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Do learners rely on metadiscourse markers? An exploratory study in English, Catalan and Spanish

Sofía Martín-Laguna^a, Eva Alcón^{a*}

^aUniversitat Jaume I, Castellón de la Plana 12071, Spain

Abstract

This study explores to what extent multilingual learners' production of metadiscourse markers (MMs) may be related in three languages present in their school curriculum, and how instructional input influences their choices and production of accurate forms. Twenty-two secondary school students wrote opinion essays in English, Catalan, and Spanish. MM use was analysed following Hyland's (2000) classification. Our results showed that the same categories of MMs were used in the three languages, although there was more variety in Catalan and Spanish. Moreover, learners mostly relied on the forms present in the input, and 90% of these forms were accurately used in the three languages.

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Keywords: metadiscourse; discourse markers; teaching metadiscourse; teaching discourse competence.

1. Theoretical background

In the last decades, Hymes' notion of communicative competence has been applied to language learning, contributing to the emergence of models of communicative competence (e.g. Alcón, 2000; Celce-Murcia, 2007). In these models, "discourse competence" is seen as the structuring competence, since it is "where everything else comes together: It is in discourse and through discourse that all of the other competencies are realized" (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000, p. 16).

Although not explicitly stated in the models of communicative competence proposed to date, one of the core properties of discourse is its ability to refer to itself, that is, it involves a metadiscourse dimension. Taking a broader

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +34-964729865; fax: +34-964 72 92 61.

E-mail address: martins@uji.es

perspective, Hyland (2005, p. 16) argues that metadiscourse does not only include a textual dimension but also an interpersonal or pragmatic dimension, since it “describe[s] not only how we organize our ideas, but also how we relate to our readers or listeners”. Thus, among the existing models of communicative competence, we have followed the one proposed by Alcón (2000) (see Table 1) because it does not limit the concept of discourse competence to textual competence, but it takes a more holistic view, relating it to linguistic competence (the knowledge of all levels in the language system in addition to grammar), textual competence and pragmatic competence (the use of language in context).

Table 1. Communicative competence (Alcón 2000, p. 262).

Discourse competence	Linguistic competence
	Textual competence
	Pragmatic competence
Psychomotor abilities and competences	Listening
	Speaking
	Reading
	Writing
Strategic competence	Communication strategies
	Learning strategies

Most research on metadiscourse has focused on adult academic discourse (see, for example, Hyland, 2005 and the special issue by Ädel & Mauranen in 2010). However, very few studies have examined metadiscourse in teenager written production. Among these, it is important to mention the research conducted by Martín-Úriz et al. (2005), who analysed metadiscourse in the English written production by secondary school students, and Moreno (2005), who examined the influence of different types of input and feedback in teenagers’ production of textual metadiscourse. These studies have focused on one language, not considering the participant’s linguistic background. Taking into account that research has shown that multilingualism enhances metalinguistic and metapragmatic awareness (Alcón, 2012; Herdina & Jessner, 2002; Jessner, 2006; Safont-Jordà, 2005), and the existence of a potential transfer between languages in the Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 2005), the Dynamic Model of Multilingualism (Herdina & Jessner, 2002), and “Focus on Multilingualism” (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011, 2013; Cenoz, 2013), in this study we would like to go a step further and determine how the production of textual metadiscourse is related in the three languages of instruction by multilingual learners of English, and the role of instructional input.

Our research questions are as follows:

- To what extent do learners use MMs in their L1, L2 and L3 written production?
- If so, do they rely on instructional input?

2. Methodology

2.1. Research environment and participants

This exploratory study was conducted in a bilingual region of Spain, the Valencian Community, where Catalan and Spanish are co-official languages taught at school, being English the foreign language taught in most schools. The participants were 22 students in the first year of non-compulsory secondary school (primero de bachillerato), speaking either Spanish or Catalan as their mother tongue. Their English level ranged between the levels A2-B1 of the CEFR, as established by the standardized Quick Oxford Placement Test (UCLES, 2001).

2.2. Data collection and analysis

The data were collected in December 2012 as part of a larger project. The learners were asked to write three opinion essays, one in English, one in Catalan, and one in Spanish, about three topics related to the school.

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