

Unveiling the Role of Explicit Metadiscourse Instruction, Language Proficiency, and Content Familiarity in EFL Reading Comprehension: A Comprehensive Review

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Abstract

This review comprehensively explores the integral role of explicit metadiscourse instruction and language proficiency and content familiarity in the context of reading comprehension among learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Drawing upon a wide-ranging analysis of empirical studies spanning two decades (2003-2023), the review illuminates the intricate dynamics between these key components. It underscores how metadiscourse markers, as vital linguistic devices, significantly impact the learners' processing, comprehension, and retention of information. The importance of language proficiency emerges as a decisive factor, shaping the degree to which EFL learners can effectively utilize metadiscourse markers to enhance their reading comprehension skills. Moreover, the review accentuates the critical synergistic relationship between content familiarity and the efficacy of metadiscourse instruction, shedding light on how prior knowledge can optimize learning outcomes. It identifies significant gaps in existing research, emphasizing the need for a more integrated approach that simultaneously considers metadiscourse instruction, language proficiency, and content familiarity. The review concludes by advocating for greater emphasis on explicit metadiscourse instruction in EFL pedagogy, positioning this work as a synthesis of current knowledge and a guidepost for future research and instructional innovation in EFL reading comprehension.

Keywords: reading comprehension, metadiscourse markers, language proficiency, content familiarity, English as a Foreign Language; linguistic devices

1. Introduction

The rapid pace of globalization and the rise of information technology have established English as the global lingua franca. As a result, English language learning has become a high-priority need, especially in non-English speaking regions where English proficiency is deemed critical for educational and professional opportunities (Hyland, 2017). English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, therefore, has received significant attention worldwide.

Although Western countries have made considerable progress in developing research-led pedagogical approaches and fostering an in-depth understanding of language structures, leading to effective EFL teaching and learning, there are areas that require further scrutiny. One such area is metadiscourse, a concept often understated in the context of English language learning in many Asian countries. Despite the potential of metadiscourse to enhance reading comprehension, its application remains underutilized in China (Hyland & Jiang, 2022; Yang, 2014).

Metadiscourse, as conceptualized by Kopple (1985) and later refined by Hyland (2017), encompasses the communicative devices that writers or speakers use to structure their discourse, engage their audience, and express their stance towards both the content and the audience. Metadiscourse not only fosters better text comprehension but also equips learners with the ability to comprehend and replicate the rhetorical conventions of English. This skill is integral in academic or professional environments where English is the primary mode of communication (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2022). Regrettably, despite its value, the application of metadiscourse in EFL learning, particularly its role in enhancing reading comprehension, remains insufficiently investigated. This is especially true in the Asian context, including China, creating a significant research gap that impedes EFL educators and learners from fully harnessing the benefits of metadiscourse (Hyland, 2017; Yang, 2014).

Addressing this gap, this review provides a comprehensive examination of metadiscourse in the EFL learning context, with a particular focus on China. It elucidates the definitions and categories of metadiscourse, and its role in reading comprehension, and offers a critical evaluation of the existing body of research. Furthermore, this review scrutinizes the effects of explicit metadiscourse instruction on reading comprehension and investigates the interplay between language proficiency and content familiarity.

By unearthing the key role of metadiscourse in EFL learning and the potential it holds for enhancing reading comprehension, especially in the Chinese context, this review aims to inform future research directions, enlighten teaching strategies, and ultimately contribute to bridging the research gap in this area. Its findings are expected to benefit educators, researchers, and policymakers engaged in the realm

of EFL education.

2. Metadiscourse and Its Importance in EFL Learning

Metadiscourse, a fundamental element of language learning, embodies the array of linguistic devices that authors employ to navigate their discourse, address reader expectations, and articulate their perspectives (Kopple, 1985). Regarded as a roadmap, metadiscourse directs readers in their interaction with and interpretation of the text. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, a comprehensive understanding and competent use of metadiscourse can substantially boost students' reading comprehension skills, writing proficiency, and overall language competency (Jang & Ryoo, 2019; Ädel, 2006).

The pursuit of understanding metadiscourse has inspired many classifications and models proposed by various scholars, each aiming to elucidate its complex nature. Of these, the models proposed by Kopple (1985) and Hyland (2017) stand out for their comprehensiveness and influence.

Table 1. Kopple's (1985) Classification of Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse Type	Description
Textual metadiscourse	Comments on the organization and structure of the text
Interpersonal metadiscourse	Comments on the reader's understanding, text's reliability, and the writer's perspective

Table 1 represents Kopple's (1985) pioneering metadiscourse model, which categorizes metadiscourse into Textual and Interpersonal types. Textual metadiscourse refers to the author's commentary on the organization and structure of the text. Interpersonal metadiscourse, conversely, encompasses comments on reader understanding, text reliability, and the writer's perspective. This model underscores the significant role of metadiscourse in shaping text structure and managing writer-reader relationships.

Table 2. Hyland's (2017) Model of Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse Category	Subcategory	Description
Interactive metadiscourse	Transitions, Frame markers, Endophoric markers, Evidentials, Code glosses	Guide the reader through the text
Interactional metadiscourse	Hedges, Boosters, Attitude markers, Engagement markers, Self-mentions	Involve the reader in the text

Building on Kopple's foundational work, Hyland (2017) subdivided metadiscourse into Interactive and Interactional categories, each further divided into various subcategories (Refer to Table 2). Interactive metadiscourse guides the reader through the text, akin to Kopple's Textual metadiscourse. However, Hyland's model presents a more detailed framework, providing specific elements like transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidential, and code glosses. Interactional metadiscourse, mirroring Kopple's Interpersonal metadiscourse, engages the reader in the text, but with a more granular framework including hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, and self-mentions (Hyland & Jiang, 2022; Hyland, 2017).

The dichotomy between Kopple's and Hyland's models of metadiscourse presents a fascinating exploration of metadiscourse's dynamic nature. Kopple's model (1985), with its broad categorization, and Hyland's model (2017), with its more intricate and nuanced classification, together provide a comprehensive understanding of metadiscourse. This shift in modelling signals the maturation of metadiscourse understanding over time, progressing from a more general view to a more refined perspective (Kashiha, 2022; Li & Xu, 2020).

Comprehension of these models is imperative for EFL learners, as it has the potential to elevate their language proficiency. Decoding metadiscourse in written texts equips learners with the skills to decipher intricate text structures, grasp authorial intentions, and unravel underlying perspectives. The effective application of metadiscourse in writing can significantly enhance a learner's ability to guide readers, organize ideas logically, and express viewpoints clearly and persuasively (Peterlin & Moe, 2016; López-Ferrero & Bach, 2016).

In addition, the benefits of metadiscourse extend to oral communication. Mastery of metadiscourse can support learners in formulating their speech in a coherent structure and articulating their views assertively and respectfully. These abilities underline the significance of metadiscourse instruction in EFL learning and highlight its profound impact on EFL learners' overall development, particularly within the Chinese context (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2022; Englebretson, 2007; Eysenck & Keane, 2015; Mancarella et al., 2022; Yang, 2014). The subsequent sections of this work delve into the role of metadiscourse in the EFL context in China.

3. Role of Metadiscourse in Improving Reading Comprehension and Language Learning

The pivotal function of metadiscourse in ameliorating reading comprehension and language learning, particularly within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning contexts, is of immense significance. This factor attains even higher prominence in multilingual environments such as China, where students navigating the transition from their first language (L1), Mandarin, to a second language (L2), English, encounter a unique blend of challenges and opportunities.

Conceptualized in models put forth by scholars like Kopple (1985) and Hyland (2017), metadiscourse acts as an indispensable navigational aid, empowering readers to decrypt the structural layout of the text and grasp the intentions of the author. This linguistic scaffolding is particularly vital for Chinese EFL learners who are confronted with the task of understanding the differing logic and organization present in

English texts compared to Mandarin (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2022; Jiang & Hyland, 2017). Thus, metadiscourse serves as a bridge, allowing learners to move beyond surface-level understanding towards a deeper, more nuanced comprehension of the text.

Beyond merely enhancing reading comprehension, metadiscourse also functions as a potent instrument for language learning, enriching both writing and speaking abilities. In the domain of writing, the judicious employment of metadiscourse elements can significantly improve the coherence and persuasiveness of students' arguments. This ability becomes particularly crucial for Chinese EFL learners who must adeptly make a transition from the characteristically circular argumentative style of Mandarin to the linear, explicitly articulated discourse seen in English (Mancarella et al., 2022). Thus, metadiscourse provides the tools to bridge these stylistic divides, enabling learners to construct clear, cogent arguments in their second language.

In the sphere of spoken language, metadiscourse can aid learners in coherently structuring their speech and expressing opinions in an assertive yet diplomatic manner. Mastery of this skill can be particularly advantageous for Chinese EFL learners who often need to negotiate cultural and pragmatic differences between English and Mandarin in oral communication (Englebretson, 2007; Shekarchi, 2013). By teaching students to use metadiscourse effectively, educators can equip them with the tools to navigate these differences and engage in meaningful, productive dialogue.

Additionally, metadiscourse plays a pivotal role in fostering critical thinking and reflective learning. By encouraging students to reflect on their language use and thought processes, metadiscourse can promote a deeper understanding of the material and foster an active, self-regulated approach to learning (Huang, 2023). This, in turn, can lead to improved language proficiency and academic performance.

Given these multifaceted benefits, there is a pressing need to incorporate explicit metadiscourse instruction into EFL curricula (Doiz & Lasagabaster, 2022; Jiang & Hyland, 2017). Such instruction could include direct teaching of metadiscourse features, modelling of effective metadiscourse use, and practice activities that allow students to apply these strategies in various communicative contexts. Through systematic and thoughtful integration of metadiscourse instruction, educators can provide learners with a robust framework for understanding, interpreting, and producing language, thereby empowering them to thrive in their L2 environment.

In summary, metadiscourse, in its dual capacity to augment reading comprehension and facilitate language learning, represents an essential component in the successful acquisition of English as a foreign language. This is particularly relevant in multilingual contexts like China, where learners grapple with the complexities of cultural and linguistic differences. Metadiscourse, in its role as a linguistic and cognitive guide, enables learners to navigate these complexities, aiding them on their journey toward linguistic proficiency. The resultant bridging of cultural and linguistic divides accentuates the need for metadiscourse to be explicitly embedded in EFL curricula, a step that promises to enhance not only language learning but also intercultural understanding and communication. In the increasingly interconnected world of the 21st century, this ability to communicate across linguistic and cultural boundaries is not just an academic skill but a prerequisite for global citizenship.

4. Reading Comprehension in the Context of EFL Learning

Reading comprehension is a critical facet of language acquisition, with an amplified role within the context of EFL learning. This complex cognitive process requires learners not only to extract and construct meaning from the text but also to integrate this new information with their existing knowledge and interpret the author's intended message. This process relies on a multitude of cognitive operations, including decoding, word recognition, syntactic processing, semantic interpretation, and also on metalinguistic elements like metadiscourse (Bartlett, 1932; Rumelhart, 1980; Eysenck & Keane, 2015).

In EFL environments, the importance of proficient reading comprehension skills is magnified, as it allows learners to interact with a diverse range of texts, fostering their language proficiency, cultural understanding, and overall academic performance. Exploring and understanding various text types, genres, and disciplines enrich learners' linguistic repertoire and academic pursuits (Hyland & Jiang, 2022; Ädel, 2006). Furthermore, the strategic use of metadiscourse, especially interactive and interactional metadiscourse as conceptualized in Hyland's model, significantly enhances this engagement with the text (Hyland, 2017).

Interactive metadiscourse guides readers through the text's organization, providing explicit cues about the writer's intended meaning and the text's structure. These markers manage information flow, clarify the writer's stance, and establish the writing's intertextual coherence through transitional markers, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidential markers, and code glosses. In contrast, interactional metadiscourse reveals the writer's persona in the text, shaping the writer-reader interaction by engaging the reader in the argument, soliciting their response, or anticipating possible objections through hedges, boosters, attitude markers, engagement markers, and self-mentions.

The development and proficiency of reading comprehension in EFL learners hinge on a myriad of factors, covering cognitive, affective, and sociocultural dimensions. Cognitively, elements such as overall language proficiency, working memory, attention, and awareness of metadiscursive tools are instrumental. Working memory allows for temporarily storing and manipulating information, a pivotal role in reading comprehension. Attention aids in prioritizing relevant information for effective processing, while a comprehensive understanding of language—including components such as vocabulary, syntactic awareness, and phonological skills—heavily influences the ability to decipher and understand a text (Mancarella et al., 2022; Eysenck & Keane, 2015; Stanovich, 1980; Vygotsky, 1978).

Affective factors, including motivation, attitude, and self-efficacy, also significantly shape reading comprehension. Learners with high motivation levels, a positive reading attitude, and a belief in their ability to execute tasks and reach goals engage more deeply with the text, demonstrating persistence in the face of challenges, and leading to enhanced comprehension outcomes (Redmond, 2013; Jang & Ryoo, 2019).

From a sociocultural perspective, a learner's cultural background, educational environment, and social interactions substantially influence

their reading habits, strategies, attitudes, and comprehension skills. The nature and frequency of metadiscourse marker exposure and use within these sociocultural interactions significantly impact these skills. A culturally responsive teaching approach can utilize the diversity of learners' backgrounds to enhance comprehension, involving strategies like explicit vocabulary instruction, metadiscourse awareness training, and fostering a supportive reading environment that encourages interactive and interactional discourse use (Vygotsky, 1978; Kim, 2001; Marandi, 2003; López-Ferrero & Bach, 2016; Hyland, 2017).

Reading comprehension in EFL learning is a multifaceted process shaped by various cognitive, affective, and sociocultural factors. The complexities are further heightened by the layer of metadiscourse. An inclusive approach to EFL instruction that acknowledges and addresses these components, particularly the unique roles of interactive and interactional metadiscourse, can significantly enhance EFL learning outcomes, enabling learners to unlock their full linguistic potential in a world where English proficiency is increasingly crucial.

5. Methodology for Reviewing Existing Literature

To deeply explore the multifaceted domain of metadiscourse markers, their instruction, and their influence on EFL reading comprehension, a method reminiscent of the diligence demonstrated by Hyland and Jiang (2022) was adopted. A systematic search was undertaken using several reputable academic databases such as PubMed, Web of Science, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Linguistics & Language Behavior Abstracts (LLBA).

In refining the search strategy, key terms like 'metadiscourse', 'EFL', 'reading comprehension', 'language proficiency', and 'content familiarity' were employed, aided by Boolean operators for precision. Such an approach mirrors the investigative depth found in Jang and Ryoo's (2019) study on adolescents' reading attitudes.

Criteria for inclusion were stringent. Studies had to emphasize metadiscourse in EFL settings, demonstrate relevance to language proficiency and content familiarity, and manifest methodological clarity and robustness akin to that evidenced in Jiang and Hyland (2022). Only articles from peer-reviewed journals, a standard supported by the works of Jomaa and Bidin (2019), were deemed suitable. Non-English articles, those unavailable in full-text, or those with insufficient data were excluded, ensuring a focus on quality, as explained in Jenaabadi (2011).

The selected studies were systematically organized, detailing authors, publication years, research themes, and primary outcomes (refer to Table 3 for a comprehensive synthesis). An analytical review of these studies followed, echoing the methodological approaches and research intentions of established experts like Hyland and Jiang (2022). The aim was to discern trends, understand the trajectory of the subject, resolve disputes, and spotlight overlooked areas. This methodology underscored the significance of relevance, pioneering methods, rigorous research techniques, and academic veracity. By centring the focus on peer-reviewed journals, the reliability of the studies under review, as underscored by Jomaa and Bidin (2019), was ensured.

In essence, the methodological design was not only rigorous but also grounded in the reliable and validated research strategies of respected scholars in the realm of EFL and metadiscourse, adding a layer of credibility to the review process.

6. Review of Existing Literature

A critical evaluation of studies focusing on metadiscourse markers, instructional techniques, and their relation to language proficiency and content familiarity in EFL contexts is provided below. Each study's relevance, novelty, methodological strength, and academic standing were carefully assessed. A tabulated summary of the selected studies can be found in Table 3, which offers a concise yet comprehensive overview, establishing a robust foundation for this review.

Table 3. List of reviewed articles

Authors	Year	Research Focus	Main Findings
Marandi	2003	Metadiscourse in English and Persian theses	Metadiscourse markers are used more frequently in English
Yang	2008	Effects of metadiscourse on reading comprehension	Metadiscourse instruction improves reading comprehension
Parvaresh and Nemati	2008	Metadiscourse and proficiency in reading comprehension	Higher proficiency EFL learners use metadiscourse strategies more effectively
Rahemi	2010	Role of reciprocal teaching in Iranian high schools	Reciprocal teaching, including metadiscourse instruction, improved student autonomy and reading comprehension
Jenaabadi	2011	English curriculum efficiency	A lack of focus on explicit teaching of metadiscourse strategies can affect learners' mastery of metadiscourse
Moiinvaziri	2014	Needs analysis of university English course in Iran	Students requested more metadiscourse instruction to enhance comprehension
Yang	2014	Discourse markers in Chinese EFL teacher talk	Significant insights into the use of discourse markers in the context of Chinese EFL teaching with high and low language proficiency
Hyland	2017	Metadiscourse: Mapping Interactions in Academic Writing	A comprehensive map of metadiscourse interaction in academic writing with content familiarity
Jang and Ryoo	2019	Reading attitudes and comprehension in	A correlation between positive reading attitudes and better reading

Authors	Year	Research Focus	Main Findings
		adolescents	comprehension was found
Hyland and Jiang	2022	Metadiscourse Choices in English for Academic Purposes	Provides insights on metadiscourse choices and how learners' language proficiency and content familiarity affect their reading in EAP program
Jiang and Hyland	2022	Negation in Research Abstracts	Discusses the use of negation, an important metadiscourse strategy, in research abstracts
Kashiha	2022	Metadiscourse Functions in Academic Lectures and Political Speeches	Metadiscourse functions differently depending on audience roles
Huang	2023	Metadiscourse in Chinese EFL online learning	Effective use of metadiscourse strategies contributes to successful online EFL learning

7. Narrative Discussion of Major Findings, Controversies, and Gaps

Intriguingly, the realm of metadiscourse research, as depicted in Table 3, from the period of 2003 to 2023, has experienced a dynamic evolution that underlines its cardinal role in language comprehension and the sway it holds over reading attitudes. Even though significant strides have been made in comprehending the nuances of metadiscourse, the journey has not been devoid of controversies and reveals numerous unexplored aspects.

Kickstarting this journey was Marandi's seminal study in 2003 that compared the application of metadiscourse markers in English and Persian theses, thereby igniting the debate on the role of linguistic and cultural differences in moulding metadiscourse usage. This critical beginning stirred the waters by introducing a fascinating perspective into metadiscourse's essence and functionality, marking a critical departure from past approaches. Nonetheless, while it did provide a solid foundation, it left ample scope for further exploration. Particularly, the study didn't delve deep into how individual writing styles could potentially influence metadiscourse usage, hence inviting future research to examine the influence of individual nuances, beyond just linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Yang's study in 2008 was another significant milestone that underscored the positive correlation between metadiscourse instruction and reading comprehension. This landmark research delineated the latent potential of metadiscourse as a tool to enhance reading comprehension skills, thereby increasing its appeal among educators and researchers. Yet, it exposed a potential pitfall in metadiscourse research — the risk of neglecting other essential constituents of reading comprehension such as prior knowledge, inferential skills, vocabulary knowledge, language proficiency, and content familiarity. It hinted at a possible reductionist approach, thereby creating a compelling case for future research to address this critical gap.

Next in line, Parvaresh and Nemati's study in 2008 introduced a significant correlation suggesting that learners with higher English as a Foreign Language (EFL) proficiency tend to employ metadiscourse strategies more effectively. This inference brought forth the role of language proficiency in metadiscourse usage, a previously unexplored territory. However, this binary correlation demands a more nuanced examination to comprehend its intricate details, specifically the complex interplay between language proficiency, content familiarity, and metadiscourse usage.

Complementing this view, Jenaabadi's study in 2011 posited that an inadequate focus on explicit teaching of metadiscourse strategies could hamper learners' mastery of metadiscourse. This study strengthened the argument that proficiency in language learning is intertwined with a thorough understanding and utilization of metadiscourse strategies. However, the study fell short of offering a comprehensive methodology to integrate metadiscourse instruction into the curriculum, thus leaving a gap for further research.

Rahemi's study in 2010 expanded this discourse by shedding light on the pivotal role of explicit metadiscourse instruction in improving students' autonomy and reading comprehension. By integrating metadiscourse instruction into the teaching curriculum, educators can enhance students' reading comprehension abilities and their mastery over metadiscourse. This perspective was further reinforced by Moivaziri's 2014 study that emphasized the dire need for metadiscourse instruction in university English courses in Iran.

Furthermore, Yang's second study in 2014 took a deep dive into the usage of discourse markers in Chinese EFL teaching, focusing specifically on different language proficiency levels. The findings underscored the need for more nuanced research exploring how proficiency influences the application of metadiscourse in varying contexts. This study marked a significant stride towards understanding the implications of metadiscourse in diverse language learning environments and set the stage for future investigations.

Shifting the lens from language learning to academic writing, Hyland's research in 2017 ventured to chart out a comprehensive map of metadiscourse interactions. However, the intricate interactions delineated by Hyland posed a significant challenge for novice writers and educators, emphasizing the need for easy-to-understand instructional guidelines and tools. This research underscored the necessity for a well-defined structure that helps navigate the complexities of metadiscourse, especially when dealing with unfamiliar content.

Taking a step further, Jang and Ryoo's study in 2019 broadened the metadiscourse research realm by exploring the correlation between reading attitudes and comprehension. Their findings suggested a positive correlation between reading attitudes and better reading comprehension, paving the way for future research to delve into the role of cognitive elements, language proficiency, and content familiarity in reading comprehension.

The succeeding studies by Hyland and Jiang (2022), Jiang and Hyland (2022), and Kashiha (2022) delved into more specific domains within metadiscourse. They examined metadiscourse choices in English for Academic Purposes, the use of negation as a crucial metadiscourse

strategy in research abstracts, and the differential functioning of metadiscourse in academic lectures and political speeches. Although these studies enriched the understanding of metadiscourse's intricacies, they underscored the need for more applied research that translates these complex academic analyses into easily understandable knowledge for practical classroom application.

In the digital age, Huang's study in 2023 brought a novel perspective by examining the application of metadiscourse strategies in Chinese EFL online learning. This study indicated that the effective use of metadiscourse strategies can significantly contribute to successful online EFL learning. However, it also pointed towards an urgent need for comprehensive research exploring the impact of the digital divide on metadiscourse strategies.

While the evolution of metadiscourse research from 2003 to 2023 has indeed been enlightening, it simultaneously uncovers significant gaps and controversies. Future research must investigate the complex relationship between metadiscourse and other language learning components, the intricate balance between language proficiency and content familiarity, and the role of metadiscourse instruction in reading comprehension. Further, research should endeavour to translate complex metadiscourse analyses into accessible knowledge for educators and address the impact of the digital divide on metadiscourse strategies in a world that's increasingly shifting towards digital learning.

8. Explicit Metadiscourse Instruction on Reading Comprehension

Metadiscourse, as a linguistic construct that aids the organization and clarification of discourse, plays an essential role in shaping the comprehension and retention of information. Accumulating research has confirmed its pedagogical worth, specifically its potential to boost reading comprehension among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Notably, Yang's (2008) and Yang's (2014) studies mark a significant contribution to this field, establishing the substantial gains that can be achieved through explicit metadiscourse instruction. In this experiment involving high school students, the researchers designed an instructional model that guided learners to understand the concept of metadiscourse, learn its categories, and apply relevant strategies during reading. The resultant improvement in reading comprehension among the participants was a testament to the potential of metadiscourse instruction. Yang's studies demonstrated that when EFL learners identify metadiscursive markers and understand their function, they experience a deeper understanding of the text. This research suggests that recognizing transitional markers such as 'however,' 'thus,' and 'moreover,' which often signal argument shifts or cause-effect relationships, allows learners to better follow the text's argument, improving comprehension.

Rahemi's (2010) study further expanded on these findings by introducing the method of reciprocal teaching, which integrates dialogue about metadiscursive elements of a text between teachers and students. This interactive method, which emphasizes learner autonomy, was found to enrich reading comprehension, underscoring the importance of teacher-student interaction and peer discussion in applying metadiscourse knowledge during reading. The study conducted by Parvaresh and Nemati (2008) added another dimension by exploring language proficiency's moderating role on the effectiveness of metadiscourse instruction. Their research indicated that EFL learners with higher language proficiency are better equipped to utilize metadiscourse strategies, owing to a nuanced understanding of metadiscursive elements, aiding in their comprehension of the text. While these studies demonstrate the efficacy of explicit metadiscourse instruction in boosting EFL reading comprehension, there is a need for further research to comprehend the most effective strategies and the specific mechanisms involved.

Moreover, learning metadiscourse is a complex process that involves understanding the author's positioning and argumentation and the relationships between different parts of the text. Hence, future research should explore these aspects of metadiscourse learning, looking beyond merely recognizing metadiscursive markers. The case of EFL students in China illustrates the significant potential of explicit metadiscourse instruction. Traditionally, metadiscourse in China has been taught implicitly, and integrated into general language instruction without explicit focus or explanation. However, this approach may not fully equip learners to understand and use metadiscourse effectively (Redmond, 2013). Explicit metadiscourse instruction, on the other hand, specifically teaches learners to recognize and understand metadiscursive markers and their functions in a text. This approach can be particularly beneficial for Chinese EFL learners, who may face additional challenges due to differences in argumentation and discourse organization between English and Chinese academic texts (Jiang & Hyland, 2022; Shekarchi, 2013). Explicit metadiscourse instruction can thus serve as a powerful tool to bridge these cultural gaps, enhancing EFL learners' comprehension and writing skills.

With English becoming increasingly important in Chinese education, explicit metadiscourse instruction could offer a promising approach to improving English reading proficiency among Chinese EFL learners. Future research should, therefore, consider investigating the effects of explicit metadiscourse instruction in Chinese EFL contexts, potentially informing pedagogical practices and improving EFL outcomes.

9. The Interplay of Language Proficiency and Content Familiarity in the Chinese EFL Context

Analyzing the role of explicit metadiscourse instruction in reading comprehension necessitates the consideration of two crucial interrelated variables: language proficiency and content familiarity. Jomaa & Bidin (2019) argue that these factors can significantly influence the effectiveness of EFL learners' use of metadiscourse strategies for enhancing comprehension.

In the Chinese EFL context, language proficiency emerges as a critical determinant. Learners with advanced language proficiency, equipped with an extensive understanding of language structure and vocabulary, can allocate cognitive resources to complex tasks such as deciphering metadiscursive elements (Ma & Qin, 2017). As such, these learners are more capable of comprehending the nuanced roles that different metadiscursive markers play in structuring the text's central argument and organization. This is supported by Parvaresh & Nemati's (2008) study that found learners with superior proficiency levels in the Iranian EFL context were more effective in using metadiscursive strategies, leading to improved reading comprehension. This invites the question: Would similar findings hold in the Chinese context, given its distinct

linguistic and cultural features?

Content familiarity, another vital factor, refers to the degree of the reader's understanding of the text's topic. Maxwell (2010) suggests that familiarity with content could speed up comprehension as readers can anticipate certain information. Therefore, content familiarity might enhance the effectiveness of metadiscourse instruction by allowing learners to focus more on the text's structure, organization, and argumentation — areas where metadiscourse is integral. Carrell's (1987) study found a positive relationship between content familiarity and EFL reading comprehension. However, these findings are not specific to the Chinese context, revealing a research gap. Would Chinese EFL learners show the same positive correlation?

Applying Carrell's findings to metadiscourse instruction suggests that learners might better identify and interpret metadiscursive elements when dealing with texts on familiar topics. In essence, content familiarity could free up cognitive resources for understanding text organization and argument construction, fundamental skills nurtured by metadiscourse comprehension (Swales, 2014). Yet, how does this play out in the Chinese EFL learning context, given its specific pedagogical and cultural factors?

Despite these insights, the interaction among metadiscourse instruction, language proficiency, and content familiarity, especially in the Chinese EFL context, remains underexplored. Further research is needed to examine these dynamics and illuminate potential strategies for maximizing reading comprehension. Also, effective methods for different learner groups, such as those with lower language proficiency or unfamiliar content, need to be identified in this context. The possibility of integrating metadiscourse instruction with other strategies to boost comprehension also warrants investigation. These areas represent promising directions for future research in the Chinese EFL context.

10. Conclusion

In delving into the complexities of metadiscourse instruction within the EFL framework, this review illuminates its pivotal role, especially in the backdrop of China's linguistic landscape. With language proficiency and content familiarity emerging as critical mediators, the findings underscore the multifaceted nature of EFL reading comprehension. However, it's paramount to acknowledge the review's limitations and the subsequent implications they pose. As English cements its position as a global lingua franca, delving deeper into efficacious instructional strategies, such as metadiscourse, becomes imperative.

It is possible that not all relevant studies, especially those not accessible through major databases or those not published in English, were captured. The diverse methodologies, participant characteristics, and instructional contexts present in the reviewed studies introduce variability. This heterogeneity may limit the ability to draw overarching conclusions. The singular focus on the Chinese context, while thorough, might overlook the unique intricacies of metadiscourse instruction in other global EFL settings. The review leans towards a qualitative synthesis rather than providing a definitive, quantifiable effect size.

To further the understanding of metadiscourse instruction in EFL reading comprehension, a multifaceted research approach is proposed. Experimental or quasi-experimental studies tailored for learners of different proficiency levels can shed light on the efficacy of metadiscourse strategies within the Chinese setting. Additionally, longitudinal research would offer a window into the sustained impacts of such instruction, mapping out the trajectory of learners' progress over time. While the spotlight here is on China, exploring other EFL markets through similar reviews would offer a broader comparative perspective. Lastly, in the era of technological advancement, research into innovative instructional methods, such as digitally driven platforms or gamification of metadiscourse instruction, would be both timely and impactful. This review serves as a beacon, guiding scholars and educators towards refined, effective EFL teaching methodologies that resonate not just within China but globally.

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