



An Analysis of Pragmatic Markers Presented in ELT Textbooks

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In this study, both beginner-level international ELT textbooks and Japanese high school ELT textbooks are analyzed for their inclusion in dialogues of the commonly recurring pragmatic markers *oh*, *okay*, *well*, and *yeah*. Their frequency and distribution in pedagogical materials was evaluated in comparison with those used in a corpus of spoken English. The identified pragmatic markers were classified by function based on Brinton's (1996) classification system. The investigation focused on 1) the functions of the pragmatic markers identified in textbook dialogues; 2) the position where each pragmatic marker is used in the turn in relation to their functions. The outcomes revealed the discrepancies between the textbook dialogues and authentic spoken texts as to the use of pragmatic markers. Also, the weaknesses of pedagogical materials in presenting pragmatic markers were discussed, concluding that teachers should compensate for their insufficiency in textbook dialogues.

本稿では、初級学習者向けの洋書教材と日本の高校生向け教科書における対話文で頻繁に使用される語用標識 “oh” “okay” “well” と “yeah” について調査した。本稿は、それらの教材における代表性の評価を、話し言葉のコーパスと比較をしながら行った。対話文の中で確認された語用標識は、Brinton (1996) の分類システムに基づき、それぞれの機能に応じて分類した。本調査は、語用標識の働きとそれに関連した発話内での発生位置 (最初、中間または最後) に焦点を合わせた。その結果、教材の中の対話文と話し言葉のコーパスにおける語用標識の使用には差異がみられた。同時に、語学教師が教材の不足部分を補う必要性を示唆すると共に、問題点についての考察を行った。

Pragmatic markers frequently occur in ELT textbooks in dialogues. They serve a variety of functions and are indispensable in everyday spoken discourse. Although pragmatic markers play an important role in terms of speech coherence and maintaining interlocutor relationships in conversation (Archer et al., 2012), they have not received much attention in pedagogical contexts. Therefore, this may result in learners not knowing how to use them in authentic interactions in their target language.

This study evaluates the occurrences of the frequently recurring pragmatic markers *oh*, *okay*, *well*, and *yeah* used in dialogues in a range of international ELT textbooks and Japanese high school ELT textbooks. These four markers were selected because they frequently occur in informal spoken discourse (Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Jucker & Smith, 1998). The data collected from these pedagogical materials were compared with those in naturally occurring discourse. The outcomes reveal discrepancies between the authentic data and the textbook data in the use of pragmatic markers in terms of their frequency and distribution.

Literature Review

Definition of Pragmatic Markers

Pragmatic markers are words and phrases which serve pragmatic functions within the linguistic system. Specifically, they establish relationships between topics or grammatical units in discourse (Brinton, 1996; Hellermann & Vergun 2007). They also serve interpersonal functions in interactions. Pragmatic markers are stand-alone words that cannot form syntactic relations with other structures (Biber et al., 1999). Although arbitrary use of these semantically empty markers can be grammatically acceptable, they are pragmatically essential and function as an important pragmatic element in discourse (Brinton, 1996).

Brinton (1996) classified pragmatic markers into two macro-functions: interpersonal functions and textual functions. Markers with each of these functions can be subdivided



into micro-functions as illustrated in Table 1. Interpersonal functions are associated with epistemic modality and express the speaker's emotions, reactions, attitudes, evaluations, judgements, expectations and demands, as well as shared knowledge or solidarity, and hedge the utterances to display tentativeness or politeness. Textual markers, on the other hand, indicate a structural boundary in the discourse and signal the relationship between utterances connected by speakers.

Table 1
Brinton's (1996, pp. 37-38) Classification System

Interpersonal Functions	
Response/Reaction markers (Rea)	<i>yeah, oh, but, oh yeah, well, eh, oh really?</i>
Backchannels (B/C)	<i>mhm, uh huh, yeah</i>
Cooperation and agreement markers (Coo)	<i>okay, yes, yeah, mhm</i>
Disagreement markers (Dis)	<i>but, no</i>
Checking understanding markers (Ch)	<i>right? Okay?</i>
Confirmation markers (Con)	<i>ah, I know, yeah, mhm, yes</i>
Textual Functions	
Opening/Closing frame markers (Op/Ci)	<i>so, okay, now, right, well</i>
Turn takers/givers (T/T)	<i>okay, yeah, and, e, well</i>
Fillers/Turn keepers (F)	<i>um, e, and, then, because</i>
Topic switchers (T/S)	<i>okay, well, now</i>
New/Old information indicators (In)	<i>so, and, and then, because</i>
Sequence/Relevance markers (S/R)	<i>so, and, and then, because</i>
Repair markers (Rep)	<i>well, I mean, you know, like</i>

Pedagogical Issues

Quite a few studies have found discrepancies between textbook dialogues and naturally occurring discourse as to the use of pragmatic markers. Gilmore (2004) observed the difference in discourse features between textbook dialogues and their

authentic equivalents including the use of hesitation devices and backchannels. His study found that far fewer hesitation devices such as *erm* or *er* were used when speakers are not ready to relinquish the floor. Furthermore, fewer backchannels like *mm*, *uhum*, *yeah*, *no*, *right* and *oh* could be found in textbook dialogues compared to those in authentic dialogues, although material writers have started to acknowledge their importance.

Furko and Monos (2013) investigated the use of the recurring pragmatic markers of *well* and *of course* in ten general business English coursebooks used in Hungary in comparison with those in the Larry King Corpus (LKC). In this corpus, they found five super functions of conversation management, information management, those used in narratives, interpersonal functions, and miscellaneous strategic functions such as delay and lexical search, effective to tag the token of *well*. They noticed these five super functions identified in the naturally occurring discourse in this corpus were unevenly distributed within the textbooks, and only one of these functions was explained in each of the textbooks.

Murahata (2018) critically analysed the interjections *oh* and *ah* appearing in the dialogues in Japanese junior high school ELT textbooks by referring to the naturally occurring discourses in two large corpora: a corpus of English Conversation and the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA, 2008). He found a mismatch between the distribution of these two interjections in the textbooks and in these corpora. The adversative marker *oh* was overused in all the textbooks while the resultative marker *ah* rarely appeared. He argued *oh* was overgeneralized in the textbooks and was used even in resultative cases. Additionally, Cheng and Warren (2007) focused on the function of *checking understandings* when comparing ELT textbooks and the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE). In naturally occurring discourses, the pragmatic markers of *I mean*, *right*, *okay*, *you know*, *alright*, *yeah*, *you see*, *yes*, etc. were mainly used to check the hearer's understanding typically relying on the speaker's intonation. In contrast, in the textbook dialogues, these markers were almost always absent, and the hearer's understanding was monitored by the speaker's direct and explicit questions such as "are you with me?", "do you understand me?", or "is that clear?". Each of these three studies similarly noted the use of pragmatic markers in textbook dialogues was inconsistent with that in authentic discourse. They suggested the necessity of textbook writers' use of authentic corpora as well as teachers' awareness of pragmatic aspects of language use to supplement the inadequate presentation of language in textbooks. Moreover, Furko and Mono (2013) noticed another discrepancy between textbook dialogues and an authentic corpus in the use of pragmatic markers. In LKC, 90% of occurrences of the marker of *course* were in the utterance-initial position, while 51% of those in the ELT textbooks



were in the utterance-final position. Similarly, O’Keeffe et al. (2020) investigated the functions of response tokens identified in the Open American National Corpus. They noted the markers of *um* and *well* in the turn-initial position had a floor-grabbing function, whereas *you know* in the turn-final position signaled that the speaker would turn the floor over to the hearer, displaying politeness. It could therefore be implied that the function of pragmatic markers varied depending on the position in each turn. However, even though EFL textbooks have often been analyzed for their inclusion for these language features, pragmatic markers are not usually taught in language classes (Hellermann & Vergun 2007; Thonus, 2007). Furthermore, this lack of pedagogical attention may cause learners’ inappropriate use of pragmatic markers (Buysse, 2012; 2015; Corsetti & Perna, 2017), which is often not corrected by language teachers (Hellermann & Vergun 2007; Thonus, 2007).

The Aim of the Study and Research Questions

In order to evaluate the representativeness of the frequently used pragmatic markers of *oh*, *okay*, *well*, and *yeah* in pedagogical materials compared with occurrences in authentic samples examined in this study, the following research questions were formulated:

- RQ1. How does each of the pragmatic markers *oh*, *okay*, *well*, and *yeah* function in the dialogues presented in the selected ELT textbooks in comparison with those used in naturally occurring discourse?
- RQ2. Are there any differences between ELT textbooks and naturally occurring discourse as to the position of pragmatic markers in the utterances in relation to their functions?

Method

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected from the dialogues in a selection of ELT textbooks and in naturally occurring discourse. Two types of ELT textbooks were examined: five beginner-level international ELT textbooks and six ELT textbooks used in Japanese high schools, as shown in the Appendix. The textbooks were selected based on responses to an informal survey of major publishers enquiring about their top-selling ELT materials, as conducted in Kawashima’s (2021) study of pragmatic information in ELT textbooks. As for the collection of authentic data, the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) was employed. Among the most widely used corpora, this

database contains billions of words in modern usage, and covers a wide range of genres. Such a large corpus makes it possible to obtain higher and stable linguistic features including additional types of words and phrases (Egbert et al., 2020). At the same time, COCA is one of the most influential corpora, as it was designed based on carefully constructed criteria (Cutting & Fordyce, 2021).

Data Analysis

To begin, the pragmatic markers *oh*, *okay*, *well*, and *yeah* used in dialogues in the selected textbooks were identified. Then, the tokens of each of these four identified markers were classified into micro-functions of the two macro-function models based on Brinton’s (1996, p.37-38) classification system in Table 1. The shortened forms of the micro-functions in each parenthesis in the table are used to display the outcomes of the data analysis in Tables 2 to 5. At the same time, the position of these markers -initial, medial, or final in each turn - was identified to see the relation with their functions. As for authentic data, the first 100 concordance lines of *oh*, *okay*, *well*, and *yeah* from COCA were used to compare with the textbook data, eliminating those with non-pragmatic use. Each token was tagged as a micro-function and the position in the utterance was determined, and likewise for the textbook data. Finally, the percentage of the function and position of each marker presented in each type of textbook was calculated to compare with those in COCA to see what was missing in pedagogical materials.

Results

The Case of Oh

Table 2 demonstrates the functions and position of *oh* in each turn identified in both the textbook corpus and COCA. Approximately 90% of the tokens in both types of ELT textbooks functioned as a response/reaction marker. As many as 17 tokens identified in COCA functioned as a repair marker, while this function was involved in less than 2% of the tokens in both types of textbooks.

In the ELT textbooks, *oh* with a single function as a response/reaction marker predominantly occurred utterance-initially throughout each textbook, while 30 tokens in COCA occurred in the utterance-medial position. *Oh* as a topic switcher and a repair marker, in almost all the cases, was used utterance-medially in COCA.



Table 2
Functions and Positions of Oh

Functions	International ELT Textbooks				Japanese ELT Textbooks				COCA			
	Tokens	I	M	F	Tokens	I	M	F	Tokens	I	M	F
Rea	135(90%)	125	10	0	43(88%)	42	1	0	69	63	6	0
Coo	1(0.7%)	1	0	0	1(2%)	1	0	0				
Dis	7(4.6%)	6	1	0					6	5	1	0
Con	2(1.3%)	2	0	0	2(4%)	2	0	0				
Op	1(0.7%)	1	0	0								
F	2(1.3%)	0	2	0					4	0	4	0
T/S	2(1.3%)	0	2	0	2(4%)	1	1	0	4	0	4	0
Rep	1(0.7%)	1	0	0	1(2%)	1	0	0	17	2	15	0
Total	151	136	15	0	47	2	2	0	100	70	30	
		(90%)	(10%)			(96%)	(4%)					

Note. I=utterance-initial position, M=utterance-medial position, F=utterance-final position

The Case of Okay

The functions of *okay* in textbook dialogues and naturally occurring discourse along with the position in each utterance are shown in Table 3. The function of cooperation and agreement was predominant for this marker in both corpora. However, while this marker overwhelmingly functioned as checking understanding in COCA, this function was rarely noted in the textbooks. Additionally, a wider range of textual use of micro-functions was identified in COCA, although the percentage was not very large.

As for the position, 82% of the tokens of *okay* occurred utterance-initially in the international ELT textbooks. The functions of cooperation and agreement, and confirmation were mainly identified in this position. All the tokens of this marker in the Japanese ELT textbooks occurred in the utterance-initial position. In COCA, on the other hand, 56 tokens of *okay* were used utterance-initially, and approximately 3/4 of them functioned as a cooperation and agreement marker. 29 tokens occurred utterance-medially, and a half of them also functioned as cooperation and agreement. Additionally,

15 tokens were identified in the utterance-final position, and the majority of them functioned as a checking understanding marker. Markers with this function were rarely used in the textbook corpus. In the ELT textbook corpus, *okay* was used mainly in the utterance-initial position with one or two particular functions, whereas in COCA, the position of this marker varied depending on the micro-functions.

Table 3
Function and Position of Okay

Functions	International ELT Textbooks				Japanese ELT Textbooks				COCA			
	Tokens	I	M	F	Tokens	I	M	F	Tokens	I	M	F
Coo	46(49%)	41	5	0	13(81.2%)	13	0	0	60	46	14	0
Ch	3(3.2%)	0	1	2					14		2	12
Con	32(34%)	29	3	0	2(12.5%)	2	0	0	1	1	0	0
Cl	5(5.3%)	2	3	0								
Op	4(4.3%)	4	0	0	1(6.3%)	1	0	0	2	2	0	0
T/T									4	1	0	3
F									4	0	4	0
T/S	4(4.3%)	1	3	0					11	6	5	0
Rep									4	0	4	0
Total	94	77	15	2	16	16			100	56	29	15
		(82%)	(16%)	(2%)		(100%)						

Note. I=utterance-initial position, M=utterance-medial position, F=utterance-final position

The Case of Well

The functions and positions of *well* used in both the textbook corpus and COCA are summarized in Table 4. The majority of tokens of *well* in ELT textbooks functioned textually, while 60 tokens of this marker involved textual functions in COCA. In the international ELT textbooks, this marker mostly functioned as a filler and a repair marker. In the Japanese ELT textbooks, nearly half of the tokens were used as a repair



marker. In COCA, in contrast, this marker predominantly occurred as a response/reaction marker, although a number of the tokens were tagged as fillers or repair markers.

Over 80% of the tokens in the international ELT textbooks were used utterance-initially, including those as a filler, a reaction marker, and a repair marker. As for the Japanese ELT textbooks, 90% of the tokens of this marker occurred utterance-initially and mostly functioned as a repair marker. In COCA, on the other hand, approximately half of the tokens of this marker used as a repair marker or a filler occurred utterance-medially, although the majority of tokens with other functions occurred in the utterance-initial position.

Table 4
Function and Position of Well

Functions	International ELT Textbooks				Japanese ELT Textbooks				COCA			
	Tokens	I	M	F	Tokens	I	M	F	Tokens	I	M	F
Rea	17(20.2%)	15	2	0	8(27.6%)	8	0	0	37	36	1	0
Dis	5(6%)	5	0	0	2(6.9%)	2	0	0	3	3	0	0
Cl	2(2.4%)	2	0	0	1(3.4%)	1	0	0				
Op	1(1.2%)	1	0	0	1(3.4%)	1	0	0				
F	30(36%)	24	6	0	2(6.9%)	1	1	0	21	9	12	0
T/S	5(6%)	4	1	0	1(3.4%)	0	1	0	3	1	2	0
Rep	24(28.6%)	19	5	0	14(48.3%)	13	1	0	36	19	17	0
Total	84	70	14	0	29	26	3	0	100	68	32	0
		(83%)	(17%)			(90%)	(10%)					

Note. I=utterance-initial position, M=utterance-medial position, F=utterance-final position

The Case of Yeah

Table 5 shows the functions and position of the marker *yeah* in the ELT textbooks and COCA. All the tokens of this marker identified in the ELT textbooks involved interpersonal functions. In COCA, 13 occurrences of this marker functioned textually.

Slightly more than half of the occurrences of this marker functioned as a cooperation and agreement marker in both types of ELT textbooks. In COCA, on the other hand, this marker predominantly functioned as a response/reaction marker along with a cooperation and agreement marker. The remaining 13 tokens functioned as a backchannel, and nine of them functioned as repairing. This marker also functioned as a turn-giver. None of these functions was identified in either type of ELT textbook.

Almost all the tokens in both types of ELT textbooks were used utterance-initially. This marker was also used mainly utterance-initially even in COCA compared to the remaining markers. *Yeah* as a cooperation and agreement marker, and a reaction marker commonly occurred utterance-initially with few exceptions. As opposed to the textbook corpus, nine tokens as a repair marker were used utterance-medially, and three tokens as a turn giver were identified in the utterance-final position in COCA.

Table 5
Function and Position of Yeah

Functions	International ELT Textbooks				Japanese ELT Textbooks				COCA			
	Tokens	I	M	F	Tokens	I	M	F	Tokens	I	M	F
Rea	8(22.9%)	8	0	0	2(20%)	2	0	0	39	33	6	0
B/C									13	13	0	0
Coo	19(54.3%)	19	0	0	6(60%)	6	0	0	34	26	8	0
Ch	1(2.9%)	0	0	1					1	0	0	1
Con	7(20%)	7	0	0	2(20%)	1	1	0				
T/T									3	0	0	3
F									1	0	1	0
Rep									9	0	9	0
Total	35	34	0	1	10	9	1	0	100	72	24	4
		(97%)		(3%)		(90%)	(10%)					

Note. I=utterance-initial position, M=utterance-medial position, F=utterance-final position



Discussion

Functions of Pragmatic Markers

The pragmatic markers *oh*, *okay*, *well*, and *yeah* are frequently used in everyday spoken language (Biber et al., 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 2006; Jucker & Smith, 1998), and several different functions for each of these markers in the ELT textbooks were identified in this study. However, some discrepancies between textbook dialogues and naturally occurring discourse as to the functions of these four markers were noted. The pragmatic marker *oh* was frequently used as a single function of response/reaction in ELT textbooks, and a very limited number of other functions were identified. The interjection *oh* displays the speaker's surprise when it is used to respond to something new, as well as disappointment and pain, and the tone of voice sometimes indicates the extent of the surprise (Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p.539). *Oh* occurred far more frequently in the textbooks compared to *well* and *yeah*, which were also used as a response/reaction marker. In line with Murahata's (2018) findings, this adversative marker *oh* might often be overused as a response/reaction marker in pedagogical materials. In COCA, *oh* was also used more often than any other functions, although the percentage was not very large. According to Carter and McCarthy (2006), *oh* is also frequently used for unexpected digressions of the topic in a conversation, or marks a direct quotation.

Okay functioned predominantly as cooperation and agreement in both textbook dialogues and naturally occurring discourse. The use of *okay* as checking understanding was also predominant in COCA, whereas few examples of this function were identified in the ELT textbooks. This is comparable to the findings of Cheng and Warren's (2007) study on the performance of checking understanding in ELT textbooks in comparison with a corpus of spoken English. Carter and McCarthy (2006) also stated *okay* is informally used to express acceptance and agreement, to change topics, and to monitor the hearer's understanding of what has been said.

Well involved a wider range of textual functions in the ELT textbooks compared to COCA. This marker functioned predominantly as a filler in the international ELT textbooks and as repairing in the Japanese high school ELT textbooks, whereas a relatively large number of occurrences of this marker functioned as response/reaction in COCA. Alcon and Tricker's (2000) study identified a wide range of functions of *well* as a pragmatic marker in intermediate EFL textbooks for a) repairing an utterance, b) mitigation of disagreement or strong opinions, c) indicating a new topic, and d) delaying a response. The present study identified most of these functions in both textbook dialogues and naturally occurring discourse. According to Carter and McCarthy (2006),

one of the most typical functions of *well* is a response to closed questions which cannot be answered by yes/no. However, overuse of *well* as a repair marker was observed in the Japanese high school ELT textbooks. Diskin (2017) found a noticeable prevalence of the marker *well* in beginner-level EFL textbooks. Indeed, it has been pointed out that L2 learners' overuse of this marker in speech management rather than as an attitudinal function like disagreement is due to their lack of confidence (Buysse, 2015; Muller, 2004).

The pragmatic marker *yeah* was used mainly as cooperation and agreement, and response/reaction in both textbook dialogues and naturally occurring discourse. However, this marker may function differently from the other types of markers as a response/reaction marker. According to Biber et al. (1999), although classified as the most commonly occurring marker in authentic conversation, *yeah* functions similarly to *okay* as a response to directives. But, it may also be treated as a weakened or indirect negative response, in contrast to the stronger positive response of *sure* and *certainly*.

The function as a backchannel, which most frequently occurred in COCA, was completely absent from textbook dialogues. According to Thonus (2007), the backchannel *yeah* functions as a response to the content of the speaker's utterance, whereas *uh-huh* or *mmhmm* are reactions to the speaker's action of speaking. She stated that appropriate use of these listener responses as *backchannels* was not provided in textbooks, and suggested the necessity for explicit instruction to raise learners' awareness at certain stages of L2 development.

Overall, the frequently used pragmatic markers *oh*, *okay*, *well*, and *yeah* mostly represented a single function or two in the dialogues in the selected ELT textbooks. Some other important functions identified in the authentic discourse rarely occurred in these pedagogical materials.

Positions of Pragmatic Markers

This study found the pragmatic markers used in textbook dialogues were mostly restricted to the utterance-initial position, while the position of those in naturally occurring discourse varied depending on their functions. Some of the particular functions provided by these four markers were rarely present in the ELT textbooks. The markers with these particular functions were frequently used utterance-medially or -finally in naturally occurring discourse. In COCA, *oh* as a topic switcher and a repair marker, *okay* as a checking understanding marker, *well* as a filler, or a repair marker, and *yeah* as a filler, a turn giver, and a repair marker were rarely present in the utterance-initial position.



O'Keeffe et al. (2020) state that placing the marker in the utterance-final position may be a sign of politeness in turning the floor over to the interlocutor. The markers *okay* and *yeah* as a turn giver, which were not present in the ELT textbooks, occurred utterance-finally in COCA. Although *well* was identified in both corpora with a number of common functions, for some particular functions it was more frequently used utterance-medially. This marker is normally used utterance-initially as a response/reaction marker, but it can occur in the middle of the utterance when the speaker repairs what s/he has said or holds the floor while searching for what to say (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). Preference for using pragmatic markers utterance-initially in textbook dialogues may limit the range of functions of each marker. *Okay* was always used utterance-initially in Japanese high school ELT textbooks and involved only three functions. Therefore, restricting the position of pragmatic markers for speech management in textbook dialogues may lead to learners using them unnaturally in authentic interaction.

Conclusion

This study identified discrepancies between textbook dialogues and naturally occurring discourse as to the use of pragmatic markers. Some of the functions which were predominant in authentic discourse were underused in textbook dialogues. At the same time, the position of pragmatic markers in each utterance in textbook dialogues was mostly limited to the initial position, whereas pragmatic markers are used in different positions according to their functions in naturally occurring discourse. Although learners may be exposed to a number of pragmatic markers through textbooks, their actual uses have not received much attention in pedagogical contexts. It is therefore left to language teachers to compensate for this lack of explanation in textbooks by supplementing lesson input with natural uses of pragmatic markers in authentic materials.

Bio Data:

Chie Kawashima has 25 years of teaching experience in upper-secondary education in Tochigi Prefecture. Her research interest includes textbook analysis and interlanguage pragmatics in pedagogical contexts.

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Appendix

Pedagogical Materials Evaluated In This Study

International ELT Textbooks

- Interchange Intro (Cambridge University Press 2013)
- American Headway Starter (Oxford University Press 2010)
- Cutting Edge Starter (Pearson Education 2012)
- Global Beginner Course Book (MacMillan 2010)
- Time Zones 1 (Cengage Learning 2010)

Japanese High School ELT Textbooks

- Progress in English 21 Book 3 (Edec 2012)
- Crown: English Communication I (Sanseido 2013)
- Vista: English Communication I (Sanseido 2013)
- Vivid: English Communication I (Daiichi Gakushusha 2013)
- Select: English Expression I (Sanseido 2013)
- Vision Quest: English Expression I (Keirinkan 2013)