Research Article

Metadiscourse in Dissertation Acknowledgments: Exploration of Gender Differences in EFL Texts

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Abstract

Metadiscourse, as an important analytic tool, was rarely used to explore the generic structure of Ph.D. dissertation acknowledgments, and within this genre, the role of gender has been unexplored. This study employs interactional resources within the metadiscourse framework (Hyland, 2005) to investigate gender differences in 120 dissertation acknowledgments written by male and female Saudi students at U.S. universities. The results revealed a number of similarities and differences. Both genders employed thanking God, a move that was not detected in English texts analysed by Hyland (2004). The results also showed the absence of hedging devices and engagement markers from all texts. Writers, however, distributed the boosting and attitude markers differently as female writers applied boosters more when acknowledging moral support while male writers used boosters more when thanking for academic assistance, while the opposite occurred with attitude markers. The employment of self-mentions revealed a clearer gender difference as females applied them more with different forms than males did. Overall, the analysis of dissertation acknowledgments using metadiscourse framework showed that metadiscourse boundaries are flexible as they can be adjusted to fulfill the nature of the genre it applies to. Thus, the study recommends that more research should be conducted to investigate different academic genres and part-genres to develop our understanding of the application of metadiscourse. It closes with some pedagogical implications.

Keywords

Gender • Dissertation acknowledgments • Metadiscourse • Interactional resources

Metadiscourse was proved to be an important social theory in academic writing which, according to Hyland (2005), functions as "an important concept for analysing the ways writers engage with their subject matter and readers, allowing us to compare the strategies used by members of different social groups" (p. 41). It is defined generally as "the commentary on a text made by its producer in the course of speaking or writing" (Hyland, 2017, p. 16). Specifically, metadiscourse is understood as "text about the evolving text, or the writer's explicit commentary on her own ongoing discourse, displaying an awareness of the current text or its language *per se*, and of the current writer and reader *qua* writer and reader" (Ädel, 2006, p. 183). Metadiscourse, however, is a fuzzy concept in the sense of delineating its boundaries, i.e. what elements can be counted as metadiscursive and what cannot (Ädel, 2006; Hyland, 2017). Due to this fuzziness, researchers have taken several approaches to investigate metadiscourse. The broad approach (by Crismore et al., 1993; Hyland, 2005; Vande Kopple, 1985, 1988) includes textual and interpersonal resources, while the narrow approach (by Bunton, 1999; Dahl, 2004; Mauranen, 1993) considers only the textual functions. The middle approach (by Ädel, 2006) resembles the broad approach but it excludes stance, i.e., expressions of opinions and attitudes. Ädel (2006) stressed the importance of classifying references to the world from those to the world of discourse, arguing that only the latter function as metadiscourse resources.

The popular taxonomy of the broad approach (as in Hyland, 2005) consists of two main categories: interactive and interactional. The interactive category consists of transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses. The interactional category consists of hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. The elements in the interactive category are used to provide organized and coherent text, while those in the interactional category are employed to establish interaction between writers and their readers.

Metadiscourse has been investigated in different genres and contexts such as doctoral dissertations (Bunton, 1999), master's dissertation (Akbas, 2014; Akbas & Hardman, 2017), introductory coursebooks (Hyland, 1999), slogans and headlines (Fuertes-Olivera, Velasco-Sacristan, Arribas-Bano, & Samaniego-Fernandez, 2001), student writing (Gardner & Han, 2018) and research articles (RAs) across disciplines (Blagojevic, 2004) and across languages (Akbas & Hardman, 2018; Alotaibi, 2015, 2016; Zarei & Mansoori, 2007). In order to see how metadiscourse differs across academic languages, Zarei and Mansoori (2007) compared Persian RAs to English texts, focusing on two disciplines, namely computer engineering and applied linguistics. The results showed that interactive resources were used more than interactional elements in both sets of languages. Interestingly, the same results were found by Bogdanović and Mirović (2018) when comparing Serbian and English RAs written by Serbian authors. Further analysis indicated that interactive resources

were used more in Persian texts compared to their English counterparts, while the opposite occurred with interactional resources as they were employed more in English texts. According to the authors, the tendency to use more interactional resources in English texts may indicate that "the writers in English are inclined to have a closer association with the reader" compared to the writers in Persian (p. 32). Another cross-linguistic comparison was made between English and Arabic by Alotaibi (2015) who examined paired abstracts (Arabic and English) published in English RAs written by Arab authors. In terms of metadiscourse features in the interactive category, Arabic abstracts employed more transition markers while English texts favoured frame markers and code-glosses. Concerning the features in the interactional category, it was found that English texts employed hedges, boosters, and attitude markers more than their Arabic counterparts. Similarly, Alotaibi (2016) investigated whether the use of metadiscourse markers differ in texts written in Arabic and in English by native speakers of Arabic. He found that Arab writers used more metadiscourse markers when publishing in English more than when they write in Arabic. Specifically, he found that the introduction sections included more metadiscourse expressions than the conclusions, especially with the use of text-oriented metadiscourse compared to the participant-oriented metadiscourse. Based on these studies, it can be concluded that English texts whether written by native English speakers or EFL researchers are characterized by using more interactional resources than texts in other languages.

Blagojevic (2004) extended the investigation to disciplinary variations. Specifically, she examined the use of metadiscourse in RAs written by English and Norwegian writers in three academic disciplines, namely sociology, psychology and philosophy. Overall, the results have not yielded significant differences in terms of the language background of writers but there were some important disciplinary variations. Specifically, psychology writers showed the highest degree of uniformity in writing, while the opposite was true with philosophy writers who employed different metadiscourse patterns, and sociology writers who took a position between the two. For example, writers of psychology papers "are unwilling to use the explicit ways to announce to or remind the readers to the parts of the material which follows or precedes" and "are also reluctant to use metadiscoursal markers by which they inform the readers about the kind of discourse actions they are going to perform, (using verbs such as *to present*, *to review*, *to give an example*), etc." (p. 66). On the other hand, writers of philosophy papers "are very much inclined to make direct commentaries," i.e. explicitly engaging with readers (p. 66).

Introductory coursebooks was another genre examined by Hyland (1999) who compared the use of metadiscourse in introductory coursebooks and RAs in three academic disciplines, namely biology, marketing, and applied linguistics. The analysis indicated that the interactive elements constituted about 70% of all metadiscourse

in the coursebooks, while both sets of resources (i.e. interactive and interactional) were similar in percentage in the genre of RA. In general, the scarce employment of interactional resources in coursebooks can be attributed to the fact that "the primary goal of textbooks authors is to make intellectual content accessible rather than to provide undergraduates with the means to interact effectively with other community members" (p. 21). While most of the studies focused on the genre of the RA, Bunton (1999) has found the doctoral dissertation to be an interesting genre to explore metadiscourse conventions. The analysis using the model of metatext has detected a high number of metatextual references that were used at chapter level to serve cohesion and coherence. Clearly, these levels of metatext are not found in shorter texts such as RAs which lack chapters.

In addition, metadiscourse has been used to investigate the genre of print advertising to reveal how slogans and headlines are constructed. Fuertes-Olivera, Velasco-Sacristan, Arribas-Bano, and Samaniego-Fernandez (2001) found that metadiscourse was used as a pragmatic strategy to inform and persuade readers in this particular genre. Specifically, they found that "copywriters use person markers, hedges, and emphatics for alerting addressees about the artificial relationship they have with advertisers, and that they also use endophoric markers and evidentials for forming coherent texts and establishing intertextuality" (p. 1305). Gardner and Han (2018) focused on the use of transitions of contrast such as *however, while, on the other hand*, etc. in texts written by Chinese and British students. They found on one hand that Chinese students employed a greater variety of transitions than their English counterparts. On the other hand, they found that the transition *however* was used significantly more by English students.

Metadiscourse was also investigated on the personal level of the author. For instance, Bogdanović and Mirović (2018) investigated the adoption of metadiscourse by young researchers, realizing that this adoption is both conscious and unconscious. The research demonstrated that young researchers frequently thought about metadiscourse expressions, they often sought advice on the internet and they changed metadiscourse expressions after recommendations by reviewers or journal guidelines, which suggests that teaching metadiscourse as an academic discipline has positive pedagogical implications.

Few studies, however, have focused on the influence of gender on the way academic language is used, particularly through metadiscourse lenses. Crismore, Markkanen, and Steffensen (1993) investigated argumentative texts written by male and female students in the United States and Finland. Overall, they found that male students used more metadiscourse than female students. In particular, Finnish males preferred to use hedges compared to US males, and similarly Finnish females used more hedges than US. females. For attitude markers, Finnish females used them the most while U.S. males used them the least.

Tse and Hyland (2008) based their analysis on gender differences in book reviews in the fields of biology and philosophy. They found that both genders had used interactional resources more than interactive ones, with hedges and engagement markers being the most employed. In particular, they found that male reviewers used metadiscourse markers more than their female counterparts, especially hedges, boosters, and engagement markers. Despite these differences, the authors stressed the complexity of the relation between gender and language showing that "there is no one-to-one relation" but there are "multiple relations and meanings cross-cut by discipline" (p. 1246). These gender discrepancies, however, were not found in Yavari and Kashani's (2013) study of metadiscourse in RAs published in top-tier journals in applied linguistics field. In terms of using metadiscourse categories (i.e. interactive and interactional), the study has not found any significant variations between the two genders. In some sections of the RAs, however, some metadiscourse features were used more by one gender group. In the introduction and discussion/ conclusion sections, for example, female authors used more attitude markers, while in the introduction section, male writers employed more evidentials, and in the results section, male writers used more hedges.

In fact, Crismore et al. (1993) highlighted the importance of scrutinizing the use of metadiscourse using linguistic and cultural lenses considering that "studies are needed that analyze the texts of professional writers from various countries, comparing their metadiscourse use to that of inexperienced writers" (p. 69). In response to this suggestion, the present study uses the interactional resources in the metadiscourse model by Hyland (2005) to explore gender differences in acknowledgments accompanying English Ph.D. dissertations written by EFL students. The next section provides a short review of previous studies on dissertation acknowledgment sections and illustrates the generic structure of this important genre.

Generic Structure in Dissertation Acknowledgements

Though studies on dissertation acknowledgments are scarce, the existing literature shows differences in the way researchers approach this academic genre. Hyland (2004) examined English texts across a range of fields to explore the disciplinary variations. The texts were written by Hong Kong university students and consisted of 20 MA and 20 PhD dissertations from six academic fields: applied linguistics, biology, business studies, computer science, electronic engineering, and public administration. Hyland detected three rhetorical moves; Move 1: *Reflecting* move, Move 2: *Thanking* move, which included four steps: Step 1: *presenting participants*, Step 2: *thanking for academic assistance*, Step 3: *thanking for resources*, Step 4: *thanking for moral support*, and finally Move 3: *Announcing* move, which included two steps: Step 1: *accepting responsibility*, and Step 2: *dedicating the thesis*. While the picture seemed

to be complex, disciplinary variations were clearly reflected in the soft sciences fields where there was a high frequency of Move 1, Step 2 of Move 2, and Step 1 of Move 3. Overall, the *thanking* move was the only move found obligatory, and only 12 out of 240 dissertations included all the three moves. While Step 2: *thanking for academic assistance* occurred in all texts, only 20% of acknowledgments included all four steps in the *thanking* move.

Jaroenkitboworn (2014) used Hyland's (2004) model to investigate English acknowledgements in PhD dissertations written by Thai students, particularly the generic structure and linguistic patterns of gratitude expressions used in 70 acknowledgements in the field of English language study. The results revealed the employment of three moves: the *thanking* move, *announcing* move, and *signing-off* move. The first move was obligatory and the remaining ones were optional. Within the *thanking* move, three steps were found obligatory: *thanking for academic assistance*, *thanking for data and documentation work support*, and *thanking for moral support*. The *signing-off* move, where the author writers his or her name at the end of the acknowledgment, occurred in 21 texts (out of 70). In addition to the results of the generic structure, Jaroenkitboworn (2014) showed that the analysis of the linguistic features such as the use of nominalization and passive voice revealed that "Thai culture is different from the English culture in terms of the way in which it shows sincerity and views of politeness, and way of living of the family" (p. 126). This is rather an interesting finding which inspired the author to argue that "even though written in English, acknowledgments, as a genre, have to be in harmony with the sociocultural context where they are generated" (Jaroenkitboworn, 2014, p. 126).

In a similar vein, Al Ali (2006) used Hyland's (2004) model to explore the generic patterns of 100 acknowledgments written in English by Arabic native speakers in a range of fields. The major difference between this study to that by Hyland (2004) was in the employment of *thanking God* which occurred in 19% of the texts, a component that always, when employed, occurred at the outset of the acknowledgment section. The author attributed this finding to the religion and culture of the writers; a similar remark made in Jaroenkitboworn (2014) who detected the influence of Thai culture on sincerity and politeness. In addition, Al-Ali (2006) found that "the Arab writers tend to use a more friendly and emotional tone to foreground their commitment to their kinships and the members of their extended family" (p. 40).

In another study, Al-Ali (2010) focused on 100 acknowledgments written in Arabic by doctoral Arabic native speakers from Jordan. The analysis showed a clear cross-linguistic variation with a move structure of eight rhetorical components. The following are the moves that have been detected followed by their number of occurrences which is out of 100: Opening (n=25), Praising and Thanking Allah

(n=70), Thanking Supervisors and Other Academics (n=100), Acknowledging Access to Resources (n=62), Thanking for Moral Support (n=61), Invoking and Blessing (n=68), Closing (n=52), and Signing off (n=20). According to Al-Ali, however, no single text contained all of these components and presented in this order.

This brief review of studies on dissertation acknowledgments indicates that this genre requires further scrutiny from researchers to unravel the nuances that may affect the way dissertation acknowledgments are structured. Gender is an unexplored variable despite its significant role in academic writing. The present study fills this gap by examining 120 (60 by males and 60 by females) Ph.D. dissertation acknowledgments written in English by native speakers of Arabic. There are several Arab nations in the Arab world where different cultural and religious beliefs may strongly influence the way students use academic writing. Hence, this study controls these variations by restricting the data collection to texts written by Saudi students at U.S. universities during 2014-2015.

Method

The data consisted of 120 dissertation acknowledgments written by doctoral Saudi students (60 females and 60 males) in the United States during 2014-2015. The dissertations belonged to a range of disciplines and were retrieved from the SDL (Saudi Digital Library) website which provided a link to access dissertations by Saudi students in different countries, including the United States, where students upload their dissertations to the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission in that country. The study explores how doctoral students employ the interactional resources within the metadiscourse model while expressing their gratitude in the acknowledgment sections. For data analysis, two frameworks have been employed. First, Hyland's (2004) model was used to examine the generic structure of acknowledgments. Second, Hyland's (2005) model was used to identify metadiscourse patterns. Also, Ädel's (2006) approach that distinguishes references to the real world from those to the world of discourse has been taken into consideration.

The first examination of the generic structure based on Hyland's (2004) framework showed the employment of the moves and steps provided in the model at different degrees. It also showed the employment of the *thanking and praising God* move which was not found in English texts analysed by Hyland (2004) but was seen in Arabic texts (Al-Ali, 2010) and in English texts written by Arab students (Al-Ali, 2006). In order to focus on gratitude expressions, I focused my analysis on the *thanking* move and excluded the *reflecting* and *announcing* moves. Likewise, Step 2 in the *thanking* move, i.e. *presenting the participants* was removed due to its scarcity and because it does not clearly function as a thanking step and thus was replaced by

thanking and praising God step. Based on these modifications, the model used for the study is represented as the following:

Thanking move

    S1. Thanking and praising God

    S2. Thanking for academic assistance

    S3. Thanking for resources

    S4. Thanking for moral support

The second part of the study was to explore metadiscourse patterns in the texts with a focus on interactional resources: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers.

The texts were printed out and coded and then were analysed manually first for move and step structure and then for metadiscourse resources. For validity and reliability purposes, the analyses were reviewed by a specialist in applied linguistics. While most of the patterns were straightforward, there were some cases that could not be assigned to any of the moves and steps of the model. For example, the openings in (1) and (2), and the closings in (3) and (4).

(1)   Introspective and deductive learning is a privilege that is truly a divine gift. (F43)

(2)   Whoever does not thank people does not thank God. (F58)

(3)   May Allah protect you all and bless you with faith, health, and happiness. (F33)

(4)   I conducted this research not only to earn a degree but also to increase my knowledge. (M25)

Such cases, however, were previously identified in Al-Ali (2010) and he assigned them as *opening* and *closing* moves, respectively. In this study, they are excluded because they do not belong to the *thanking* move which is the only move being analysed.

Regarding the analysis of metadiscourse, I used Ädel's (2006) assertion to exclude markers that refer to people outside the world of discourse. This policy resulted in excluding a high number of engagement markers as they addressed people in the real world. For example, the uses of *you* in (5) and (6) refer to the supervisor and the wife, respectively, not to the general reader.

(5)   I would like to express my deepest gratitude and appreciation to my supervisor… I would like to thank <u>you</u> for your insights… (M2)

(6)   To my beautiful wife…. I cannot thank <u>you</u> enough for your love. (M14).

As will be explained later, Ädel's (2006) methodology was treated with flexibility as there was an overlap between references to people in the real world and individuals in the world of discourse. Thus, cases that clearly address people in real world were excluded but cases that belong to the world of discourse were counted.

Results

The Generic Structure in Male and Female Acknowledgments

The examination of the *thanking* move reflected that *thanking for academic assistance* and *thanking for moral support* were obligatory steps in male and female dissertation acknowledgments. As shown in Table 1, the former step occurred in all texts while around 90% of texts included the latter. The steps of *thanking God* and *thanking for resources* were optional but with clear differences in employment between the two sets of texts. Female authors included each of these steps in nearly half of their texts, while their male counterparts employed *thanking for resources* steps in nearly 70% of the their texts but employed *thanking God* steps in around 40%.

Table 1
Frequency of the Thanking Move in Male and Female Dissertation Acknowledgments

Steps in Thanking move	Male (out of 60)	Female (out of 60)
Thanking and Praising God	23 (38.3%)	31 (51.6%)
Thanking for academic assistance	60 (100%)	60 (100%)
Thanking for resources	41 (68.3%)	31 (51.6%)
Thanking for moral support	52 (86.6%)	54 (90%)

Patterns of Interactional Metadiscourse in Male and Female Acknowledgments

This section reports the findings regarding the employment of metadiscourse patterns found in the steps of the *thanking* move. Surprisingly, the resources of hedges and engagement markers were not found in the corpus. Although there were many cases of *you* which can be counted as engagement markers, the rigorous approach adopted for

Table 2
Frequency of Interactional Resources in the Steps of the Thanking Move in Both Groups

Steps in the Thanking move	Boosters		Attitude Markers		Self-References		Total No. of MD Occurrences	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Thanking God	11	8	7	5	35	74	53	87
Thanking for academic assistance	57	44	156	166	493	576	706	786
Thanking for resources	4	11	5	11	121	80	130	102
Thanking for moral support	68	78	124	111	320	618	512	807
Total	140	141	292	293	969	1348	1401	1782

this study (following Ädel (2006)) excluded these instances when they address people in the real world and not readers in general. Hence, only three components found in the interactional category: boosters, attitude markers, and self-references.

As shown in Table 2, female students deployed a higher proportion of metadiscourse items than male authors did (1782 vs. 1401). While both genders used almost the same number of boosters and attitude markers, they distributed them differently. Concerning boosters, Hyland (1998) argued that they "allow writers to express conviction and assert a proposition with confidence, representing a strong claim about a state of affairs" as well as they "mark involvement and solidarity with an audience, stressing shared information, group membership, and direct engagement with readers" (p. 350). As displayed in Table 2, both male and female writers applied boosters almost in same proportions (140 and 141, respectively). In both groups, most of boosting markers appeared in *thanking for moral support* followed by *thanking for academic assistance*. This is not surprising since these two steps occupied most of the space in the acknowledgment sections compared to the other two steps (*thanking God* and *thanking for resources*). An interesting gender difference, however, is that female writers employed boosters more when acknowledging moral support, see examples in (7), (8), (9), while male writers employed boosters more when thanking for academic assistance, see examples in (10), (11), and (12).

(7) I am greatly indebted to my family. Words cannot express how grateful I am for their sacrifices they have made on my behalf. (F31)

(8) I would like to express my sincere and heartfelt gratitude to my parents for their prayers and patience during my studies. I know that whatever I say, I shall not qualify and compensate them. (F37)

(9) I can never thank my family and friends enough for all of their support to me. (F47)

(10) Special thanks go to my secondary supervisor…He has always been at hand to listen and give advice… (M36)

(11) I am greatly indebted to my professors….who even gave me inspiration towards new inroads that I surely would not have found on my own. (M7)

(12) I would like to thank… I also thank…. Without them, this project would not have been possible. (M14)

The attitude markers were also found crucial in the texts. Female writers used more cases of attitude markers when thanking their academic supporters than their male counterparts did, while the opposite occurred with thanking for moral support. Attitude markers "indicate the writer's affective, rather than epistemic, attitudes, encoding an explicit positive or negative value that is gradable (e.g. important/very important to propositions" (Hyland, 2005, p. 149). Martin and White (2005) specified

that attitude deals with "our feelings, including emotional reactions, judgements of behaviour and evaluation of things" (p. 35). Hence, based on these functions, they provided three categories: affect (for emotional reactions), judgement (for judgement on behaviour), and appreciation (for evaluation of things) (p. 35). The extracts in (13), (14), and (15) represent these categories, respectively. The extract in (13) was written by a female writer to acknowledge moral support, while the extract in (14) was also written but a female student but to acknowledge academic assistance, and the extract in (15) was written by a male student to acknowledge for resources.

(13)   About five years ago, I moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan from Saudi Arabia. I was feeling nervous, excited, scared, homesick, blessed, and everything in between. (F20)

(14)   I am very lucky and thankful to have someone like Dr. Lee who always dedicates himself to educate his students. (F1)

(15)   My training would be impossible without the generous financial support from…. (M29)

The examination of self-reference expressions has reflected clearer gender differences as female writers used more self-mentions compared to their male counterparts (1348 and 969, respectively). Male writers employed a higher number of self-references only when thanking for resources. However, in all other steps, female writers used more self-references. In addition, as shown in Table 3, there is another gender variation in the use of self-mention as female writers employed plural forms (our, we, us) quite more than male authors. The use of *our*, for example, was used nine times by female writers but none of the male writers used it.

Table 3
Self-references in Both Groups

Self-reference	Male	Female
I	414	536
My	334	408
Me	210	367
mine	1	1
myself	3	7
our	0	9
we	5	13
Us	1	7
Researcher	1	0

Self-reference expressions were further analysed to show their distribution in the steps of thanking move (see Table 4). As stated earlier, with exception to *thanking for resources*, female writers used more self-references in the *thanking* move. *Thanking for moral support* in particular exhibited a clear difference between the male and female writers.

Table 4
Self-references across the Steps of the Thanking Move

Self-references	Thanking God		Thanking for academic assistance		Thanking for resources		Thanking for moral support	
	Male	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*	*Male*	*Female*
I	10	29	207	240	55	32	142	235
My	15	19	179	188	38	27	102	174
Me	10	25	104	140	27	21	69	181
Mine	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Myself	-	1	1	-	1	-	1	6
Our	-	-	-	3	-	-	-	6
We	-	-	-	5	-	-	5	8
Us	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	7
Researcher	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Total	35	74	493	576	121	80	320	618

The most common strategy of using the self-reference *I* is by opening with *I*, then the verb *(would like to) express*, followed by the phrase *my gratitude/gratefulness*. The extracts from (16) to (22) include self-mentions *I* and *my*. Those underlined cases refer to the writer as a producer of the text and thus were considered metadiscursive, while those with asterisk refer to the writer as an experiencer in the real world or refer to individuals and hence were not considered metadiscourse resources.

(16) I express my gratefulness and thanks to my* parents, my* lovely wife, and my* wonderful son for their love, patience, and support. (M5)

(17) I thank my* parents who have always reinforced my confidence and helped sustain my ambition. (F14)

(18) I am greatly indebted to my* family. Words cannot express how grateful I am for their sacrifice… Without their help, encouragement, and unconditional love, I* would not be who I* am today. I thank my brothers and sisters. (F31)

(19) I would like to express my deep appreciation and respect to my* advisor… for her support, guidance, and patience. She not only taught me to be a good scientist but also to be a good person. She made me a better person and I* will remember her all through my life. I am indebted to her for all the skills that I* learned during the years I* spent in her laboratory. (M6)

(20) I would like to express my gratitude to…. For their endless trust… whenever I* was lost or helpless in this journey. (M1)

(21) I would like to express my deepest gratitude for my* adviser…..(F3)

(22) My gratitude goes out to my* parents…(F34)

The self-mentions of *me* were prevalent in the texts and it was quite challenging to mark the boundary between what refers to the student as a writer of the dissertation acknowledgment and to the student as an experiencer in the real world. These cases of

self-references are exceptionally considered metadiscourse provided that they stress the assistance and support that writers have received and establish clear connection between the writer and the person or entity being acknowledged. The uses of *me* in (23) and (24) appear to be outside the world of discourse and closer to the real world, while the opposite in (25), (26), and (27) as they show direct impact on the writer.

(23) All praises to Allah, the most gracious and merciful, for countless blessings that were bestowed on <u>me</u> to complete this work. His help and support have guided <u>me</u> not only during the course of dissertation but during my whole life. (M17)

(24) I would like to express my endless gratitude to my parents for their love, support, understanding, and prayers for <u>me</u>, which have sustained <u>me</u> throughout my life and especially during the long years of my education. (F25)

(25) I would like to express gratitude to Dr…. for assisting <u>me</u> with the statistical components of this research. She always took time with <u>me</u> and was prompt in responding to my questions. (F26)

(26) I am also especially grateful to the involved individuals at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center, who generously shared their experience with <u>me</u> and provided <u>me</u> with helpful related materials. (F43)

(27) I further would like to thank my committee member Dr…. for his time, feedback, and insightfulness. Dr…. introduced <u>me</u> to a global perspective of higher education showing <u>me</u> how concerns over higher education can be very similar across different nations. (F42)

Likewise, plural self-references, which were used mostly by female authors as shown earlier in Table 3, were counted as metadiscourse, i.e. part of world of discourse, since they have established clear relationship between people being involved and the writer, as exemplified in (28).

(28) Profound gratitude goes to Dr… <u>Our</u> weekly meeting has been a source of tremendous learning experience, to which I will always be grateful…I am also hugely appreciative to Dr…, although <u>we</u> started working together half way through my PhD and I have only wished <u>we</u> have worked together sooner given how much I learned from him… He gave me the chance to ask tough questions and guided me through many challenges we faced during this project. (F2)

Discussion

The importance of this study lies in using the powerful analytic tool of metadiscourse to examine an under-researched genre, i.e., dissertation acknowledgments written in English by EFL students. The study aimed to address gender differences in conveying gratitude by focusing on interactional markers within the metadiscourse framework (Hyland, 2005). The results showed the absence of hedging devices and engagement markers from all texts. In fact, the study showed a high frequency of engagement markers

but their application was not considered metadiscursive. This finding shows that the acknowledgment section has a considerable amount of interaction yet between writers and people addressed for appreciation and not between writers and generic readers.

The absence of hedges in dissertation acknowledgments implies that there is no place for doubt in this section. Despite the fact that hedging is considered a sign of respect and politeness and thus is expected to occur in this section, hedging specifically was rhetorically not employed. In other words, we assume that the refrain from using hedges in acknowledgments was deliberately rhetorical and not due to the lack of awareness of this feature. It is important to note, however, that some previous studies such as Mingwei (2010) have considered the opening phrase *I would like to* (before the thanking statement) as a hedging device. Indeed, these prefaces are abundant in this study but we have not characterized them as hedging choices but instead as signs of formality and politeness. This ascription was also taken by Jaroenkitboworn (2014) who interviewed the authors. According to Jaroenkitboworn (2014), a graduate student has emphasized that by using such phrase, he intended to be more polite:

> To me, it sounds more polite than saying just "I thank" which is brusque. To extend the statement a bit longer like, say, "I would like to thank" or "I would like to express my gratitude," the statement becomes softer. I didn't think at that time when I wrote it that my intention to thank someone could be weakened. I was just concerned about politeness. (p. 123).

Additionally, the use of the phrase *I would like to* can be attributed to formality. One graduate student in Jaroenkitboworn's (2014) study commented:

> To me, it is sort of a formal language feature. And it's appropriate to address people who are of higher social rank or more powerful like the advisor who is not an intimate friend of the same social distance. Also, there is a distance between me and the reader. I don't know who will read my thesis in the future, so it's better that I make it formal with this pattern. (p. 123)

Jaroenkitboworn (2014) attributed these choices to Thai culture showing that marking gratitude with formality and politeness is due to the influence of Thai culture where students prefer be indirect when conveying gratitude (p. 124). Similarly, the overuse of the modals and mental state verbs such as *I would like to* in this study can be due to cultural perceptions that academic manuscripts require a more formal style. The use of hedges also can be influenced by the nature of the genre. In comparing coursebooks to RAs, Hyland (1999) found hedges to be the most frequent metadiscourse feature in RAs, and cogently argued that this finding may reflect "the importance of distinguishing established from new claims in research writing and the need for authors to evaluate their assertions in ways that their peers are likely to find persuasive" (p. 10).

Male and female writers surprisingly used almost the same number of boosting items. Interestingly, the same finding was reported by Yavari and Kashani (2013) who found that boosting devices were used similarly between male and female authors in

all the four sections of RAs. In this study, however, boosting markers differed at the step level as female writers applied boosters more when acknowledging moral support while male writers applied boosters more when thanking for academic assistance. The opposite was revealed with using attitude markers as female authors used them more when thanking for academic support while male students employed them more when thanking for moral support. The overall use of attitude markers, however, was almost identical in both groups, which was the same finding of boosters. Yavari and Kashani (2013) had a different finding as female authors used more attitude markers, especially in the introduction and discussion/conclusion sections of RAs. Comparing the results in this study and those in Yavari and Kashani (2013), it can be argued that both genders employ attitude markers differently according to the genre while boosters remain neutral.

The case was different with self-mentions as female writers used them more frequently, thus increasing the level of authorial presence. This finding does not match what Tse and Hyland (2008) found with book reviewers where males used far more self-mentions than females. This difference can be attributed to the nature of the genre of dissertation acknowledgment where the writer discusses in detail how certain individuals helped him or her. The present study shows that female writers were more keen on applying this rhetorical option.

Metadiscourse was treated with flexibility in this study as its boundaries were adjusted to match the function of the genre of the dissertation acknowledgment. Certain self-mention elements were excluded when they referred to particular people in the real world while other self-mention resources were considered metadiscursive when they were integrated within the realm of the discourse world. Therefore, the approach adopted for this study falls between the broad approach by Hyland (2005) and the middle approach by Ädel (2006). Hyland (2017) recommended this flexibility caveating that limiting the boundaries of metadiscourse will "run the risk of eliminating much of what makes metadiscourse a powerful analytic tool" adding that what can be considered "metadiscoursal remains controversial and there are good reasons for distinguishing the two ends of the continuum more clearly with different terms to label the management of texts and the management of interaction" (p. 27). In this study, the main motivation behind adjusting the boundaries was the nature of the genre. Hence, more studies on other academic genres and specifically on part-genres will inform us more about the concept of metadiscourse and its boundaries.

Pedagogical Implications

Based on the results of the present study, some ideas related to the teaching of metadiscourse can be offered to teachers, especially teachers of EFL students. As Hyland (2010) has outlined "[a]ssisting students to an awareness of metadiscourse can thus

provide them with important rhetorical knowledge and equip them with ways of making discourse decisions which are socially grounded in the inquiry patterns and knowledge structures of their disciplines" (Hyland, 2010, pp. 141–142). The writers in the examined texts who are doctoral students might have been introduced to metadiscourse use in academic writing in general, but not necessarily in specific genres such as dissertation acknowledgments. As the findings indicated, some metadiscourse features were used while some others were not, and we as researchers are unsure whether these choices were deliberate or came as a result from students' lack of knowledge and understanding of metadiscourse use. Hence, explicit instruction via authentic activities with metadiscourse materials (as is also suggested by Akbas & Hardman, 2018; Bogdanović & Mirović, 2018; Molino, 2018) is essential to increase the awareness of metadiscourse features and specifically the various ways of using them in different contexts and different text types. Additionally, the results, particularly those regarding the use of boosting devices, self-references and attitude markers, have showed that the Ph.D. dissertation acknowledgment is a unique genre in terms of giving writers a freedom to use metadiscursive patterns and employ different techniques. Hence, the dissertation acknowledgment section can be considered a very suitable part for teachers to teach metadiscourse conventions and generally make students conscious of certain genre expectations. Based on the result regarding the employment of "you," for instance, teachers can provide students with samples of Ph.D. dissertation acknowledgments and ask them to identify and analyse the uses of "you;" whether they belong to the real world, hence not a metadiscursive device, or belong to the world of discourse, hence a metadiscursive one. Likewise, some results, especially those pertinent to self-mentions, indicate that metadiscourse is a flexible tool and thus students can be taught how certain patterns and their functions can influence the rhetorical organization of the genre as a whole. It is important to note, however, that by insisting on teaching metadiscourse does not mean simply asking students to overuse it but to use it strategically, as Crismore et al. (1993) have cogently argued "metadiscourse can be used effectively or used ineffectively, so we need to teach students to use all types of metadiscourse rhetorically not mindlessly" (p. 68).

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