indicate Japanese learners' significantly overuse of metadiscourse markers are not transition markers but engagement markers and self-mentions. In particular, transition markers are more concerned with the text, while engagement markers and self-mentions have more to do with the relation between writers and readers. While Crismore et al. (1993) and Vande Kopple (1985) have called the former "textual metadiscourse" and the latter "interpersonal metadiscourse," Hyland (2005) labeled them as the "interactive" and "interactional" dimensions, respectively. According to Hyland (2005), the writer uses interactive metadiscourse markers, attempting to organize propositional information in ways that target audience will find coherent and convincing. With this kind of metadiscourse markers, the writers can also shape and constrain a text to meet the needs of a particular audience, developing arguments to lead readers to the writer's preferred interpretations and goals. In contrast, the writer employs the interactional metadiscourse markers to interact with invisible readers by explaining the message. By exploiting such

metadiscourse, the writer's views emerge in texts and get readers to respond to unfolding stories. This metadiscourse also helps writers to control the level of personality in texts as they recognize and connect to others, involving readers in their argument and guiding them to writers' interpretations.

The English-speaking proofreader corrected interactive metadiscourse markers, such as sentence-initial *so*, *but*, and *and*, which help to guide the reader through the text but were misused in academic prose. However, she seems to hesitate to correct interactional metadiscourse markers, such as engagement markers (e.g., *should* and inclusive *we*) and self-mentions (e.g., *I* and exclusive *we*), because they relate more to interaction with imagined readers and include writers' views and evaluations, which is beyond the scope of proofreading.

From these results, where metadiscourse markers are concerned, it is difficult to depend on English teachers to give effective corrective feedback to students. Ishikawa (2012), who investigated Japanese university students' essays corrected by English natives, remarks that we tend to consider native English speakers' or teachers' proofreading or correction as absolutely correct; the fact is, however, that the validity of their proofreading is open to question, except for obvious errors such as misspellings. It seems true of the correction of metadiscourse markers.

## 5. Concluding remarks

Before concluding this study, I should point out three limitations. First, as only a single proofreader corrected learners' essays, her idiolect and personal judgment might affect the reproduction. Second, the proofreading was deployed sentence by sentence, so that it would be quite difficult to make corrections over sentences, resulting in the lower frequency of order errors. Lastly, unlike selection errors and omission errors, any proofreader would have difficulty adding metadiscourse markers to texts that were not employed in the original essays because it also means adding in new interpretations and evaluations.

To conclude, we have seen that a native English speaker does not always correct the overuse of metadiscourse markers; most overused self-mentions and engagement markers survive their proofreading review. Our proofreader may consider that such overused metadiscourse markers neither affect acceptability nor grammaticality or that correcting them would run to excess in terms of the limits of proofreading. From this, unlike obvious grammatical errors, it is difficult to expect English teachers to give effective corrective feedback to students concerning metadiscourse markers.

The recent research of metadiscourse in L2 writing emphasizes the effect in “prior” writing instructions on metadiscourse markers, that is, explicit teaching of them “before writing” rather than after. This can help EFL learners to promote their pragmatic understanding (Allami & Serajfard, 2012; Alward, Mooi, & Bidin, 2012). Moreover, Ishikawa (2012) demonstrated that corpus-based explicit teaching or instructions are pedagogically beneficial. This study is a small piece of research but has addressed a limitation of native English speakers’ correction of metadiscourse and suggested the perspective of explicit teaching of metadiscourse markers before writing rather than corrective feedback after writing.

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