Writing Between the Lines:
ESL Learners' Metadiscourse Awareness and Its Impact on Writing Performance

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Abstract

Many English as Second language (ESL) learners find it difficult to write in their second language writings. One of the ways to overcome it is by using metadiscourse (MD). MD refers to devices that assist writers in interacting with their readers and explaining their thoughts coherently. However, many learners are unaware to use or do not appropriately utilize MD devices in their writing. Meanwhile, researchers in Malaysia have paid little attention to the MD in the writing. Therefore, this quantitative study was conducted to examine ESL learners' awareness of MD and its relationship to their ESL writing performance. Utilizing purposive random sampling method, 60 undergraduates were selected from a local institution in Malaysia. The data were gathered using an English-written essay and a questionnaire. The essays were assessed using a verified scale and the response from questionnaire was evaluated using the SPSS software. The findings indicate that the participants have a minimal knowledge of MD. Most participants have low awareness of MD devices and low use of the MD devices in their writing. Furthermore, this low awareness and knowledge of MD slightly affect their writing performance which is at moderate level. The study gives insight to researchers and lecturers, not only in the language field but in other areas, on improving the learners' awareness and use of MD which would eventually increase their writing performance.

Keywords: *ESL learners: metadiscourse awareness; writing performance*

Introduction

Many ESL students find writing challenging because it requires organizing thoughts into language while considering reader expectations (Naim et al., 2020). At the tertiary level, this difficulty increases as students must produce complex, sophisticated texts (Kashiha, 2018). Cohesion is another issue, requiring appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures to create meaningful writing (Kashiha, 2022). Academic success demands skillful argumentation and idea synthesis (Hyland & Tse, 2004), but ESL learners face additional hurdles due to linguistic limitations (Rahman et al., 2022).

Examining the aspects on how ESL learners acquire and utilize MD features in their writing offers valuable insights. MD in writing and speaking assists readers and writers in recognising its significance and guarantees that both parties comprehend the topic. Reyes et al. (2024) in their study also highlighted the importance of teaching MD as a way to enhance learners' understanding of language use and support

increased control and personal expression in academic writing. Furthermore, Hyland (2005) highlighted that instructing learners in MD markers offers three key benefits. First, it enables learners to recognize the cognitive demands imposed by texts and understand how these markers facilitate the writing process. Second, exposure to MD markers enhances learners' motivation to sustain and defend their viewpoints. Third, it equips writers with the ability to effectively reinforce their arguments for the reader. Ultimately, the integration of MD markers significantly enhances the overall learning process.

Currently, ESL writers frequently encounter difficulties in effectively employing appropriate interactional MD strategies, which may impede their capacity to articulate a clear stance and engage readers with the content presented (Musa et al., 2019). Furthermore, ESL learners have a limited understanding of MD markers and use certain MD markers only, such as transition markers and self-mentions, exclusively in their writing (Mat Zali et al., 2022).

As highlighted by Alharbi (2021) and Kashiha (2018), analyzing their application of MD in different genres like expository writing underscores their significance for L2 writers. Additionally, expanding the corpus with a stronger focus on Malaysia could yield more robust findings. Therefore, this study investigates Malaysian undergraduates' MD awareness and its relationship with their writing performance of expository essay. Existing MD research primarily addresses ESL writing pedagogy rather than learners' MD awareness. While prior studies have examined MD in various contexts of academic writing (Mohd Noor & Mohamed Alam, 2017), argumentative essays (Aziz et al., 2016), persuasive writing, doctoral proposals (Lo et al., 2020, 2021), and evaluative writing (Mat Zali et al., 2022; Zali et al., 2021), little attention has been given to learners' MD awareness in academic writing. Given this gap and the principle that knowledge precedes usage (Aliyu & Korau, 2020), this study focuses specifically on undergraduates' MD awareness and its correlation with writing performance.

Research Questions

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1.   What is the ESL learners' awareness of MD?

2.   What is the relationship between the ESL learners' awareness of MD and their writing performance?

Literature Review

Definition of Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse refers to linguistic devices that organize discourse, guide reader interpretation, and signal writer stance. Hyland (2005) defines it as "self-reflective linguistic material" that frames primary content while engaging audiences. Ädel (2006) emphasizes its role in "writer-reader interaction," classifying it as

textually oriented (e.g., transitions) or interactively oriented (e.g., hedges). Harris in 1995 takes a broader view, describing metadiscourse as "discourse about discourse"—markers that explicitly reference the act of communication itself (e.g., *as noted earlier*). Collectively, these definitions highlight metadiscourse's dual function: structuring text and negotiating social interaction. Traditionally, MD elements have been categorized into two categories; interactive and interactional MD.

Model of Metadiscourse: Interactive Vs Interactional Metadiscourse

In the ESL context, the definition of MD is clearer by Hyland (2004), who views MD as "self-reflective linguistic expressions referring to the evolving text, to the writer, and to the imagined readers of that text". It is based on a view of writing as social and communicative interaction and, in academic contexts, which describes the ways writers project themselves.

The model proposed by Hyland (2005) includes two types of MD: interactive and interactional measurements. The interactive MD helps the writer in organizing propositional content for clarity. *Transition Markers, Frame Markers, Endophoric Markers, Code Glosses, and Evidentia*l are these highlights. Interactive MD refers to the writer's consideration of the audience and how he conveys the audience's plausible information, interests, expository desires, and handling capacities. Its purpose is to diagram a book to address the reader's concerns and ensure that the writer's intended understanding and goals are met. Thus, interactive MD directs the reader through the text. In this sense, it alludes to techniques for organizing speech. *Endophoric Markers* allude to data in other parts of the content (for example, see fig. x), *Evidentials* allude to data from other writings (for example, as indicated by x, z states), *Frame Markers* allude to talk acts, successions, or stages (for example, at last, to conclude), and *Transition Markers* pass on the relations between sentences.

Interactional MD enables writers to provide commentary on their messages. This current 'writer's manner of a printed "voice" is referred to by Hyland as *Self-mentions, Hedges, Boosters, Attitude Markers, and Engagement Markers* (Hyland, 2005). The interactional MD involves the reader in the argument and reveals the writer's perspective on the propositional content (Hyland, 2004). *Self-mentions* indicate the level of unambiguous creator proximity in the content' (Hyland, 2005). This is indicated using first-person pronouns and possessive descriptors such as "I, me, my, our, mine, and us." The terms 'the writer, the essayist, the writer's, and the writer's' can also be used to highlight *Self-Mentions*. *Hedges* are utilized "to perceive elective voices and perspectives to preserve the promise of the proposal" (Hyland, 2005). *Hedges* express the writer's information as a sentiment or a conceivable thought rather than a fact. For example, "in my opinion, as I like to believe, likely and tend." Various elements constitute *Boosters*. Unlike *Hedges*, *Boosters* assist learners in communicating their ideas with confidence. Models are "in actuality, unquestionably and disobediently". *Engagement Markers* are employed by writers to directly address and

draw in readers to the discussion. This should be achievable using inclusive 'we, our, and us', reader pronouns 'you and your', and the question mark. The most obvious sign of a writer's dialogic awareness, according to Hyland (2005), is when the writer alludes to readers by posing questions, making suggestions, and appropriately responding to them. *Attitude Markers* are the last interactional high points. They demonstrate the writer's empathic, as opposed to epistemic, disposition towards suggestion. Examples include "lamentably, strikingly, and fortunately." (Jalilifar & Alipour, 2007) demonstrating that strong essays contain more MD than weak ones. However, the use of interactional MD depends on the writer's writing ability, of which most writers are not completely proficient if their papers are compared to those of expert authors or native speakers (Mohd Noor & Mohamed Alam, 2017).

For this study, the authors referred MD definition and MD model by Hyland (2005) since it was widely used by previous researchers like Ekawati & Al Rosyiidah (2022), Goltaji & Hooshmand (2022), Hanim et al. (2020), Mat Zali et al. (2024), Shafqat et al. (2020), Zahro et al. (2021) and Zali et al. (2021). Instead, the model is understandable and comprehensive to be used in the ESL writings. The table 1 below presents the details of the classification of MD model which will be adopted in this study.

Table 1: Hyland's model of MD

Category	Function	Examples
Interactive	Help to guide the reader through the text	
Transition Markers	Express relations between main clauses	In addition, but, thus, and, because
Frame Markers	Refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	Finally, to conclude, my purpose is
Endophoric Markers	Refer to information in other parts of texts	(in) (this) Chapter; see Section X, Figure X, page X; as noted earlier
Evidentials	Refer to the information from other texts	(to) quote X, according to X
Code Glosses	Elaborate propositional meanings	called, defined as, e.g., in other words, specifically
Interactional	Involve the reader in the text	
Hedges	Withhold commitment and open dialogue	Apparently, assume, doubt, estimate, from my perspective, in most cases, in my opinion, probably, suggests
Boosters	Emphasize certainty or close dialogue	Beyond doubt, clearly, definitely, we found, we proved, it is an established fact.
Attitude Markers	Express writer's attitude or proposition	I agree, I am amazed, appropriate, correctly, dramatic, hopefully, unfortunately.
Self-mentions	Explicit reference to authors	I, we, the author
Engagement Markers	Explicitly build relationship with reader	We, our (inclusive), imperative mood.

Metadiscourse Versus Writing performance

Metadiscourse, which refers to the linguistic devices writers use to guide readers through a text, can significantly enhance writing performance by improving clarity, coherence, and engagement. According to Hyland (2005), MD markers such as transitions ("however," "therefore") and frame markers ("in conclusion") help organize ideas logically, making texts easier to follow. Additionally, interactive MD (e.g., hedges like "possibly" or boosters like "clearly") allows writers to strategically modulate their stance, fostering persuasive communication (Jiang & Ma, 2023). Research by Abdel Latif (2022) also highlights that MD supports reader-writer interaction, as engagement markers (e.g., "consider," "note") directly address the audience, increasing textual involvement. In academic writing, the use of MD has been linked to higher-quality arguments and improved reader comprehension (Dahl & Pérez-Llantada, 2020), demonstrating its role in effective communication. Thus, incorporating MD can refine writing performance by enhancing structure, credibility, and audience awareness (Alqarni, 2024).

Previous Studies

There are several scholarly researches that delve into the importance of MD awareness among ESL (English as a Second Language) learners in writing. A study conducted by Aliyu & Korau (2020) reveals that Nigerian undergraduate students generally have low awareness of MD, which correlates with lower quality in persuasive writing. The findings suggest that enhancing MD awareness can lead to improvements in writing performance.

Akinseye (2023) explored the use of interactive MD as a discursive technique for improving academic writing skills among ESL undergraduates in Nigeria. A total of 100 expository writings were used. The study employs both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The qualitative component examines the types and applications of discursive techniques used in the selected expository writing, whilst the quantitative component focuses on the occurrence of these tactics. The findings show that transitional markers, frame markers, and code glosses were the most utilized interactive markers in academic writing, while evidential and endophoric markers were employed less frequently. These findings highlight the pedagogical importance of including interactive materials in the teaching of academic writing skills to ESL undergraduate learners.

Tahmasbi et al. (2024) currently conducting a study to investigate the effect of MD markers instruction on expository writing of 80 male and female EFL learners in a school setting, who were chosen through convenience sampling and interviewed with a smaller number of participants. A statistical test of covariance revealed that MD markers instruction had a substantial effect on EFL learners' expository writing. Another conclusion was that participants used interactional MD markers frequently.

In the Malaysian context, according to Chan & Tan's (2010) study on L2 writers in their argumentative essays, Malaysian undergraduates produced more interactional MD markers than interactive MD markers. that high English-proficient Malaysian undergraduate writers use a higher frequency of MD devices in their writing than their low English proficiency counterparts. The high English proficiency level students also utilize a greater variety of MD forms as opposed to the low proficiency students. Intriguingly, Mahmood et al. (2017) also discovered that Pakistani undergraduate learners were more likely to use interactional MD markers than interactive ones in their corpus of argumentative writings, like Chan & Tan's (2010) findings. Transition Markers were discovered to be the most utilized feature by L2 learners.

Tan & Eng (2014) investigated the use of MD among Malaysian undergraduates. The results indicated that between the two main domains of MD both groups of writers exhibited a greater preference for the use of interactional MD than the interactive. Between the two groups of writers, it was the HEP writers who exhibited a higher frequency of use for both the interactive and interactional MD. In terms of the forms used, the HEP writers also used a greater variety of MD forms when compared to the LEP writers.

Using Hyland's Interactional MD Table (2005), Zali et al. (2020) analyzed the corpus of 200 evaluation essays written by Malaysian ESL learners enrolled in hard and soft science courses. The purpose of the study was to determine if learners in both groups used the same amount of meta-discourse, if learners in distinct course groups chose MD differently, and if MD was utilized more or less in both courses. According to the analysis, learners in soft science subjects utilized more MD characteristics than learners in hard science courses. In addition, it was observed that learners frequently used self-mentions and had few attribution indicators in their writing.

Zali et al. (2021) contrasted the use of interactive and interactional MD research on how L2 learners constructed MD functions. 200 evaluative essays written by undergraduate computer science and business learners at UiTM were analyzed based on Hyland's framework (2005). The objective is to determine how frequently and what types of meta-discourses are employed, as well as whether learners in different course groups make decisions differently. In both courses, interactive learning was utilized more frequently than interactive MD, according to research. Self-references are the most prevalent trait, whereas attitude indicators are the least prevalent. Both courses' transition markers share the same distinguishing characteristic. The distinction between the two courses is the transition markers. In terms of evidence, business administration courses are the least specific, in contrast to computer science frame markers.

Mohamed et al. (2021) conducted an MD study in 2021 using 195 potent persuasive essays authored by Malaysian student authors. The study examined the frequency of MD markers used in both organizational and interpersonal discourse markers in the essays of good undergraduate writers, as well as how these MD markers are identified and classified into main categories and subcategories, according to Lon et al. (2012)'s simplified MD framework for ESL lay writers. According to the findings, college learners use more

organizational discourse markers. Interpersonal discourse markers are less common in the corpus because of the writer's usage of these norms to draw readers into the text's discussion. In this circumstance, these inexperienced college learners would use fewer hedges. This quantitative research was conducted to look at the relationship between ESL learners' awareness of MD and their writing performance.

Methodology

This quantitative research which is a preliminary study was conducted to look at the relationship between ESL learners' awareness of MD and their writing performance. The site of this study is a local university in Malaysia. Specifically, ESL learners from the diploma level were considered for the study. By utilizing purposive sampling method, the participants of this study were 60 undergraduates taking English classes, specifically they are taught writing in the class. They were purposefully selected because it assumed that they had attained a certain level of proficiency in writing in English in their first year of the University. Also, they have acquired a certain level of proficiency in the English language based on the minimum entry requirement for admission into the University. In fact, the participants were not given any formal MD teaching in their writing class.

Two instruments; a writing task and a questionnaire were utilized for data collection. The writing task was given to the participants to ascertain their writing quality. They were given two hours to write individually an expository essay with the similar topic, "Ways to overcome Cyber-bullying". They were asked to write about 250-300 words for the essay. The writing task is a part of their assessment in the English class which is the full mark is 20. Then, the writing will be evaluated by three different raters using common holistic essay scoring rubric with three components; language 10, content 7 and organization 3 as attached in appendix.

The questionnaire was used to collect data regarding the participants' knowledge of MD. The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first section elicits the participants' background information which includes their grades, educational background knowledge of MD and academic writing. The second section gathers participants' experiences writing in English. The third section elicits participants' information about MD and the last section is about the information on the participants' use of MD devices in their writing. Sections C and D are adapted from Bogdanović & Mirović (2018). The modifications are made to suit the current study as this study focused on ESL learners. Table 2 below shows the reliability result of questionnaires done using Cronbach's alpha during the pilot study. Each item of questions has obtained more than .80 which indicates good internal consistency (Cohen, 1988). This suggests that the items within the instrument are reliably measuring the same underlying construct, and the responses are consistent across items. According to commonly accepted thresholds, a value above 0.70 is considered

acceptable, while values above 0.80 indicate good reliability (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). Having obtained permission from the Department, the consent of the participants was sorted for. They were asked to fill in an informed consent form. In fact, this study received ethical approval from the university's Research Ethics Committee (REC/04/2024 (PG/MR/4)).

Table 2: Reliability Statistics Result of questionnaires

No.	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
1.	Part A: Personal Information	.892
2.	Part B: Writing Experience	.922
3.	Part C: Information Related to Metadiscourse	.842
4.	Part D: Use of Metadiscourse in Essay	.852

The data were collected in two stages. In the first stage, the questionnaire was administered to the participants to fill out and submit to the researchers. In the second stage, the participants were given a topic to individually write an essay of about 250-300 words within 2 hours. As mentioned previously, two sets of data were gathered, and the data were analyzed using different methods of data analysis. To achieve the first objective of the study on the ESL learners' awareness of MD, the data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed descriptively using SPSS. To ease the comparison, the mean of collected data was divided into three categories; high, moderate and low. Finally, to achieve the second objective of the study which is to examine the relationship between the undergraduates' awareness of MD and writing performance, the essays written by the participants were graded by three experienced raters. Similarly, the participants' writing scores were compared with those of MD awareness by using the mean category as mentioned before.

Findings

The data gathered for the study were analyzed and the findings are presented based on the research questions of the study.

Research Question 1: What is the ESL Learners' Awareness of Metadiscourse?

To achieve the first research question of the study, the data obtained using the questionnaire were analyzed. From the responses of the questionnaire, it was found that all the participants have more than ten years' experience of learning English, since from their primary and secondary schools to their tertiary level. The other findings are presented in the following subsections which include their writing experiences that are considered difficult by many of the participants; information related to MD where the majority of the participants are not much aware of the term and the utilization of MD in their writings.

Writing Experiences

The participants were also asked to rate their experiences and perceptions of writing in English by indicating the extent to which they agree with each statement by using a 5 Likert scale; 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree and 5= strongly agree. From their responses, it is revealed that the majority (about 65 %) of the participants agreed that they like writing in English. However, items 2 shows that writing in English is a very difficult task for many of the participants, especially in organizing my ideas in a logical sequence, developing ideas and using the appropriate style of writing as indicated by items 6, 7 and 8 respectively.

Table 3: Summary of the Participants' Writing Experiences

S/N	Item	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)	M	SD
1.	I like writing in English.	0.0	10.0	30.0	58.3	1.7	3.5167	.70089
2.	Writing in English is a very difficult task.	0.0	13.3	16.7	65.0	5.0	3.6167	.78312
3.	To succeed in my university studies, I must write well in English.	0.0	1.7	3.3	66.7	28.3	4.2167	.58488
4.	I have difficulty choosing an appropriate word/phrase in my writing.	0.0	10.0	33.3	56.7	0.0	3.4667	.67565
5.	I tend to use wrong grammar in my writing.	0.0	13.3	45.0	40.0	1.7	3.3000	.72017
6.	I have problems organizing my ideas in a logical sequence.	0.0	3.3	18.3	71.7	6.7	3.8167	.59636
7.	I have difficulties developing ideas for my writing.	0.0	1.7	23.3	70.0	1.7	3.7833	.55515
8.	I have difficulty using the appropriate style of writing.	0.0	5.0	15.0	78.3	1.7	3.7667	.56348

Information Related to Metadiscourse

As for the awareness of MD, the participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they are aware of MD with 1= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= undecided, 4=agree and 5= strongly agree. The results have shown that more than 50 per cent of the participants were unaware of the term as shown by all the items in the questionnaire because they disagreed and were unsure. It is further indicated that most of the participants neither premeditate the use of MD while writing in English nor pay much attention to MD when writing in English as shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of the participants' information on metadiscourse

S/N	Item	1(%)	2(%)	3(%)	4(%)	5(%)	M	SD
1.	I know what metadiscourse is.	11.7	21.7	25.0	41.7	0.0	2.9667	1.05713
2.	I premeditate the use of metadiscourse while writing in English.	10.0	6.7	35.0	48.3	0.0	3.2167	.95831
3.	I pay much attention to metadiscourse when writing English.	8.3	11.7	31.7	48.3	0.0	3.200	.95314
4.	I have a set of metadiscourse that I regularly use while writing in English.	8.3	13.3	26.7	51.7	0.0	3.2167	.97584

Use of Metadiscourse

As for the use of the MD device, the participants were asked to choose numbers 1-5 to indicate how often they use the following expressions when writing English: 1=I don't use them at all, 2=I rarely use them, 3=I occasionally use them, 4= I use them quite often, 5=I always use them. The results of the questionnaire show that the expressions that explicitly refer to you as the author (I, we, my, our) become the highest mean scores of (M 4.1833). Followed by expressions that refer to writing organization, express sequence, label text stages, announce discourse goals, or indicate topic shift (finally, to conclude, the purpose is, first, next) have the second-highest mean scores of (M 4.1000). While the expressions that refer to the source of information from other texts/papers/ books (according to X, Z 1990, Y states, as shown in [1]) recorded the lowest mean scores (M 2.633) in Table 4.

To enable the researchers to ascertain the participants' awareness of MD, the results of the participants' writing experiences, information on MD and the use of MD were categorized into three levels (high, moderate and low). The participants' writing experiences as presented in Table 6, have shown that the majority of them have a positive attitude but face a lot of difficulties of writing in English. The participants' awareness of information on MD is presented in Table 7 which shows that a larger percentage of the participants (60.7%) have low information on MD. Finally, the results of the analysis of the participants' use of MD in academic writing as presented in Table 8 show low use of MD by the participants.

Table 5: Summary of the participants' use of metadiscourse in academic writing

S/N	Item	1(%)	2 (%)	3(%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	M	SD
1.	Expressions to indicate semantic relation between main clauses and main sections in your writing, (but, thus, in addition, consequently etc).	1.7	0.0	28.3	53.3	16.7	3.8333	.76284

2.	Expressions that refer to writing organization, express sequence, label text stages, announce discourse goals, or indicate topic shift (finally, to conclude, the purpose is, first, next)	0.0	6.7	8.3	53.3	31.7	4.1000	.81719
3.	Expressions that refer to information in other parts of your writing (noted above, see Fig., in section 2)	5.0	41.7	35.0	18.3	0.0	2.667	.83700
4.	Expressions that refer to the source of information from other texts/papers/ books (according to X, Z 1990, Y states, as shown in [1])	13.3	31.7	35.0	18.3	1.7	2.633	.99092
5.	Expressions that restate and explain information for better understanding (namely, e.g., such as, in other words)	0.0	5.0	31.7	46.7	16.7	3.7500	.79458
6.	Expressions that withhold your full commitment to the information (might, perhaps, possibly, about, approximately, to some extent)	1.7	20.0	43.3	30.0	5.0	3.1667	.86684
7.	Expressions that emphasize your certainty in the information stated (in fact, definitely, it is clear that)	1.7	10.0	40.0	41.7	6.7	3.4167	.82937
8.	Expressions that explicitly express your attitude towards information in your writing (unfortunately, I agree, surprisingly, promising idea, important contribution)	1.7	10.0	45.0	30.0	13.3	3.4333	.90884
9.	Expressions that build relationship with the reader (consider, note that, you can see that)	0.0	16.7	36.7	40	6.7	3.3667	.84305
10.	Expressions that explicitly refer to you as the author (I, we, my, our)	0.0	5.0	11.7	43.3	40.0	4.1833	.83345

Table 6: Level of participants' writing experiences

Category	Frequency	Percentage
High	26	43.3
Moderate	22	36.7
Low	12	20.0
Total	**60**	**100.0**

Table 7: Level of the participants' information on metadiscourse

Category	Frequency	Percentage

High	20	33.3
Moderate	12	20
Low	28	46.7
Total	**60**	**100.0**

Table 8: Level of the participants' use of metadiscourse in academic writing

Category	Frequency	Percentage
High	20	33.3
Moderate	18	30.0
Low	22	36.7
Total	**60**	**100.0**

Research Question 2: What is the Relationship between the ESL Learners' Awareness of Metadiscourse and Their Writing Performance?

To achieve the second objective of the study, which is to examine the relationship between the ESL learners' awareness of MD and writing performance, the participants' essays were graded, and the scores were compared to the results of their MD awareness obtained from the questionnaire. The average scores of the participants' essay is Content 5, Language 6 and Organization 2 as indicated in Table 9. Based on this common holistic essay scoring rubric (see appendix A), the participants' essays show a good response to the question, having clear and effective introduction and thesis statement. The essays contain considerable understanding of ideas, information and issues. In fact, they have clear topic sentences with reasonably developed and relevant details or examples. The essays also consist of appropriate and correct vocabulary and also adequate wrap-up of main points. As for language, the participants' essay contains several grammatical errors; occasionally affecting the readers' understanding and consist of minor errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation. Lastly, for the organization, participants' essays have adequate structure of introduction, body and conclusion, appropriate and sporadic transitions and satisfactory paragraphing. The results of the participants' essay were further categorized into three: high (from 16-20), moderate (from 15.9-10.1) and low (below 10). As indicated in Table 10, it shows the learners' score is moderate level.

Table 9: Summary of the participants' writing scores

S/N	Components	Scores
1	Content	5
2	Language	6
3	Organization	2

Table 10: Level of Participants' Writing Quality

Category	Frequency	Percentage
High	24	40.0

Moderate	34	56.67
Low	2	3.33
Total	**60**	**100.0**

Discussion

Therefore, to answer the first research question of the study, it could be seen that despite the positive attitude and experiences of writing in English, most participants have low awareness of MD devices and slightly low use of the devices in their writing. This study agreed with the study conducted by Aliyu & Korau (2020) which revealed that learners are unaware of MD devices. It may seem surprising that the participants have very high positive experiences of writing in English. but low information on MD. It is not surprising because while filling out the questionnaires, the participants informed the researchers that they were unaware of the term MD. Most of the participants revealed that they were unfamiliar with the MD term. Furthermore, the results may appear contradictory in that the participants have little information on MD but slightly moderate use of MD devices in their writing. They may use the devices subconsciously.

The findings have proved the study conducted by Haruna et al., (2018) which suggested that many of the undergraduates were not exposed to MD because they write academic essays in the same manner they speak. The findings further agree with the findings of (Mat Zali et al., 2020; Zali et al., 2021) which observed that learners prefer to employ specific MD devices while ignoring or using less of other types in their writing. This suggests the students' lack of MD awareness. This is because of over usage or underusage of MD could both affect writing quality negatively.

To answer the second research objective, it was found that writing performance of the most of participants are moderate but they have low awareness of the use of MD devices. Thus, it could be concluded that there is a slightly positive relationship between the participants' awareness of MD devices and their writing performance. The finding is not surprising because many studies show that MD are essential devices that ensure effective academic writing. Thus, since most of the participants have low awareness of MD, their writing performance is presupposed to be low or moderate as well. The findings agree with the findings of previous studies on MD. For instance, Tan & Eng (2014) show that high English-proficient Malaysian undergraduate writers use a higher frequency of MD devices in their writing than their low English proficiency counterparts. The high English proficiency level students also utilize a greater variety of MD forms as opposed to the low proficiency students. Based on the results, it could be concluded that the high the English proficiency of students, the greater their awareness of academic writing conventions and MD. On the other hand, the lower English proficiency of students, the lower their awareness of academic writing conventions and MD.

Conclusion

The study aims to examine the ESL learners' awareness of MD and its relationship with their expository writing performance. MD has been neglected by many researchers in investing in the writing skills. The findings show that the participants have low awareness of MD and there is a slightly positive relationship between their awareness and their writing performance. The findings are crucial as they suggest that awareness and usage of MD can help to develop learners' mostly expository writing. The findings also reveal the need to teach learners most especially the awareness of the readers and how to convince the audience in their writing, as it is shown that generally explicit instruction of MD markers significantly improves learners' writing ability (Aliyu & Korau, 2020). The need is crucial since the teaching of MD is neglected even among language instructors. While assessing learners' writings, lecturers, regardless of the field of study, should place much emphasis on how learners convince their audience in their writing.

The study implicates the need to teach MD markers to ESL learners during their writing class. It is because when they have this MD knowledge, the learners will be more aware and use these MD markers in their writing which helps them to connect the sentences cohesively and coherently and also communicate with the readers of the essay successfully. To sum up, while MD awareness is important in improving ESL learners' writing, teachers, instructors and lecturers should cooperate to create the learners' awareness and ensure its usage in any ESL writing.

There are a few limitations of the study. One limitation of this study is the small sample size (n = 60), which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. The use of purposive sampling may have introduced bias, as the participants were selected based on specific characteristics and may not represent the wider ESL learner population. As data were collected through self-reported questionnaires and writing score, there is a possibility of social desirability bias affecting participants' responses. Due to time limitations, the study was conducted over a short period, which may not reflect changes in learners' MD use over time. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into MD use, and it lays the groundwork for future research to expand upon these findings with larger and more diverse samples.

Therefore, further studies can randomly select a larger number of participants. The study only describes the undergraduate learners' MD awareness levels and expository writing performance which does not give any treatment. Thus, future studies could adopt an experimental research design to investigate how to increase ESL learners' awareness and usage of MD in academic writing.

Author Contributions

MMZ conceived the study and designed the experiments. MMZ, NAAR & ACM. conducted the study and collected the data. MMZ. analyzed the data and prepared the figures. NAAR contributed to the data

interpretation and literature review. MMZ & ACM. wrote the first draft of the manuscript. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix A

Expository Essay Rubrics

SCORE	7-6	5-4	3-2	1	0
Content (7 marks)	Excellent response to the question Well-developed and engaging introduction Very clear/effective thesis statement	Good response to the question Clear and effective introduction Clear and relevant thesis statement	Adequate response to the question Adequate introduction Satisfactory thesis statement	Inadequate response to the question Inadequate introduction Weak thesis statement, or off topic	Task not attempted

	Thorough, insightful understanding of ideas, information, and issues Effective topic sentences with well-developed details/examples Accurate and effective vocabulary Effective and powerful closure (Beyond restating the thesis)	Considerable understanding of ideas, information, and issues Clear topic sentences with reasonably developed and relevant details/ examples. Appropriate and correct vocabulary Adequate wrap-up of main points	Some understanding of ideas, information, and issues Adequately developed topic sentences with satisfactorily developed details and examples Adequate vocabulary or vague at times Simple restatement of the thesis statement as closure	Inadequate understanding of ideas, information, and issues Weak topic sentences with inadequately developed/ and irrelevant details/examples Inappropriate or incorrect vocabulary Abrupt closure/ Repetition of the thesis statement	
SCORE	**10-9**	**8-7**	**6-5**	**4-3**	**2-1**
Language (10 marks)	Hardly any grammatical errors; barely noticeable Hardly any errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation	Very few grammatical errors; noticeable but not significantly affecting understanding. Minimal errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation	Several grammatical errors; occasionally affecting understanding Minor errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation	Many grammatical errors; consistently affecting understanding Many gross errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation	Serious grammatical errors; affecting meaning and understanding Too many gross errors in spelling, capitalisation or punctuation
SCORE	**3**	**2**	**1**		
Organization (3 marks)	Very clear structure of introduction, body and conclusion	Adequate structure of introduction, body and conclusion	Inappropriate or incorrect structure of introduction, body and conclusion		

	Effective, mature and appropriate transitions	Appropriate and sporadic transitions	Incorrect transitions/ no attempt to use transitions		
	Clearly organised paragraphs	Satisfactory paragraphing	Inadequate or no paragraphing		

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