

Research Articles

Pragmatic Markers in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners' Spoken Discourse: Implications for English Language Teaching

Abstract

This study investigated pragmatic markers in the spoken discourse of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Pragmatic markers which play crucial roles in facilitating effective communication are often neglected in language instruction. This study examines the pedagogical implications of pragmatic marker use among EFL learners. The population of the study comprised learners of English from different educational levels in Ebonyi State. The data for the study were generated from tape recorded interactions of EFL learners at different proficiency levels. The recordings were transcribed and analyzed using Celce-Murcia's (2007) Communicative Competence Framework. The purposive sampling technique was used to select forty-five (45) EFL learners from the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels across the study area as sample. Three research questions were formulated that guided the study. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine the frequency of pragmatic markers, the challenges faced by learners, and the implications for English language teaching. Based on the findings of the study, recommendations for teaching pragmatic markers in EFL contexts, emphasizing the importance of authentic materials; and promoting cross-cultural understanding and awareness were made.

Keywords: Pragmatic markers; EFL learners; spoken discourse; communicative competence; pedagogy

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1.Introduction

As learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) strive to express themselves in English, they often master grammatical rules and vocabulary, but the effective use of pragmatic markers (PMs) remains a subtle yet significant challenge. PMs, which are words or phrases that help interlocutors manage the flow of conversation are crucial to communication. Consequently, acquisition and effective use of PMs in spoken discourse are vital aspects of language learning, particularly for EFL learners. PMs, such as discourse markers (words like ‘well,’ ‘however,’ and ‘anyway’); hedging devices (phrases like, ‘kind of,’ ‘sort of,’ and ‘I think’); and fillers (like ‘ah,’ ‘um,’ and ‘aha’), play a significant role in facilitating communication. This is because they convey speaker attitude and help interlocutors to manage discourse flow. In other words, PMs facilitate communication by helping speakers to negotiate meaning, signal relationships between ideas, and manage turn-taking in conversations. Also, they add nuance to the message as well as manage discourse flow by helping speakers to organize their thoughts, signal transitions, and maintain coherence in discourse. As Neary-Sundquist (2014) observes, PMs perform a number of important discourse and pragmatic functions in second language speech. Other scholars (Hasselgreen, 2004; Aijmer, 2013; Blakemore, 2008) agree that PMs facilitate the development of second language fluency as well as allow for the communication of speakers’ attitudes.

However, EFL learners face some challenges in using PMs. For instance, they may struggle to understand and use PMs effectively due to differences in linguistic and cultural norms and they may not have sufficient exposure to authentic language use, making it challenging to develop pragmatic competence. Also, PMs are often not explicitly taught in language classrooms, leaving learners to acquire them through trial and error in informal settings. Though research has examined the use of PMs in learner speech, Neary-Sundquist (2014) observes that a number of questions are left unanswered. For example, according to him, little is known about the overall pattern of PM use across a wide spectrum of language learners. Muller (2005) aptly reports that PMs have received relatively little attention in second language acquisition research. Although some L2 studies of PMs (House, 2013; Müller, 2005; and Romero-Trillo, 2002) have revealed important findings about individual markers, only a few studies focus on the wider range of use of PMs, including those that may be used less frequently by some learners. Neary-Sundquist (2014) adds that a few studies have focused on similarities and differences between highly advanced learners and native speakers with respect to the frequency and variety of PMs.

In addition, Hernandez, Baron, and Llanes (2024) explore the development of PMs’ use by children and adult L2 English learners in two learning contexts. The study tested pragmatic development of respondents by prompting their use of PMs through pre-test and post-test semi-structured interviews. From the findings of the study, they conclude that both age and context affect PMs development. On his part, Eragamreddy (2024) explores the roles, functions, and effects of PMs in spoken discourse

with a focus on how language learners' comprehension skills, classification and interpretation abilities, and interactions between verbal and non-verbal PMs are affected.

From the foregoing, studies abound on PMs but their focus has been on the nature of PMs as well as comparative studies of native speakers' and second language learners' PMs use. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the use of PMs in EFL learners' spoken discourse to identify the challenges that EFL learners face in using PMs effectively; and explore the implications of the findings for English language teaching and learning. By examining the use of PMs in EFL learners' spoken discourse, this study provides insights into the development of pragmatic competence and informs English language teaching practices.

2. Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

1. What is the frequency of use of PMs in the spoken discourse of EFL learners?

2. What are the challenges that EFL learners face in using PMs effectively?

3. What are the implications of the findings for English language teaching and learning?

3. Review of Scholarship

An impressive array of research has been conducted on pragmatic markers (PMs) over the past two decades, yielding a wealth of insights into their characteristics, functions, and roles in discourse (Blakemore, 2008; Romero-Trillo, 2012). Despite this extensive scrutiny, the field still grapples with the challenge of arriving at a unified definition and consistent terminology for this complex concept. The lack of consensus is evident in the diverse labels ascribed to PMs, including discourse markers and discourse particles, each reflecting subtly different perspectives on their functions and nature. For instance, Blakemore (2008) defines PMs as sequentially dependent elements that serve to bracket units of talk, thereby providing a framework for understanding their roles in structuring discourse. In contrast, Hasselgreen (2004) views PMs as small words or phrases that occur with high frequency in speech and play a crucial role in facilitating the flow of conversation, despite not substantially contributing to the propositional content of the message. According to this perspective, PMs are vital lubricants that enable speakers to negotiate meaning and maintain communicative momentum.

Further nuance is added by Aijmer's (2002) observation that discourse particles, a subset of PMs, are strategically positioned at various points within discourse, where they serve as important cues to the segmentation and processing of the message. By providing these subtle signals, PMs help listeners navigate the discourse landscape, interpreting meaning and inferring speaker intent. The multifaceted nature of PMs is thus underscored by these diverse perspectives, highlighting the need for continued research into their complexities and implications for language teaching and learning.

This terminological confusion arises because some scholars make clear distinctions between the two terms (pragmatic markers and discourse markers) while others use the term pragmatic markers to refer to a superordinate category under which discourse markers may be subsumed (Romero-Trillo, 2012). Though the terms are often used interchangeably, there is ongoing debate about their

meanings. Pragmatic markers are generally seen as the umbrella category, comprising structures that convey meta-communicative and attitudinal functions (Beeching, 2016; Romero-Trillo, 2012), while discourse markers specifically indicate relationships between discourse segments. Some researchers argue that pragmatic markers focus on social and interactional aspects, whereas discourse markers emphasize textual organization. However, others use the terms with different emphases. This confusion stems from the multifaceted and complex nature of these linguistic elements, which can have various functions depending on context of use. For example, Fraser (1996) sees pragmatic markers as revealing the speaker's communicative intent, while Beeching (2016) emphasizes their social meaning. As a result of the lack of consensus, it is essential to clarify how these terms are used in specific research contexts. Hence, the present study adopts the more general term, pragmatic marker, in order to avoid confusion with specific terms, which refer to various subclasses of these expressions.

Moreover, many studies on PMs focus on specific PMs and on comparison of use of PMs between native and non-native speakers. For instance, Müller (2005) investigates the use of *so*, *like*, *well*, and *you know*, by native speakers and German learners of English; Fuller (2003), Hellerman and Vergun (2007), Müller (2005), and Romero-Trillo (2002) analyze specific PMs in particular contexts. Fung and Carter (2007) compare a corpus of elicited classroom data from intermediate–advanced learners of English in Hong Kong with the British English CANCODE. Their focus was solely on intermediate–advanced learners and they provided no comparative data from native and non-native speakers performing the same task. In his study, Haselow (2021) did an experimental study on the usage of PMs by adolescent German-speaking L2 learners of English in the foreign language classroom. Haselow concluded that significant increase in frequency and diversity of PMs in conversational L2 speech could be reached only for learners who underwent explicit teaching.

The existing body of research on pragmatic markers (PMs) shows a clear divergence from the present study, primarily due to the unique interest of this investigation. Whilst PMs have generated considerable attention from scholars across various disciplines, a review of the literature reveals a dearth of studies on the frequency of PM usage, the challenges associated with their deployment, and the pedagogical implications of these linguistic elements in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, studies in these critical aspects of PMs are scarce. It is precisely this perceived gap in the existing scholarship that the present study seeks to address, with the ultimate goal of contributing meaningfully to the ongoing discourse on the complexities of PMs in language teaching and learning contexts.

4.Theoretical Framework

Celce-Murcia's (2007) Communicative Competence Framework serves as the analytical model for this study. Celce-Murcia explores the concept of communicative competence in language teaching, and also discusses its role in language learning. She builds on her previous researches (1995 and 2000) on discourse and context in language teaching. The main tenets of her theory include: discourse competence (the ability to create cohesive and coherent discourse in both spoken and written discourse); linguistic competence (mastery of the language's grammar, vocabulary, and phonology); actional competence (understanding and using language to perform various functions, such as requesting, apologizing, or complaining); sociocultural competence (understanding the cultural context and social norms that influence language use); and strategic competence (the ability to use communication strategies to compensate for gaps in language knowledge or to enhance

communication). Consequently, Celce-Murcia's communicative competence framework can be applied in analyzing data in several ways. By applying this framework, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of how language is used in context and how communicative competence is developed and demonstrated. The present study relies on the discourse and strategic competencies of the framework. These include cohesion and coherent strategies which examine how speakers or writers use linguistic devices to create cohesive and coherent discourse and compensatory strategies such as paraphrasing and non-verbal cues to overcome obstacles and achieve communication goals.

5. Methodology

Purposive sampling technique was used to select forty-five (45) EFL learners from the primary, secondary, and tertiary education levels in Abakaliki, Ebonyi State as the sample for the study. Elicitation tasks for data collection were impromptu role-plays at the primary school level to elicit spoken data in a controlled setting; group discussions and debates at the secondary school level to provide opportunities for the respondents to use pragmatic markers in spoken discourse; and semi-structured interviews with respondents at the tertiary level to provide valuable data on their use of pragmatic markers in spoken discourse. The ESL learners that participated in the study were grouped into three different proficiency levels, numbered 1, 2, and 3 comprising learners at the primary, secondary and tertiary education levels respectively. There were 10 participants at Level 1, 15 at Level 2, and 20 at Level 3. The interactions were audio recorded and transcribed to identify PMs and count them in order to calculate the total number of words and the percentage of PMs used by participants. As Aijmer (2013) points out, the meaning of PMs is inherently “flexible and fuzzy” (p. 15), hence, identifying PMs was aided by the use of Carter and McCarthy's (2006) well-defined list.

The Carter and McCarthy's (2006) list of PMs was deemed appropriate for this study because it was generated from a corpus-based investigation of actual language use. The corpus-based nature of the definition makes it particularly appropriate for this study because PMs is useful for methodological reasons: Carter and McCarthy's classification is accompanied by a list of 121 expressions. According to Neary-Sundquist (2014), Carter and McCarthy's definition is more comprehensive and their list of appropriate expressions more extensive. Their list includes sub-categories of PMs, including “discourse markers” like you know, well, or so, “stance markers” such as actually, of course, and hopefully, “hedges,” for example, I think, just, and kind of, as well as “interjections” like gosh, wow, or ouch.

The PMs were identified, counted, and the total number of PMs used by participants at each level was calculated. Non-lexical fillers such as um, ah, or eh, were removed from the transcripts and not included in the total word count. The total number of words and the number of PMs used by subjects were then recorded. The number of PMs was divided by the total number of words to calculate the percentage of PMs that was used by subjects. The resulting percentages were then averaged to give the average percentage of PM use for all of the responses at each level.

Finally, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to identify and examine the frequency distribution of pragmatic markers, and challenges faced by EFL learners in the study area. Simple percentage was employed for the quantitative analysis while thematic analysis was used for the qualitative analysis.

6.Findings

The study had a mixed-method approach hence data obtained were discussed quantitatively as well as qualitatively. The quantitative analysis addressed the first research question while the qualitative consideration focused on the second and third research questions. The first research question sought to find out the pragmatic markers that EFL learners use in their spoken discourse and how they use them; the second research question investigated the challenges that EFL learners face in using pragmatic markers effectively; while the third research question interrogated the implications of the findings on English language teaching and learning. The results are presented in the following sub-sections according to the three research questions.

6.1Frequency of Use of PMs in the Spoken Discourse of EFL Learners

Data consisting of 2,583 words from 369 speech samples were gathered from the three levels. Pragmatic markers were separated but since majority of the PMs identified were non-lexical fillers (such as, em, oh, and eh) which were not used in the study, only 96 PMs out of the 2,583 words were used for analysis. EAS 216

Table 1: Frequency of PMs in the Spoken Discourse of EFL Learners

Level	No of words	Freq of PMs	% of PMs
1	603	2	0.3
2	861	34	3.9
3	1,119	60	5.4
Total	2,583	96	9.6%

From table 1 above, the percentage of use of PMs among the three levels is 2 PMs representing 0.3% of the sample collected in level 1; 34 PMs representing 3.9% in level 2; and 60 PMs representing 5.4% in level 3. From this, respondents in level 1 use the least PMs of the three levels; respondents in level 2 use more PMs than level 1 but less than level 3; and respondents in level 3 use the most PMs of the three levels. More so, data show that frequency of PMs by the three levels is 9.6% of the entire speech sample collected. From the data collected, the most frequent PMs were: so, you know, I think, I mean, well, you understand, right, however, meanwhile, and just.

6.2Challenges of EFL Learners in Using Pragmatic Markers Effectively

EFL learners were noted to encounter some challenges in using PMs. These challenges impact their abilities to communicate effectively and appropriately in English. In the group discussions and interviews, respondents were required to introduce themselves as well as talk on diverse topics of interest (content creation, family, sports, fashion, cuisine, and school life) and they were encouraged to freely express themselves. From the spoken discourse, respondents were formal in their presentations and this affected their use of PMs; they were rigid and their speeches lacked cohesion and coherence which are elements that Celce-Murcia (2007) notes as very important in

communication flow. Respondents had not been sufficiently exposed to authentic language use during learning activities and naturally want to be 'correct and proper' when engaged in formal discourses. The general school curricula at different levels of proficiency dwell more on contrived materials. As Celce-Murcia's model emphasizes, it is important to consider different components of communicative competence in language teaching and learning. Consequently, lack of exposure to different components of language limits opportunities of learners to learn and practice PMs in context.

Also, the respondents displayed confusion and difficulties in PM usage. In fact, many of the respondents suggested that use of PMs should not be encouraged in Standard English. This is due to the fact that PMs are often not explicitly taught in language classes. None of the respondents agreed that PMs were necessary in formal discourse. More so, it was observed that respondents used compensatory strategies in communication. According to Celce-Murcia, compensatory strategies are used by speakers or writers to overcome gaps in language knowledge. Common compensatory strategies used by respondents in the study were fillers (such as, um, ah, and chai), approximations, and self-correction. This constitutes a challenge to PM use, as respondents tended to replace PMs with these strategies, resulting in communication breakdowns.

6.3 Implications of the Findings on English Teaching and Learning

This study on pragmatic markers (PMs) has implications for English language teaching. For instance, the study's findings can inform the development of language curricula that include explicit instruction on PMs, enabling learners to use them effectively in communication contexts. In addition, this study highlights the importance of authentic materials and interactive activities in teaching PMs, encouraging teachers to adopt more communicative and task-based approaches. The study's findings can guide the creation of teaching materials that focus on PMs, providing learners with opportunities to practice using them in context. Finally, this study informs the development of assessment tools to evaluate learners' ability to use PMs effectively, ensuring that learners are assessed on their pragmatic competence.

This study raises teachers' awareness of the importance of PMs in language teaching, encouraging them to prioritize pragmatic competence in their teaching practices. By highlighting the importance of PMs, the study encourages learners to take a more active role in developing their pragmatic competence, enabling them to communicate more effectively in real-life situations, thereby enhancing learner autonomy. By exploring the implications of this study on PMs, educators and researchers can work together to improve English language teaching and learning, ultimately enhancing learners' ability to communicate effectively in a variety of contexts.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that EFL learners make an effort to avoid using PMs and make effort to be 'proper' in formal discourses, hence they sound unnatural. Learners of English as a foreign language use more compensatory strategies (fillers, approximations, and self-correction) to the detriment of PMs. Teachers of English in the study area should use more authentic materials and interactive activities in teaching PMs. Finally, this study aligns with Haselow's (2021) conclusion that significant increase in frequency and diversity of PMs in conversational L2 speech could be reached only for learners who underwent explicit teaching.

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made.

1. Explicit instruction on pragmatic markers should be introduced at the different levels of education in the study area to help EFL learners develop pragmatic competence and improve their communication skills.
2. Instead of solely relying on textbooks and contrived materials, teachers of English should use authentic materials, such as videos, podcasts, and real-life conversations, in order to provide learners with opportunities to observe and practice pragmatic markers in context. Also, teachers should adopt innovative approaches to instructional material design.
3. Classroom activities that promote the use of pragmatic markers, such as role-plays and peer group discussions, should be designed to help learners develop their pragmatic skills.

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