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Author(s): Xiaoguang Cheng and Margaret S. Steffensen
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40171358
Accessed: 19/02/2014 22:01

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Metadiscourse: A Technique for Improving Student Writing

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Metadiscourse is a construct that is increasingly important in both composition and reading research. The purpose of this study was to explore, first, how metadiscourse can enhance the writer's awareness of readers' needs and, second, how the use of metadiscourse is related to the quality of the texts that students produce. In this quasi-experimental study, university-level student writers in the experimental class were taught metadiscourse in addition to a process method, while those writers in the control class were taught composition through only a process method. Pre- and post-treatment student papers were analyzed to determine whether metadiscourse usage was different and how the interpersonal, textual, and ideational components of the texts in the two groups were affected. The results of the analysis indicated that the experimental group benefited from instruction about metadiscourse: Students in the experimental group produced essays that received significantly higher grades than those in the control group. Qualitative in-depth analyses of the essays of the experimental students further showed that this improvement can be attributed to the use of metadiscourse markers, which made the texts more accommodating toward readers, and to the strengthening of the ideational as well as the interpersonal and textual meanings of the texts. These results suggest that teaching students to use metadiscourse may be an important way to improve their writing skills.

A persistent problem faces teachers and researchers in composing. Although virtually all universities require undergraduate composition classes, most students do not write effectively even after instruction. Moreover, although composition instruction has been studied intensively, seldom does empirical research clearly elevate one method of instruction over another.

The study we are reporting was organized around the concept of metadiscourse. We felt this would be an effective methodology for university level students taking their first composition course because we believe that many novice writers focus on the product, the written text, and do not pay enough attention to the ultimate goal of writing, communicating with an audience.
Background

Composition is difficult to teach because it is a highly abstract cognitive process. Unlike an activity such as playing baseball, the process of composing is not open to introspection. We cannot analyze how we generate ideas, form these ideas into a logical argument, or realize these ideas and concepts in grammatical sentences and rhetorical patterns. Instructors are not able to describe these processes to their students, although they are able to teach certain rhetorical, structural, and grammatical regularities in the product, the written composition.

The rhetorical goals of composing are fundamental aspects of the task of writing. Some rhetoricians (e.g., Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) propose that all writing is motivated by the intention to persuade—to convince our readers to take certain actions, to adopt our world view, to agree with us and like us. Most writers who have considered their purpose would agree that a primary goal of writing is to communicate with some intended audience. The explicit goal of producing a written text and the implicit goal of reaching an audience are reflected in the two levels of text: Primary discourse provides information about the subject of the text and expands propositional content about a topic. Metadiscourse, a second and a less obvious level, is that part of the text which comments on the text itself or which directs comments to the reader (Williams, 1981). When we write on the level of metadiscourse, we supply cues that help readers organize, interpret, and evaluate the propositional content of the text (Vande Kopple, 1985; Williams, 1981).

Seven Criteria for Successful Text

De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) developed seven criteria for a successful text that suggest the importance of helping students acquire a broad perspective on composition.

The first of these criteria, **cohesion**, refers to the grammatical dependencies within and across sentences, as in “Wash and core six cooking apples. Put the apples in a fireproof dish” (Halliday & Hasan, 1976, p. 3). Analysis of the sentences’ elements at the intersentential level reveals that there is repetition of the word *apples* in the second sentence as well as repetition of the imperative form of three transitive verbs. The use of the definite article *the* in the second sentence depends on the occurrence of the term *apple* in the preceding sentence. At the intrasentential level, transitive verbs are followed by direct objects. *Six* is followed by a noun in the plural. The verb *put* requires a following locative, satisfied by the prepositional phrase *in a fireproof dish.*

**Coherence**, a second text-centered criterion, refers to the knowledge that provides the conceptual undergirding of a text. The concepts and
the relations of the textual world (which the text creates and assumes) must be accessible to both the writer and the reader. No text is completely explicit, but with a satisfactory text, readers share enough background knowledge to be able to make successful inferences and fill gaps.

The five user-centered criteria refer to the communication activity of both the writer and the reader. **Intentionality** and **acceptability** are reciprocal criteria which capture the fact that the writer must intend to produce a cohesive, coherent text that fulfills specific goals. The reader must accept the text as cohesive, coherent, and directed toward these goals.

**Situationality,** another user-centered criterion, refers to the match between a text and the context for which it is intended. De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981, p. 9) illustrate this standard with a traffic sign:

SLOW—CHILDREN—AT PLAY

Because the sign is intended to be read at relatively high rates of speed, it must be telegraphic. And, because it is intended and accepted as a warning about driving conditions in a particular situation, certain information does not have to be mentioned.

**Intertextuality,** a fourth user-centered criterion, captures the fact that how one writes and reads a text depends on knowledge of other texts of that type. Thus if one encounters Dear Bill, a certain set of expectations is elicited based on knowledge of the typical form, content, and goals of a personal letter. On the other hand, Dear William Smith, a common salutation for word-processed solicitation letters, evokes a different set of expectations. Awareness of text types guides successful writers and provides a rationale for writing instruction oriented toward genre.

For a text to be informative, the fifth user-centered criterion, writers must be able to anticipate the amount of information shared by their readers. If the level of **informativity** is too high, the text will be too difficult for the reader.

The text-centered standard of coherence and the user-centered standards of acceptability, situationality, and informativity are clearly related to concepts of audience. Although audience has been recognized as an important component of rhetoric since at least the time of Aristotle, how audience is understood has changed over time. Audience has been considered actual people to whom the text or discourse is addressed. Porter (1992) proposes that this is not a useful heuristic because the actual person and the person as reader may not be the same from a rhetorical standpoint. Reading is a dynamic process, and as soon as reading begins, it affects the reader and changes subsequent interactions with the text. For example, if a professor receives a note couched in imperatives from a student requesting a favor, the professor, as reader, will predictably shift her perspective during the process of reading.
In an attempt to avoid this problem, the concept of an imagined audience was introduced, particularly in pedagogical texts (Crucius, 1989; Ede & Lunsford, 1984; Ward, 1994). This concept is also limiting, however, because few writers have the ability to project themselves into the fictitious world of this audience and write in concordance with that projected situation. The audience has been defined as a textual presence rather than an external presence (Kinneavy, 1971; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969). The implied reader is a reading role embodied in the text. Because the real reader and the implied reader will not be rhetorically identical, the writer must address either one or the other, or alternatively both. An alternation between real and implied audience is one explanation of what happens when a writer consults real readers for feedback during the process of writing (Porter, 1992).

The most recent concept of audience to be proposed is that of the audience as community (Porter, 1992). This perspective blurs the distinction between composer and audience because it proposes that discourse is constrained by topics and styles already established within a group. The writer is no longer privileged because the audience is conceptualized as a dynamic force that shapes the text through collaboration and interaction rather than a passive recipient. Porter suggested that the successful composer

\[
\ldots \text{picks up on conversations quickly and makes a strong contribution. To a great extent, the composer must understand and accept the given topic} \\
\ldots, \text{the mode of logic, the premises, and the tone of the conversation.} \ldots
\]

(p. 81)

with the intention of socializing into the community. The place in which the discourse occurs is defined as the forum.

Unfortunately, students rarely have a clear sense of audience. When students do consider audience at all, it is a real person who gives a perceptible response—a teacher who provides a grade, not someone with whom to create a dialogue. Part of the inability to consider an audience is caused by the failure of most composition classrooms to develop into forums or discourse communities. How to create a forum in the classroom and evoke a sense of audience in student writers is a challenge, but it is one that must be addressed. We now explain how and why we used the concept of metadiscourse as the organizing focus in an introductory composition course to meet this challenge.

Metadiscourse

All language use is a social and communicative engagement that involves two parties, a producer and a receiver. We write to be read, and in order to accomplish this goal, the writer and the reader must work together through the medium of the text. Language considered in its
The macro-functions express informational, social, and personal relationships. Here, language is used as the mediator of role: It allows users to express their personal feelings about the ideational content of their texts and guide the readers in processing propositional content. Options in the textual system have the function of creating texts, which are distinct from strings of words or isolated sentences and clauses. Halliday’s concept of the three functions of language lays the theoretical foundation for metadiscourse. Primary discourse fulfills the ideational function of language; metadiscourse serves interpersonal and textual functions of language (Vande Kopple, 1985).

Vande Kopple (1985) analyzed seven types of metadiscourse, comprising Connectives (first, therefore, but), Code Glosses (for example, i.e.), Illocutionary Markers (to conclude, frankly speaking), Narrators (according to), Attitude Markers (I find it surprising), and Commentary (Dear friend, you will find it surprising). Also included are Validity Markers, which are further subcategorized into Hedges (maybe, might, it is possible that) and Emphatics (it is true, certainly). Connectives, Code Glosses, and Illocutionary Markers are considered textual markers within a Hallidayan framework and create texture by making text organization explicit. The remainder are interpersonal markers which develop the relationship between the reader and the writer and text.

Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993) used Vande Kopple’s system for classifying metadiscourse, modifying it somewhat. They retained the two major types, textual and interpersonal, but reorganized his categories into textual metadiscourse, consisting of Textual Markers (Logical Connectives, Sequencers, Reminders, and Topicalizers) and Interpretative Markers (Code Glosses, Illocutionary Markers, and Announcements), and interpersonal metadiscourse consisting of Hedges, Certainty Markers, Attributors, Attitude Markers, and Commentary.

We used Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen’s typology of metadiscourse for our analysis. This system also includes punctuation marks (except periods) and typographical marks (such as underlining, capitalization, circled words, arrows, and numbers) as metadiscourse items because these marks can signal text glosses and clarifications as well as certainty and attitude. For example, a colon, a comma, an underlining, parentheses, or brackets can function as Code Glosses when they signal a following explanation. Exclamation marks, underlining, and capitalization can be used to show the writer’s attitude and are categorized as Attitude Markers. This system also codes the following as metadiscourse:
questions that are later answered by the writer in the text; rhetorical questions that readers must answer themselves by actively making inferences and by accessing their prior knowledge about the question topic; tag questions used for politeness and maintaining interpersonal relations with the readers; asides and comments to the reader that interrupt the propositional content; and the first person plural pronoun “we” that refers to both writer and reader. All of these are Commentaries, and they function to draw the reader into a writer-reader relationship.

Metadiscourse markers are one of the factors that make a text “reader friendly.” Vande Kopple (1985) suggested that exploring metadiscourse would increase students’ sensitivity to the needs of their readers, making them better able to meet those needs, and thus changing writer-based prose (Flower, 1979) into reader-based prose. Furthermore, he argued that understanding metadiscourse would make writers more aware of the truth value of the propositional content and turn them into ethical writers who pay more attention to reflecting any doubts they may have rather than simply asserting that their statements are true.

Considerable attention has been paid to metadiscourse in written texts (Crismore, 1989; Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993; Crismore & Vande Kopple, 1988; Steffensen, 1992; Vande Kopple, 1985). However, very few studies have looked at variations in how student writers incorporate metadiscourse into a text. Intaraprawat (1988) and Intaraprawat and Steffensen (1995) have shown that appropriate use of metadiscourse plays an important part in a successful text. When student writers lack an overall knowledge of rhetorical conventions, they do not know how to make good use of these interpersonal and textual functions of language. This often leads them to produce writer-based prose in which the propositional content is not effectively conveyed, thus lowering the overall quality of their texts.

The Present Study

In this research we explored teaching metadiscourse to college level student writers to help them create interpersonal and textual meanings that would reinforce the ideational meaning of the text. As far as we know, there has been no attempt to organize an entire college level composition course around the constructs of metadiscourse, although many of the categories of metadiscourse are covered in composition instruction for both first-language and second-language students and are included in composition textbooks (Williams, 1981). The first question we studied was whether it was possible to teach metadiscourse so that students would understand the concept, the functions, and the markers and then value it enough to use it in their own texts. The second question we investigated was whether such a technique would result in better texts.
Method

Participants

Two intact classes of freshman composition at a large Midwestern university participated in this study. Each of the classes consisted of 23 native-born students, with 13 males and 10 females in the Control Class (CC) and 8 males and 15 females in the Experimental Class (EC). All participants completed the course and the experiment.

Procedure

Both classes were taught using the process method, in which the emphasis is on the process of writing—the generation of ideas and the development of logical and effective presentation—with considerable time and attention spent on peer review and feedback. Students in process composition classes typically have a textbook that comprises a selection of articles from journals, newspapers, and magazines on various social issues such as abortion, gun control, drugs, and capital punishment. These textbooks are a resource that students use to choose and read about their own essay topics instead of responding to a specific assignment from their instructor. Reading about the topic and discussing it gives writers more information about their subject, possible responses to their position from their anticipated audience, and feedback on what is and is not effective in their argument. The textbook used in the two classes was The Contemporary Reader (Goshgarian, 1990).

During the sixteen-week semester, each class wrote 6 papers, spending about three weeks on each paper. Their three-week objective was to produce an essay on a topic that would be suitable for publication in the student paper. The class schedule followed was:

1. When students were assigned a position paper, they each read an article on a controversial subject from their textbook, a magazine, or newspaper and decided what their own position was on the topic. They then wrote a summary and response to that article in their journals, a method also commonly used in process classrooms. These response journals gave students an opportunity for free writing, and they served as a source of ideas for their formal writing assignments.

2. Working in groups of four, students presented their articles and explained whether they supported or rejected the author's position. The discussion that followed generated information and clarified the student's feelings about the topic. It brought out possible support for and objections to the writer's position that could be addressed or conceded in the proposed essay.

3. At the third, and sometimes the fourth class session, each student presented a first draft to the working group. Responses to the draft
4. After revision at home, the students again presented their papers to their groups for a finer level of revision, including whether the organization of the paper was effective; whether the paragraphs were well structured and with good transitions; whether there was an appropriate introduction; and whether there was a convincing conclusion that tied into the introduction but was not repetitious. The purpose of this session was to revise at a more local level and, ultimately, to increase the strength of the arguments and the effectiveness of the essays.

5. After further revision, the final in-class session was devoted to proofreading and polishing, with attention to local matters of spelling, punctuation, and grammar. In this session, the working groups also considered whether their members had responded to the issues raised earlier and, if not, sought explanations why they had not.

In the EC, the students did not attend exclusively to the propositional content of the writer's message. Instead, they were asked to consider the reader's perspective and needs as a way of improving writing skills. We accomplished this in a variety of ways.

First, rather than reading essays from The Contemporary Reader exclusively, we asked the EC students to read six theoretical articles on text analysis and metadiscourse. The first chapter of Halliday and Hasan's *Cohesion in English* (1976), "Introduction," presents cohesion as a semantic relation that exists within the text. Their fifth chapter, "Conjunction," describes conjunction as a semantic relation rather than a structural one. Williams (1981), in *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace*, introduces the concept of metadiscourse and classifies three common types—Hedges and Emphatics, Sequencers and Topicalizers, and Attributors and Narrators. The most difficult article, Lautamatti's (1978) "Observations on the development of the topic in simplified discourse," distinguishes topical materials from non-topical materials and compares topical development in authentic discourse with that in simplified discourse. Her category of non-topical material corresponds closely to metadiscourse. Crismore's article (1983), "Metadiscourse: What it is and how it is used in school and non-school science texts," offers a typology of metadiscourse based on two general categories of language functions, the informational and the attitudinal. Finally, Vande Kopple's (1985) "Some exploratory discourse on metadiscourse" proposes another typology of
metadiscourse and discusses the implications of metadiscourse for composition teaching.

EC students read these articles in place of some of the articles read by the CC students from The Contemporary Reader. Thus, they were getting less information about the content but more about rhetorical structure than the CC students were. After each reading, the EC students were asked to summarize and synthesize the article to increase their level of comprehension and to allow the instructor to identify the problems in comprehension. Class discussion followed, with special attention paid to problems reflected in the student summaries.

Both groups of students completed exercises. The CC students worked on problematic structures at the level of the essay, the paragraph and the sentence. For example, they discussed how to write a good topic sentence, how to structure paragraphs effectively, how to develop an effective argument, what was involved in a good introduction and conclusion, and how to write transitions. EC students completed discrete and holistic exercises. The discrete exercises were sentences or paragraphs, taken out of context, which contained inadequate and inappropriate uses of metadiscourse features. Students were asked to identify and correct misused forms. Holistic exercises are especially important because the aim of studying metadiscourse is to be able to integrate it into written texts. Essays produced by professional writers (including some from their textbooks) and essays written by the students were analyzed for successful and unsuccessful uses of metadiscourse in authentic texts. The students' final activity, and the most important, was applying their acquired knowledge of metadiscourse in their writing, with the help of peer editing and peer responses.

Both groups did the same amount of work but with a different focus. The CC focused on the content of their essays and traditional textual structures while the EC focused on the rhetorical functions of writing—explaining difficult forms to the audience, redundantly encoding the text structure, expressing their own opinions, and interacting directly with their readers.

The Instructor

The senior author taught both classes. This had the advantage of controlling important extraneous variables, such as personality, accent, teaching style and so forth. It had the possible disadvantage of teacher expectations with respect to the two methods, which could have affected student outcomes. However, any bias in favor of the experimental method of teaching metadiscourse was perhaps offset by the problems that tend to occur the first time a new method is used. In this case, after reading the student summaries, we found that the essay by Lautamatti was too technical and abstract for a freshman level course,
and the readings from Halliday and Hasan were marginally so. Furthermore, Cheng had taught four semesters and two summer sessions—long enough to have worked out any pedagogical problems in teaching the CC composition program. His teaching techniques and style in the CC reflected his experience, in contrast to those in the EC.

Data Collection

Two sets of data were collected and analyzed statistically. For the first data set, both groups wrote a 75-minute in-class essay during the first week of the semester (IC-Pre) and a final essay at the end of the semester (IC-Post). The assignment was the standard diagnostic prompt used in the Department of English and consisted of writing a one-draft paper responding to an article from The Contemporary Reader (Goshgarian, 1990), which was read before class. The writing prompt for the IC-Pre follows:

In her article Plug-In Drug, Winn observes that through the changes it has made in family life, television emerges as the important influence in children’s lives today (p. 174). Based on your experience and observations, to what extent is Winn correct? Should we be concerned? Why? In an essay of about 500 words, explain and illustrate your answer. You should organize your ideas so that they will make sense to the reader. Correct grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation are also important.

The prompt for the IC-Post dealt with Cohn’s article, “‘Nuclear Language and How We Learned to Pat the Bomb:’”

In her article “‘Nuclear Language and How We Learned to Pat the Bomb,’” Cohn argues that language affects our view of reality. Do you agree or not? In an essay of about 500 words, explain and illustrate your answer using your personal experience, your observations of others, and/or your reading. You should organize and illustrate your ideas so that they make sense to the reader. Correct grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation are also important.

The second data set was comprised of the third draft of the first position paper (3-Pre) written during the first two weeks of the semester, which was compared with a fourth draft (4-Post) written during the final week of the semester. This assignment, like all the other papers, went through the standard multiple-draft composing process, with the third draft turned in for grading. During the final week, the students of both groups were asked to pick up the paper again and do a fourth draft for another grade. This design, like the IC-Pre and the IC-Post, allowed us to examine the performance before and after the instruction on metadiscourse and assess the effectiveness of our method. The difference between the two designs was that the IC-Pre and the IC-Post were spontaneous writing while the 3-Pre and the 4-Post involved the normal revision process.
Analysis

All papers were graded by three experienced composition instructors who had originally participated in the required grading workshops that are held regularly in the department. These workshops include discussions and analysis of scored exemplars in order to achieve consistency across graders. The graders knew nothing about the experiment or the students involved. They were not familiar with the concept of metadiscourse, nor had they read any of the articles on it. It would be surprising, however, if they were not familiar with such rhetorical forms as conjunctive adverbs (which fall in the category of Connectives), or if they did not recognize the importance of making one’s writing effective and considerate by providing an occasional definition (Code Glosses), by indicating the sources of information (Attributors), or by directly involving the reader in the interaction with a rhetorical question (Commentaries).

To assure a high level of intrarater as well as interrater consistency for this study, instructors were chosen who had taught for an average of four academic semesters. They all worked alone, assigning a letter grade to each individual paper. The three grades they assigned to each paper were converted to numbers using the following scale: A = 4.00, A− = 3.66, B+ = 3.33, B = 3.00, B− = 2.66, C+ = 2.33, C = 2.00, C− = 1.66, D+ = 1.33, D = 1.00, D− = 0.66, F = 0. The average of the three grades for each paper was used in the statistical analyses.

Results

The scores on the pre- and posttests were analyzed using the SPSS/PC + t-TEST procedure. There was no significant difference between the two groups on either the IC-Pre (CC M = 1.87, EC M = 1.84, t = −.22, p = .828) or the 3-Pre (CC M = 1.72, EC M = 1.92, t = 1.44, p = .157).

As predicted, on the posttests the groups differed: The mean scores on the IC-Post were CC = 1.95, EC = 2.43, t = 3.05, p < .004. For the 4-Post, the mean scores were CC = 2.04, EC = 2.55, t = 3.33, p < .002. These results indicated that the different treatments resulted in higher scores in the EC.

The EC mean scores changed significantly between the IC-Pre (1.84) and the IC-Post (2.43), t = −4.73, p < .001. The CC scores on the IC-Pre (1.87) and the IC-Post (1.95) did not change significantly, t = −.61, p = .548 (see Figure 1).

On the 3-Pre and the 4-Post, both groups showed significant gains: EC 3-Pre = 1.92, EC 4-Post = 2.55, t = −8.49, p < .001; CC 3-Pre = 1.72, CC 4-Post = 2.04, t = −3.87, p < .001. The mean gain for the EC was .62 and for the CC, .32 (see Figure 2). However, the greater gain by the EC suggests that the experimental treatment was beneficial.
The different proportions of men and women in the two classes raised the issue of whether our results could be explained simply by the fact that all the women learned more about writing than did the men. If this were the case, the EC would have shown a greater increase simply because it had proportionally more women. To explore this possibility, the scores of the men and women in the two classes were analyzed. The average letter grades for the semester for the EC men and women were exactly the same, 2.5, just barely a B-. In the CC, the average score for men and women was above a C, but not a C+, with the men scoring .1 more than the women when the grades were converted to numbers, 2.2 and 2.1 respectively. It therefore seems unlikely that what we found was simply a sex difference, a conclusion supported by the fact that two of the EC students who improved the most were men.

**Analysis of Metadiscourse in Four Compositions**

In an effort to further understand the differences in the two classes, we did an in-depth study of four papers, two from the CC and two from the EC, to see what changes occurred in the use of metadiscourse between 3-Pre and 4-Post. The four students all had received a grade of C on the 3-Pre. On the 4-Post, E1 increased her grade to A-, and E2 increased his grade to B+. C1 also increased his grade to a B+, while C2 improved her grade to a C+. We tabulated the density levels of metadiscourse items per T-unit, the percentage and the proportions of the
interpersonal and textual metadiscourse and their subcategories, and errors in metadiscourse in all the papers.

Density Levels
The two EC writers differed from the two CC writers in the density level of metadiscourse items per T-unit and the proportion of the major categories and the subcategories of metadiscourse. On the 3-Pre, the density levels of metadiscourse items per T-unit varied greatly from subject to subject: E1 had a density of 1.94; E2, 1.47; C1, 1.06; and C2, 1.17. For the 4-Post, the range was smaller: E1 had a density of 1.22; E2, 1.28; C1, 1.28; C2, 1.15. We speculate that one reason the two EC writers' scores improved to A- and B+ was that in the 3-Pre, E1 underused metadiscourse, and E2 overused it. In the fourth draft, both moderated their usage. C1 also increased his use of metadiscourse.

The two pairs differed in the use of major metadiscourse categories in the final revisions. The two EC writers used more textual metadiscourse than the two CC writers (40.8% vs. 27.1% respectively). Conversely, the CC used more interpersonal metadiscourse than the EC (72.9% vs. 59.2%). The higher proportion of textual markers in the EC texts suggests that the EC writers were more concerned with organizing and interpreting their propositional content and in this way were making their texts more considerate and accessible to their readers. The higher proportion of interpersonal features in the CC texts suggests that the CC
writers were trying to reach their readers at a personal level and were attending less to the cohesion of their texts. The EC writers were increasing the cohesion and lowering the informativity (increasing the readability) of their texts, while the CC writers were increasing the intentionality and attempting to influence the acceptability of their essays.

Interpersonal and Textual Categories

An analysis of the textual subcategories shows that CC writers used more Hedges than Certainty Markers (23% vs. 17%), while EC writers did the reverse: Certainty Markers constituted 20%, Hedges, 14%. Hedges engage the reader in the interaction and allow room for discussing alternate viewpoints, but they may also convey a lack of commitment to the truth value of the proposition if they are used too frequently. In appropriate doses, Certainty Markers allow writers to underscore what they believe, but too many make the writer sound bombastic and overbearing and the argument factually unsupported. Since in persuasive writing, the writers' primary objective is to sway their readers to their position, it is important to state that position and its supporting arguments in a convincing way. It may be that the CC writers came across as unsure of what they were asserting because of their higher use of Hedges.

The most successful writing, we believe, involves a balanced use of the interpersonal subcategories as well. In the case of Attributors, the EC writers used about 67% more than CC writers (10% and 6% respectively). Because student writers do not have scholarly status, referring to an authority increases the force of their arguments and makes their positions sound less arbitrary. The higher use of Certainty Markers in the EC papers was supported by their reference to authorities. On the other hand, the lower use of Attributors and Certainly Markers and the higher use of Hedges by the CC resulted in a configuration that made their arguments uncertain and hesitant rather than assuring and convincing.

Interesting differences also showed up in the categories of Attitude Markers and Commentary. The EC used 9% and 7% respectively, while the CC had 13% for both. The EC subjects appeared to be balancing their assertiveness with limited self-disclosure and comments to the reader. The CC subjects, by using these markers at a higher level, appeared to be soliciting agreement from their readers through personal relationships rather than through the force of the propositional content and logical argumentation. It is rather surprising that the group which was instructed in developing the textual and interpersonal facets of their texts (EC) used fewer interpersonal features and was more successful in presenting the propositional content, while the group that developed the substantive information about their essay topic (CC) relied more heavily on the interpersonal function of the text to persuade their audience.
Errors

The findings about the quantity of metadiscourse give some information about the use of metadiscourse features, but it is equally important to examine the error rate in these features. We classified two kinds of errors, explicit and implicit. Explicit errors are those in which a feature is used incorrectly, as in the following examples from a CC 4-Post paper. (Metadiscourse is underlined and errors are not corrected.)

*In the article "It Isn't Working" by William F. Buckley, he said that the drug agency apprehended ten to twenty percent of the drugs coming in last year.*

The writer was trying to use an Attributor, but because he had moved the adverbial phrase with the Attributor forward, he has blocked the reading of he as William F. Buckley. In another example from the same paper, he uses a Sequencer, in turn, while the relationship between the two sentences is cause and effect:

It is estimated the thirty to forty percent of killings each year are drug related as stated in the New York Times. While many less serious drug related crimes are also committed a year. Theft, perjury, extortion, almost any crime where criminals can get their hands on money. In turn these criminals go to jail for varied lengths of time depending on how serious their crime is.

These errors (and others) make the texts more difficult to read because the reader must reanalyze the text and make the corrections during reading.

Implicit errors are those cases in which metadiscourse should have been used to make the text more considerate but was not. The following excerpt is from a CC 3-Pre:

*Guns are used in most murders in the world, says Lance Morrow. Look at Kennedy, King, and Lennon. Handguns seem to breed among them (Americans) like roaches, he claims.* Lance Morrow, in his essay, looks at handgun related violence and concludes that “It's Time to Ban Handguns.” Handguns don't "breed" among Americans, the spread of handguns is a conscious choice made by those who wish to exercise their constitutional right to bear arms.

In the last sentence, the writer is introducing a position different from that of Lance Morrow. It would have helped the reader if an adversative *but* or *however* had been used to indicate this shift.

Errors were an important category to examine because the purpose of this study was to teach students to use metadiscourse correctly. Errors before and after treatment for the four subjects were EC1, 14% and 6%; E2, 14% and 8%; C1, 19% and 15%; C2, 17% and 17%. As we expected, the percentage of errors decreased more for the EC writers than for the CC writers. The correction rates suggest that EC writers were more
aware of the use of metadiscourse than CC writers and had a better control over them after the treatment.

Before they studied metadiscourse, our writers realized that there were problems in their texts, but they did not know specifically what these problems were or how to solve them. After instruction, one thing the students in the EC were able to do was judge whether they used so much metadiscourse that they buried their primary message or so little that their texts were unfriendly. While no optimal levels for metadiscourse have been established (and it will be difficult to do this because of differences in writing style), it is interesting that the density levels of metadiscourse in the posttests were more similar than those at the beginning of the semester. However, it must be noted that on the 3-Pre, with different density levels of metadiscourse, the four subjects received the same score of C; and that on the 4-Post, with similar levels of metadiscourse, their scores were different. There is more to good writing than metadiscourse.

Analysis of Spontaneous Writing by the Two Classes

Differences between IC-Pre and IC-Post papers show two kinds of improvements in the EC writing which did not go through a revision process.

Reduction in Excessive and Ineffective Use of Metadiscourse

In our data, several of the IC-Pre papers used metadiscourse too heavily as well as ineflectively. Consider the following excerpt from an EC paper.

In the beginning the television was posed as a real asset for families with children because it would be a big influence in the home. Basically this is what Marie Winn discussed in her article "The Plug-In Drug". As a young adult today I can safely say that the hours one person sits in front of the television has greatly increased from what it was forty years ago. So, yes Winn is correct in stating that the television is a major influence on children these days.

The writer began her essay with the proposition that television is an asset, supported by the "pseudo" Attributor, the passive, was posed. In the second sentence, she provided an Attributor and an Interpretive Marker, the illocutionary marker, basically. She supported the claim that viewing time has increased over the last forty years on the basis of personal experience, an ineffective Attributor because the reader knows that the writer is not forty or fifty years old. In the final sentence of her introductory paragraph, she bundled four metadiscourse markers together—a Logical Connective so, a Certainty Marker yes, an Attributor, and a second Certainty Marker, Winn is correct in stating that, to lead into a reiteration of her first sentence. Besides flawed use of metadiscourse, this paragraph has a low level of informativity (de Beaugrande & Dressler, 1981).
A pretest essay written in the CC shows a similar high level of metadiscourse:

After experiencing this phenomena, as myself has, one would have to say that Winn is totally correct with her assumption. One would also have to say that her proposition of correcting this television based life we live in is indeed necessary to keep family life as we know it, if not to improve it.

As Winn has understated in her article, concern for change should be high among family members. People should be concerned for quite a few reasons.

The student opened the essay with a tangle of metadiscourse that included two Attributors, a Hedge, two Certainty Markers, and an Interpretive Marker. The expression, one would have to say, is awkward in its use of the indefinite pronoun one and is weakened by the hedged Certainty Marker. (Contrast this with one has to say that Winn is totally correct in her assumption.) He repeated the impersonal expression in the second sentence, adding a logical connective, also, and an Attributor, her proposition of, before he got to the proposition itself, that our use of television must be changed if we are to preserve family life. His second paragraph, which also comprised introductory material, used another Attributor with the bizarre understated. Two uses of the Attitude Marker should followed. As in the EC pretest, the use of metadiscourse is ineffective because it adds little but verbiage, obscuring the small amount of propositional content and contributing to low informativity.

In the final in-class essays, the writers showed clear differences in the use of metadiscourse. The EC writer reduced the amount of metadiscourse in her introductory paragraph and used it more skillfully:

Language And The View of Reality
In the article “Nuclear Language and How We Learned To Pat The Bomb” Carol Cohn describes the issue of language and reality after having spent a year in a world of nuclear strategists. She argues how the language that surrounds us changes our views on reality, and nuclear war is one subject that brings about such changes. I have to agree with Cohn after reading her article. It provides many convincing examples that lead you into believing.

The writer introduced the source of her information on nuclear language with an Attributor, and the author’s thesis with a second Attributor. She stated her opinion about the propositional content she is developing with an Attitude Marker, and led into the body of her essay with a statement that the article was convincing because of the evidence Cohn cites. The writer offered the reader insight into the source of her ideas and her position on the claims in the essay. As her paper developed, she used a wide variety of metadiscourse appropriate for her assertion.

The level of metadiscourse remained high in the CC student’s final in-class paper:
Language: The Art of Deception

After reading "Nuclear Language And How We Learned to Pat the Bomb", one finds that Cohn's main thesis is how language is used to deceive people and distort reality. *I would, after reading this essay, have to strongly agree with her.*

Today, if one were to go home and read a daily newspaper one would easily find that every article would in some way or other be guilty of using language to cover up reality. *Take for example* an article on a burglary. *Though this is totally fictional*, the article would *probably* have the same traits. *Let's suppose* that there was a gun involved, in the article, the gun wouldn't simply be a gun, it would be "a menacing machine capable of causing a horrifying death".

The writer begins his essay with a wordy double Attributor, *one finds that Cohn's main thesis is*. . . As in his pretest, he continued to use the awkward third person singular pronoun, creating distance from the text and reducing interaction with the reader. He stated his agreement with Cohn's position in a sentence-long Attitude Marker. Although the Attitude statement is not a sophisticated technique for stating one's position, it is better than forcing the reader to infer the thesis. In the second paragraph, the writer attempted to draw the reader into a dialogue through two Commentaries (the imperative, *take*, and a first person plural imperative, *let's suppose*), followed by a Topicalizer, *there was*. He also used an Interpretive Marker, *for example*, and two Hedges, *though this is totally fictional and probably*. However, there is still too much metadiscourse and any improvement is marginal.

More Varied Use of Metadiscourse

Another problem that we found was the overuse of one category of markers. Consider the following EC-Pre, which used Hedges excessively:

Americans watch television a lot. Adults *probably* spend at least five hours in front of the t.v., watching prime time, the news and *maybe* a show or two after that. Children spend many more hours than that watching television. A child *could* spend the entire day in front of the t.v.

*I'm not so sure* that a child watching t.v. all day is a very good idea. Children are very influential. Most parents work all day *so* they aren't always around to monitor what they watch. Children pick up many of their habits from t.v. *I agree totally with Winn when he says that t.v. is the important influence in children's lives*.

This short excerpt has four Hedges, the Connective *so*, and one long authorial intrusion that includes a strongly stated Attitude Marker combined with an Attributor. The Hedges, particularly *I'm not so sure that*, make the author sound vague and ineffective. On the other hand, the introduction also includes statements that are too strong and need hedging, a disconcerting contrast in tone.
There are obvious changes in the EC-Post:

In her article "Nuclear Language and How We Learned to Pat the Bomb" Carol Cohn tells of the year she spent as a visiting scholar at a university defense study center. She says that as she learned the nuclear language, her views began to change. She started thinking less about the people that would be killed by a nuclear bomb and more about the politics involved and the weapons themselves. Cohn claims that using the language affected her views of reality.

I believe that learning all the vocabulary of nuclear language did affect her views. The reason for this is the language itself.

This is a stronger introduction than that of his IC-Pre because the writer supports his assertions with Attributors and adds one appropriate Attitude Marker to present his thesis.

Another way more varied use of metadiscourse strengthened an essay is shown by a second set of papers from the EC. In her first paper, this EC writer was direct and blunt in the expression of her opinions. She began:

I believe Winn is one hundred percent correct, even more so in the past couple of years since the invention of cable. TV is used as a sort of pacifier for a child. When a child is upset or whining, parents find it a solution to stick the child in front of the TV and let him have reigns over the channel selector. And it does become a pacifier—momentarily—until the TV is shut off and the problems come flooding back to both the parents and child. This is one influence it has on the child—to make them want to escape reality and not face the truth.

Now, to even further expand on the idea of escaping reality, let's look at the program shown on TV. They certainly far depict reality. . . . we have shows depicting violence, like "Miami Vice", "L.A. Law", not to name all the nightly movies that are broadcasted. Children see this and see a grown man shooting a woman and will think, "Hey, this man is shooting someone. I guess it's ok." They are not taught that this type of program is wrong because this type of program is a "norm" for TV, and the child is being socialized into this kind of viewing. . . . Stick the kid in front of the TV, and he'll shut up. The kid watches TV, and the mom and dad go about their own business. It is really a factor in the breaking up of the relationship between child/parents. Gone are the days when families sat around the dinner table and shared conversations. Here is the day of the surrogatey mothers and fathers—T.V.!

There are a number of problems with this paper, including the fact that the reader is never told what Winn's position is. The writer used a variety of metadiscourse types, but her tone is a dogmatic one that evokes resistance to her ideas. There are no Hedges, and no opening is provided so that readers might entertain a different slant on the propositional content being presented.

After a semester of training in the use of metadiscourse, and the resulting focus on the reader, we found some moderation in this EC writer's style, although there is still an absence of Hedges:
“Language in the World of Nuclear Arms”
Penetration aids. Cookie cutter. Shopping list. What comes to mind upon hearing these words? Certainly not nuclear warfare! These words are just a few of the many euphemisms that nuclear arms specialists use among themselves to discuss their own little “subculture.” When used, these words soften the horror of nuclear arms race and don’t convey the truth of the matter—the actual amount of destruction taking place. Let’s take a look at some of the words or phrases that “distort” reality.

She opens her essay to the reader with a rhetorical question and a Commentary. Her use of the first person plural imperative, let’s, is more of an invitation to the reader to join her in exploring a question than it was in her IC-Pre, where it was embedded after a clause telling readers what they were going to find. Even though she continues to express her opinions and her level of conviction strongly, the reader does not feel excluded, as in the first paper. Throughout, the writer uses a variety of metadiscourse markers, including other Commentaries to engage her reader (as one may expect), Attitude Markers to reveal her own affective responses to the text (surprisingly), and a Commentary and a Reminder in the conclusion, which brings the readers back to the opening series (And what about the euphemisms like “cookie cutter” and “shopping list?”). Her new-found attention to her reader is perhaps best demonstrated when she concludes with an Attitude Marker and an Illocutionary Marker, “I believe I have justified my argument—these words certainly cover up the serious effects of what nuclear warfare is. . . . They reflect a significant change, in our opinion, both toward her reader and to the underlying purpose of writing—communicating to persuade.

Lack of Development from Pre- to Post-Essay in a CC Paper
Development in the use of metadiscourse forms and attention to their pragmatic functions on the part of EC students can be contrasted with the lack of development shown between the following two essays written by a CC student:

The amount of TV that a child watches should be an important concern for his parents. A child may sometimes substitute certain activities to watch television. Socializing with other children can be avoided. If the role of the mother and father is lightened by the use of television, the influence on the child is tremendous.

As a child I was mesmerized by TV. I watched countless hours during the day. It has been brought to my attention that we are the first of the TV generation. We can now be separated in our own room, without our parents, trying to comprehend and understand what is it we are watching.

In the IC-Pre, the writer used one Attitude Marker (should), three Hedges (may, can, can), and an unusual Narrator (it has been brought to my attention that). He did not include the reader in a dialogue and did not give much help in interpreting the text.
Now consider the style in the IC-Post:

In terms in dealing with a nuclear war, a different language was a basic necessity to cover up the damage and tragedy which can result. Cohn brings out many interesting points with the way these men handle their jobs. In order to relate with these men, it was a basic necessity for her to learn the language. As she learned the highly technological subject of the military world, she noticed some changes. At first she wanted these men to realize the real impact of their language and its consequences. But as she studied and observed it became apparent that her views were slowly changing on the subject.

This introduction is difficult to follow because the writer assumed total shared background. The first sentence, which is wordy and vague, opens with a topicalizer and is followed by a faulty Attributor and an assertion about these men, who are not identified, and there jobs. One connective is used in the final sentence. The sentences jump from one subject to another, so the reader must do a significant amount of inferencing to follow how they are related to each other. There is no indication of the writer’s stance, a predictable problem given the lack of clear development. Only a determined reader (or an instructor forced to give a grade) will invest the necessary effort to glean the crumbs of meaning from this paragraph.

Discussion

What Caused the Improvement?

The fact that the students in the EC used metadiscourse more effectively and received better grades than students in the CC raises some interesting questions. It might be argued that the improved use of metadiscourse markers made the texts easier to read and, in response, the graders gave them higher marks. However, the research on reading and metadiscourse is quite equivocal. In an early study suggesting the importance of cohesive markers, Cohen and his colleagues (Cohen, Glasman, Rosenbaum-Cohen, Ferrara, & Fine, 1979) found that EFL students did not read effectively, in part because they did not understand certain cohesive ties, including Connectives. Smith (1984) reported that students in the health sciences had trouble distinguishing facts from hypotheses and attitudes. She recommended teaching modals, Validity Markers, and Attitude Markers. However, in a study of business undergraduates, O’Keefe (1989) found that informational and attitudinal metadiscourse did not effect either text comprehension or decision-making activities. Similarly, Hooistra (1990) found that more considerate middle school social studies textbooks which included more metadiscourse did not result in greater student achievement than less considerate textbooks which included less metadiscourse. The apparently contradictory conclusions of these two groups of studies may be explained by the observation by Cohen and
his colleagues (1979) that native speakers read globally while non-native speakers read locally. This would mean that metadiscourse markers are not necessary for native speakers because they are usually redundant.

More Explicit Structure and Tone

If we can infer from these studies that graders might be like students, with their reading comprehension unaffected by the increased use of metadiscourse markers, then presumably the scorers were responding favorably to something else in the EC essays. What else did the EC students do that improved their grades? Some insight into this quandary is provided by one of the last entries that Virginia Woolf (Bell, 1984) wrote in her diary, on March 8, 1941:

And now with some pleasure I find that it's seven; and must cook dinner. Haddock & sausage meat. I think that it's true that one gains a certain hold on sausage & haddock by writing them down. (p. 358)

One of the things that metadiscourse does is provide "a certain hold" on the organization and tone of the emerging text by making structure and tone explicit, by capturing them on paper. Writers can then consider what they are saying more easily and make appropriate changes and improvements. When this improved "re-vision" occurred with an emerging attention to the reader's perspective, we believe this helped our EC writers make much more effective changes in their texts than the CC writers did.

Let us support these claims with a brief comparison of three sets of excerpts from a 3-Pre and a 4-Post paper, written by a member of the EC, that show editing going beyond the level of metadiscourse markers. The writer was considering the right to die.

In her 3-Pre, she introduces the issue of life support systems and argues:

How can we say Nancy Cruzan has any quality in her life? She can't walk, talk, or even pray.

The use of even in this case is infelicitous because it should be used to indicate an ability that is less than those already mentioned, i.e., she can't walk, pray or even talk. Perhaps because the writer recognized this problem, the sentence was replaced in her 4-Post with a more detailed and explicit description of the condition Cruzan was suffering:

People in a comatose or persistent vegetative state can't walk, talk, or express any kind of emotions, mental or physical.

This type of revision is one of the more interesting effects of this method because it shows global, rather than local, changes.

In the following 3-Pre passage, the writer describes how it is now determined if a comatose patient is still technically alive:

The actual amount of activity in the brain is determined by an E.E.G.
In the 4-Post, the writer showed greater sensitivity to reader needs by providing a definition of the term E.E.G.:

The actual amount of activity in the brain is determined by an E.E.G., a machine which translated electrical energy from the brain into visual patterns on screen via electrodes placed on the outside of the head.

In the 3-Pre, a description of Nancy Cruzan’s situation is given:

Nancy Cruzan only has a small portion of her brain that functions and is kept alive only by feeding tubes. Missouri State will not remove these tubes because they are considered ordinary means of treatment.

This part of the text would have been a bit more considerate with the addition of however before the second sentence, which would have alerted the reader to the fact that an adversative statement followed. In the 4-Post, this passage was changed substantially, again reflecting global rather than local revision:

Nancy Cruzan is technically alive because there is still activity in her cortex, the lower brain center that controls such involuntary activities as blinking of eyes, breathing, twitching of muscles, and relieving of bodily wastes, to name only a few. People in situations like Cruzan’s can’t do anything, let alone feed themselves, because they are unable to voluntarily act out any need or want. These tubes should be removed along with artificial life support systems that are keeping a comatose person needlessly alive.

In this expansion, the writer has used an Interpretive Marker, to name only a few, has added information defining the cortex, and has greatly expanded support for her position, which is expressed using an Attitude Marker, These tubes should be removed . . .

It was the case that some students in the Control Group revised at a more global level. But it was much more common in the Experimental Group, and the use of metadiscourse markers was more extensive and more effective in that group.

Improved Topical Progression

Another type of revision that shows the difference between the two groups involves topical progression, which captures how authors develop the subjects and predicates of their sentences to introduce different topics on which they provide information. Lautamatti (1978) discusses two types of progression, parallel and sequential. In parallel progression, the author introduces a topic in subject position, and continues to use it as a topic, as in the following example:

My cat loves to eat mice. She’s ten years old, and she’s still an excellent hunter.

“My cat” is introduced, then is kept as the topic with additional predications provided in the predicate of the following sentences to develop a richer concept.
In sequential progression, the topic changes. The first sentence presents a topic and a predication. The second sentence introduces a new topic from the predicate of the preceding sentence, and provides information about this second topic in the predicate. A third topic is selected from the predicate of the second sentence and is developed, and so on. An example of sequential predication follows:

My cat ate a mouse. The mouse was in the barn. The barn is old and is a never-ending source of food for her.

Cat is the first topic, followed by the mouse as the second topic, and the barn as the third. The subjects of the last two sentences are definite because they are previously mentioned.

If topical progression is not orderly, the reader must infer in order to follow the development of the text:

My cat loves catnip. Our nursery is ordering some so she will have a never-ending supply.

In such a sequence, my cat is the first topic. A new second topic is introduced, our nursery, and the reader must make a series of simple inferences (but inferences nevertheless) to understand the relationship between the two sentences. Forcing the reader to work for meaning increases the informativity and effectiveness, in de Beaugrande and Dressler’s (1981) sense, but it may become problematic if the text introduces information for which the reader does not have the appropriate background knowledge.

In analyzing how English teachers simplified texts for EFL students, Lautamatti (1978) found that some teachers intuitively made the topical progression simpler and more explicit. (Such transparent topical progression, incidentally, is a facet of Hemingway’s style that makes his novels easy to read.) If our writers had become more aware of audience and of the value of making texts easier to follow, some of them should have hit on explicit topical progression as an appropriate strategy to cultivate.

The following two excerpts show how topical progression was handled by a CC student. Numbers indicate topics, which are in boldface; metadiscourse is italicized in this pretest:

1. . . . the majority of young people . . . center their lives around the television.
2. Television has changed family life drastically and will do so even more in the future unless we can direct our children’s attention away from the set.
1. . . . our future adults are going to know more about the first caucasian rapper to appear on MTV than the meaning of the common ideas learned in a healthy family setting.
3. These ideas would include love . . .
4. Children today know what programs will be on from the minute they walk in the door from school. . . .
5. Mealtime doesn’t seem to see a break in television either.

Five different topics are used in this CC introduction, if we consider young people to be a different group than children. (Those people we have informally polled do.) Parallel progression is used when our future adults refers to the majority of young people in the first sentence. It may refer to children in the expression children’s attention in the previous sentence. Sequential progression is found in the second sentence, when television follows its mention in the predicate of the first sentence, and in the fourth sentence when these ideas refers to common ideas learned in a healthy family setting in the preceding sentence. Children can be traced back to the possessive in the second sentence or to our future adults in the third. Because the writer seems to have two different groups of “non-adults” in mind, the reader must switch between the two groups or form them into a broad, fuzzy set, a problem that obscures the point the writer is trying to make. The final topic, mealtime, also requires inferencing on the part of the reader.

There is some improvement in the writer’s posttest, but topical progression is still not transparent:

1. . . . Carol Cohn demonstrated . . . the reality of nuclear wars was changed by learning the language.
2. . . . she hadn’t needed to deal with the acronyms and phrases used in discussing nuclear war.
3. She believed that nuclear war was dangerous and irrational and associated with insanity or evil with our decision makers.
4. . . . Cohn found it hard to believe that the defense professionals could speak of nuclear war without taking into account. . . .
4. They rattled off terms and nick-names . . .
2. Cohn was astounded by this . . .

Here, this writer uses one less topic. There are two cases of parallel progression (she and Cohn, the defense professionals and they) and one case of sequential progression (nuclear war in the predicate of the second sentence and as the subject of the following sentence). The defense professionals may be a paraphrase of our decision makers, but these forms cannot be unambiguously analyzed. A more serious difficulty is the way the topical progression flows in the second sentence from the metadiscourse in the first sentence. One has to infer that Carol Cohn was learning the language, not simply reporting about the effect of learning the language on someone else’s perception of reality in the first sentence. While topical development is better, it is still not straightforward.

When we consider a sample from the EC, we find a similar high number of topics in the pretest, embedded in considerable metadiscourse. There is one case of sequential progression, between the predicate of the
first sentence and the subject of the next to last sentence, which is followed by a case of parallel progression in the last sentence. Readers must make several inferences as they read through this paragraph, although it could be argued that the four remaining topics (today's family, Americans, family time, children) all show lexical cohesion, as described by Halliday and Hasan (1976). Even if this is the appropriate analysis, inferencing is involved.

1. It is true that today's family has less time for doing things together but it is not all together fair to put the blame only on television.  
2. Studies have shown that . . . Americans . . . are working more . . .  
3. This fact alone shows that family time is greatly reduced.  
4. Children . . . would be likely to feel alone.  
5. In this instance the television becomes a friend . . .  
6. It is true that television greatly influences children . . .

In the posttest, one thing that is effective in the first sentence is the use of the definite but vague noun phrase, the people who hold the fate of the world in their hands, which piques the reader's interest. But the first sentence is also problematic because the writer tries to use a pronoun in a fronted adverbial phrase to refer to the following subject, which does not work, as we have seen. Topical progression is clearer than in the pretest, with two "textbook" cases of sequential progression and possibly a third, if we consider the people who hold the fate of the world in their hands to be referring to the same set as military advisors. Another thing contributing to the clarity of this introduction is the fact that propositional content is not buried in excessive metadiscourse, as in the first, and what there is is used more effectively:

1. In Cohn’s article, she had the opportunity to study and be with the people who hold the fate of the world in their hands.  
2. When someone mentions the phrase nuclear war, the first thing that comes to mind is the terrible destruction . . .  
3. However, when Cohn was in the presence of military advisors they didn’t quite regard nuclear war in the same way . . .  
4. It was clear that the military had their own system of slang when talking about weapons of mass destruction.  
5. These are violent, dangerous weapons that need to be respected for their power.  
6. Military analysts however, would talk of “patting the bomb” . . .

This introductory paragraph is a significant improvement over the pretest introduction. There are other aspects of the text that could be examined, such as the development of the argument and the structure of paragraphs. However, the changes in metadiscourse, more global revision, and improved topical progression represent important developments that occurred more frequently in the writing of the EC.
discourse markers would be expected as an effect of direct teaching. (If the use of these markers did not change, it would be surprising if there were any differences between students in the EC and in the CC.) As the EC students became aware of the pragmatic, rhetorical function of metadiscourse through direct teaching, they moved away from regarding metadiscourse markers as empty fillers with low levels of information to recognizing the complexity and rhetorical functions of specific forms.

Improved Revising Processes

The knowledge of metadiscourse helped the students in their revising processes. Before they studied metadiscourse, they realized that there were problems in their texts, but they did not know specifically what these problems were or how to solve them. After instruction, they were able to judge whether they had used so much metadiscourse that they had buried their primary message or so little that their texts were unfriendly (Williams, 1981). They started to pay more attention to the textual and interpersonal meanings of the text, which in turn led to major, as well as local, revisions of the draft: The descriptive analysis of the student papers showed that very often the students realized that revision was not just replacement of one word with another. In many cases, revisions of whole T-units, sections, and paragraphs occurred. In other cases, even though just one metadiscourse feature was changed or added, the text thereby took on a new, different perspective which changed or reinforced the propositional content.

An important development took place in the interactions in the peer editing sessions during which peer review took place and editing questions involving metadiscourse were asked. Responses like, “I think you sound too absolute in this argument,” made the writer think about the tone and make necessary changes in Hedges or Emphatics. Questions like, “Why did I find your paper so hard to read?” encouraged the writer to reconsider the use of Text Connectives, Topicalizers, Sequencers, and Code Glosses. Teaching the students to use metadiscourse facilitated their peer editing sessions. Knowing the terminology of metadiscourse made it easy for the students not only to locate the problems in each other’s texts but also to communicate what the problems were and indicate specific solutions during the peer editing sessions. Specific student comments included suggestions for changes:

This statement is too strong. Why don’t you use a Hedge?
I don’t understand this term you are using. You should probably give the reader a Code Gloss here.
I think you need a Connective in this sentence.

These kinds of comments pointed out not only the problems but also possible solutions, changing the peer editing sessions into meaningful
and helpful activities in which students were seriously engaged in revising their texts. This was a major change because peer editing sessions are typically regarded as a waste of time because such vague feedback as "It doesn't sound right" neither pinpoints the problem nor indicates a solution. Metadiscourse offered students a language for critiquing what they read, specifying the problems, and indicating possible revisions. It would appear that student writers need more than facts and process to write successfully and as reviewers need specific techniques if they are to provide useful critiques to each other.

More Attention to a Realistic Epistemology

Finally, the attention to metadiscourse made the students aware that what they wrote was being understood by their readers as their view of reality, and they became more ethical writers, paying more attention to the truth value of their propositional content and hedging it when necessary. They began to realize that facts and meaning are contingent and transactional, and started to develop an orientation toward a realistic epistemology. For example, when dealing with controversial issues like abortion, they realized that self-interest is not the only basis for decisions; priorities that derived from social choices and the values that order one's life may also be the basis for decisions. These are the choices that William Perry (1968) calls "commitments." One can make confident judgments of what is better or worse relative to oneself while still recognizing that other people may employ different, but to them, equally valid standards of judgment. Therefore, the use of such interpersonal metadiscourse as it seems to me, in my judgment, and I believe implies that writing is a meaning-making process during which the writer is talking to the reader and making negotiations as well as commitments. Metadiscourse used in this sense helped the students to become participants in establishing truth and meaning and to develop as critical thinkers.

Was the Method Significant for the Students?

An important question is whether teaching metadiscourse was educationally significant or simply statistically significant. From the point of view of the students who received course grades of B- instead of C+, and C- instead of D+, the method was valuable. Furthermore, students felt that the method was useful. It is dangerous to attribute too much to the assessment that students make about the value of particular methods, but in their journals they certainly indicated that they believed that they learned something. The EC students had a sense that they had learned aspects of the composing process that improved their writing, as the following EC journal entry shows:

Before my English 101 class, I had little knowledge of metadiscourse at all, but now my understanding has greatly increased due to the chapters we
have read on the subject. Now I understand terms such as interpersonal and textual metadiscourse. Likewise, this understanding has helped my writing in subtle ways. I have begun to notice when I used either too much or too little metadiscourse, and I can link my ideas together more easily by realizing what more of my options are. For example, when I check my papers now, I tend to cross out many of the unneeded phrases such as "in light of the subject," "turning now to the subject of," etc. because I notice that I have far more than the paper needs, which makes it unnecessarily hard for the reader.

This entry reflects a clear sense that the writer was aware of metadiscourse markers and was able to use them effectively.

An even greater improvement, in our opinion, came about with our students’ awareness of the reader. When they wrote and revised their papers, the emphasis on metadiscourse and the explorations into its effects on the reader influenced them to be more reflective about what they were saying and how they were saying it. They began to realize readers might have needs different from their own, an insight that encouraged them to undertake global revisions that improved the readability of their texts. The students understood that this is what they were doing, as reflected in the following journal entry:

Before taking English 101, I knew absolutely nothing about metadiscourse or different types of metadiscourse. In fact, I had never even heard of it. After reading about metadiscourse, however boring I found it to be, I understood what metadiscourse is and what the different kinds of it are. . . . While writing the papers that followed the readings, I started paying closer attention to the readers’ needs and to the way I was presenting my message, wording my sentences, and taking out unnecessary metadiscourse. Because of this, I started to believe that my writing was improving and that the readings were helpful to me.

Another student in the EC wrote:

Metadiscourse, in my opinion, enhances my writing by adding more to the writing. For example, my abortion paper sounded too subjective and didn't give the reader much room for negotiation, and it also lacked transitions between paragraphs. I used metadiscourse to accommodate to the reader and to make stronger transitions.

There was some negative feedback from the EC, but it was mainly directed at the way metadiscourse was taught rather than the complaint that students were not taught how to write.

One other point supports our claim that the results of this study were educationally significant. There were different outcomes in the editing task and the in-class writing task. The reader will remember that both the EC and the CC students showed significant improvement in writing a fourth draft at the end of the semester. Thus, both groups of students learned something about revision, and when they were asked to work on their papers, they were able to improve them using monitoring strat-
egies and conscious editing procedures. In the case of the in-class papers, however, there was no improvement between the pretest and the posttest for the CC, while there was significant improvement for the EC. This suggests that the methodology we used for the EC made a difference at the level of the generation of the text, not just at the level of editing and monitoring. It strikes us that this is an important difference because it shows that the students had incorporated fundamental insights into the composing process that were effective from the moment they began to put their ideas on paper, not just during the process of revision. A teaching method that improves two aspects of the desired behavior (spontaneous production and revision) is likely to have more lasting effects than a method which affects just one (revision).

In his 1993 paper, Mao challenged the existence of metadiscourse as a category, arguing that the boundary between primary and secondary discourse is very indistinct and some forms seem to belong in both categories. We agree that the categories of metadiscourse are fuzzy, but so are many natural language categories. More to the point, we would argue that we taught our students something called metadiscourse and showed them how to use it in their writing. Their improvement suggests we were teaching them something that does exist, that they did understand, and that did help them write a better paper.

Conclusion

In a recent issue of Research in the Teaching of English, the practice of explicit teaching of features and principles of composition was debated. Freedman (1993) discussed objections to the explicit teaching of genres. The strongest position that she presented was that such teaching is not only unnecessary, but impossible and potentially dangerous because it may lead to overlearning or misapplication. A more cautious position is that explicit teaching is not necessary but, under some circumstances, for some learners, might enhance learning. Freedman’s arguments were based, in part, on analogies with language acquisition. In our judgment, such comparisons are not useful because language is an instinctive behavior that is not taught and that no normal human can choose not to acquire (Bickerton, 1990; Pinker, 1994). Effective writing and control of particular genres, on the other hand, are not innate behaviors. A more insightful comparison with composition is oral rhetoric, which has been taught to students with considerable success since antiquity.

Freedman also proposed that a teacher should assume only a facilitative role in the classroom. In a trivial and uninteresting sense, it can be claimed that it is impossible to teach a student anything, in the sense that one can lead a horse to water but cannot make it drink. However,
it is clear that what a teacher teaches in the classroom has a profound effect on student outcomes. Williams and Colomb (1993) have been able to show that a writer’s control of a particular genre can be increased by the explicit teaching of the structural rhetorical relationship of old and new information, topical progression, lexical chaining and other formal and functional properties of text. These results are supported by Hillocks’ (1986) review of research on composition. He found that inquiry, which focuses “on immediate and concrete data of some kind during instruction and practice” (p. 180), was the most effective strategy for the classroom and always achieved results (p. 186). Unfortunately, many instructors believe that direct teaching of specific strategies is possible using only a presentational method, the least effective of the four strategies that Hillocks identified.

Our research is relevant to this debate because it provides both quantitative and descriptive support for direct teaching. Our students learned about the concept of metadiscourse and metadiscourse features in terms of their rhetorical functions in an environmental setting, characterized by peer-group activity and highly structured problem-solving tasks, the type of classroom Hillocks found most effective. Most important, the explicit teaching of specific features appeared to have global effects. Our students did not simply learn to use metadiscourse correctly and at more appropriate levels. They also experienced a breakthrough in their consideration of the reader and an awareness of the rhetorical functions of composition. This classroom method changed the students’ understanding of what composition is about, with their writing reflecting greater insight into the acts of writing and revising and an awareness of audience.

In the keynote address given at the 1995 International Symposium on Language Teaching, William Littlewood discussed changes in the methods and philosophy of language teaching. He noted that we have moved from a structural approach, in which the forms of language are taught, to an experiential approach, in which the focus is on the expression of the student’s reality. This shift, Littlewood proposes, has skipped the intermediate functional level, which is the bridge between the structural and the experiential. Similarly, in composition instruction, we have moved from the idea that composition is a five-paragraph exercise to the concept of asking our students to write by modeling the processes of accomplished writers. When we teach composition as product, we are certainly addressing important facets of the text—organization, paragraphing, mechanics. But the case can be made that we are teaching only the typical patterns, not the essence of a good essay. Similarly, when we teach text as process, we are instructing students in methods that are extremely useful for most writers—the generation of ideas, peer review, revision. But these again are not the crucial steps in generating
a successful text, only the typical outward signs of inner mental processes that cannot be taught or even perceived by writers themselves.

In teaching metadiscourse, we have integrated both the written product and the composing process by focusing on the rhetorical goals of writing—persuading our readers to believe us, agree with us, do what we want them to do. We have provided our students with forms that perform functions and have taught them to define and accomplish rhetorical goals with reviews from their peers. We have taken some steps that have changed the EC from a group of individuals struggling to get sentences onto paper into a discourse community (Porter, 1992). This audience has evaluated each writer’s success and failure and has helped the writer move closer to that condition in which a competent process leads to a good product. We all know that good writing is a process of self discovery and communication. What we can do in the classroom is teach those criteria that are most likely to evoke the insights that will lead to success. We believe that teaching the rhetorical functions of metadiscourse is a small step in the right direction.

Authors’ Note: We wish to thank Debra Knutson, Scott Weeden, and the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments which greatly improved this manuscript. Errors which remain must be attributed to our misunderstanding or to sheer willfulness on our part.

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