

A Corpus-based Study on Pragmatic Functions of Discourse Marker “OK” in Chinese EFL Teacher Talk

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Abstract

Discourse markers are not only a means of achieving discourse cohesion and coherence but also an important tool for teachers to manage classroom teaching. Given the lack of research on discourse markers in Chinese EFL teacher talk, this study focuses on the high-frequency discourse marker “OK” and explores its pragmatic functions in the classroom context through quantitative statistics and qualitative analysis. The research shows that the discourse marker “OK” serves four pragmatic functions at the textual level, including managing topics or classroom activities, taking or relinquishing speaking turns, delaying, and making repairs. At the interpersonal level, teachers can use the discourse marker “OK” to reduce threats to students' self-esteem, provide positive feedback, capture students' attention, seek reassurance, prompt responses, and give instructions. The findings of this study may have significant implications for Chinese EFL teachers' discourse norms and the utilization of discourse markers in junior high school English classes.

Keywords

Classroom context, Teacher talk, Discourse marker, “OK”, Pragmatic function

1. Introduction

Discourse marker is a multi-functional language unit, which does not constitute discourse and its semantic content, but affects the construction and understanding of discourse. They can promote the coherence of discourse and the hearer's understanding. However, many studies have shown that discourse markers have not received enough attention in EFL teaching. Because the mastery of discourse markers can help students use language effectively, understand others accurately, and express themselves appropriately, they should be made aware of the functions of discourse markers (Al-khazraji, A., 2019). As a major source of students' language input and an important carrier of teaching content, the proper use of discourse markers in teacher talk determines the quality of classes. Therefore, the study of discourse markers in teacher talk is conducive to improving the quality of teacher talk, promoting effective interaction between teachers and students, and creating a good classroom atmosphere. This paper focuses on “OK”, a high-frequency discourse marker used by Chinese junior high school English teachers, and analyzes its pragmatic functions. Specifically, the study is guided by the following two questions:

- 1) What is the frequency and distribution of “OK” as a discourse marker in the Chinese EFL teacher talk corpus?
- 2) What are the pragmatic functions of “OK” as a discourse marker in Chinese middle school English class, and how

about its frequency and distribution?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Discourse markers in teacher talk

Discourse markers are invariable expressions that are syntactically independent of their environment, typically set off prosodically from the rest of the utterance, and their function is metatextual, relating a text to the situation of discourse (Heine B. et al., 2021). They can connect information, facilitate the participants' understanding, and guide them through interpretation. As an indispensable part of teacher talk, they are important guideposts for pedagogical clarification and effective interaction. As a lubricant, they can reduce understanding difficulties, incoherence, and social distance between teachers and students and create a harmonious atmosphere (Walsh, S., 2006). For EFL learners, discourse markers can enhance the pragmatic meaning of their utterances and play an important part in learners' pragmatic competence, which enables them to use language in a culturally, socially, and situationally appropriate way (Fung, L. & Carter, R., 2007).

2.2 Discourse marker "OK"

"OK" is one of the most common, broadly acceptable and adaptable discourse markers, especially useful for EFL learners owing to its ability to realize many functions with minimal linguistic and cognitive efforts. It always cooccurs with other discourse markers (Cuenca, M J. & Crible, L., 2019). The uses of "OK" with rising and falling intonations are quite different. "OK" with a rising tone marks a progression or confirmation check, functioning as a response elicitor, a seek of assurance. "OK" with a falling tone functions as an attention-getter. It can also serve as a signpost for opening or closing topics, a tool for shifting lecture mode (Othman, Z., 2010). As a useful classroom management tool for teachers, "OK" performs both structural and interpersonal functions. Structurally, it can mark the opening, shifting, and ending of topics, make transitions between activities more salient, and elicit questions. Interpersonally, "OK" can elicit feedback, seek assurance, and mark responses (Vickov, G. & Jakupcevic, E., 2017). From metapragmatic awareness perspective, "OK" has the features of face threat mitigation, alert function, information correction, information delay and so on.

To sum up, previous scholars have systematically analyzed the functions of "OK" in many language styles. However, few scholars have studied "OK" in Chinese EFL teacher talks. The classification of its pragmatic functions in previous studies is not comprehensive. There still exist many unexplained linguistic phenomena. Based on Vickov's classification and the corpus analysis, this paper constructs a framework of pragmatic functions of discourse marker "OK" in Chinese EFL teacher talk (see Table 1).

Table 1. The framework of pragmatic functions of discourse marker "OK" in Chinese EFL teacher talk

The pragmatic functions of discourse marker "OK"	Textual level	Managing topics or classroom activities
		Taking or relinquishing speaking turns
	Interactional level	Delaying
		Making repair
		Mitigating face threat
		Giving response
		Seeking for assurance
		Attracting students' attention
	Eliciting instructions	

3. Methodology

The study employs the techniques in corpus linguistics and conversation analysis, which can provide a systematic and detailed examination of the use of discourse marker "OK". In order to build a corpus of EFL teacher talk in Chinese junior high school, 10 classes are collected and transcribed into text by the software Text Transcriber. After manual checking, the corpus capacity is 29,857 English words.

In this study, the Concord function in Wordsmith Tools was used to extract all "OK"-containing cases. Error retrieval

and incomplete cases are manually eliminated. Secondly, “OK” in all effective cases is divided into discourse marker and non-discourse marker. This study only focuses on discourse marker and make a comprehensive analysis of its pragmatic functions. Discourse markers are highly polyfunctional, particularly in spoken settings (Crible, L. et al., 2019). However, only the primary function is analyzed in this study. The identification of the primary function is based on the analytical framework (Table 1) and combined with teaching videos. All data analysis is done by two people, and differences are confirmed to ensure the reliability and validity.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Quantitative results of discourse marker “OK”

The researcher uses “OK” as the index word and retrieves 650 valid cases in the target corpus. After manual tagging, the frequency and proportion of “OK” in the corpus are confirmed, as shown in the following table.

Table 2. The frequency and proportion of “OK” in corpus

	Non-discourse marker	Discourse marker	Total
Frequency	7	643	650
Proportion	1.08%	98.92%	100%

As shown in Table 2, “OK” is used as a discourse marker 643 times, accounting for 98.92%, and as a non-discourse marker 7 times, accounting for 1.08%. It’s obvious that the use of “OK” as a non-discourse marker and discourse marker are numerically different in Chinese EFL teacher talk ($p < 0.001$).

Table 3. The pragmatic functions and frequency of discourse marker “OK” in Chinese middle school English classroom discourse

Level	Pragmatic Function	Frequency	Normalized frequency (per 1,000 words)
Textual level	Managing topics or classroom activities	189	6.33
	Taking or relinquishing speaking turns	61	2.04
	Delaying	22	0.74
	Making repair	9	0.30
	Mitigating face threat	43	1.44
	Giving response	126	4.22
Interactional level	Seeking for assurance	77	2.58
	Attracting students’ attention	39	1.31
	Eliciting instructions	77	2.58

Table 3 shows that “OK” plays multiple pragmatic functions in Chinese junior high school English classes. At the textual level, the most frequent pragmatic function is managing topics or classroom activities, with a frequency of 189 times. At the interactional level, “OK” is most used for giving a response, with a frequency of 126 times. By comparing the results of these two levels, it is found that “OK” is used more frequently at the interactional level.

4.2 Qualitative analysis of the typical pragmatic functions

4.2.1 Taking or relinquishing speaking turns

In teacher talk, “OK” is seldom used to take or maintain speaking turns. This is mainly because, in classroom interactions, teachers control classroom interaction by selecting the next speaker and deciding on turn-taking (Hamdan, A H E. & Elandeef, E A E., 2021). So, “OK” in the teacher talk is often used to relinquish speaking turns. In actual classroom teaching processes, teachers usually relinquish speaking turns in the following two ways. First, teachers use “OK” to elicit questions and realize the shift of speaking turns through the I-R-F classroom interaction model. Second, teachers invite

or directly assign students to answer questions so as to shift speaking turns to students. So, when teachers use “OK” to shift speaking turns, it is often followed by sentences such as “Anybody else?” “What about you...?” or “This girl.” “That boy.” For example,

(1) T: ... “OK”, what about you? What do you often buy?

S: I often buy clothes, too.

(2) T: ... Now the first. “OK”, this girl. Use a microphone.

S: Many baby pandas die when they are very young.

4.2.2 Delaying

“OK”, which plays the delaying function in teacher talk, mostly appears in the following situations. First, the speed at which teachers write on the blackboard is slower than oral expression. In order to avoid long pauses in classes, teachers usually use “OK” to fill the time gap. Second, when the training aids are not ready or with some problems, teachers need to use “OK” to gain more time for themselves. For example,

(3) T: ... What about Mike? What about Mike? Helen, please. Microphone, pass the microphone, please. Yes. Thank you, gentlemen.

S: Sends email.

T: Sends email. ... “OK”. ... Sends email. Go on.

In example (3), after the student answers question, teacher chooses to present the answer on the blackboard. But because the teacher needs some time to write. So, in order to avoid long pauses, teacher chooses to fill the time gap by using “OK” and repeating the students' answer.

4.2.3 Mitigating face threat

In the classroom context, the mitigating face threat function of “OK” often appears in the following situations. First, when teachers point out students' problems or correct their mistakes, they tend to use “OK” to reduce the threat to students' face and relieve students' embarrassment. And in actual teaching process, after the teacher asks some difficult questions, the classroom silence phenomenon usually occurs. At this time, teachers need to use “OK” to encourage students and ease students' fear. In addition, because of the particularity of the class, teachers will issue a lot of instructions to students. In order to ease the tension caused by instructions and requirements, weaken the power of commands, and create a more relaxing atmosphere, teachers often use “OK” to reduce the power of teacher talk. For example,

(4) T: Do you know what it is? It is a kind of rice.

S: Juice.

T: Juice? Sorry. “OK”. It doesn't matter. Sit down, please. Thank you.

(5) T: Who can tell me? “OK”. Lily, please. Use the microphone, please.

S: We have got some apples and oranges.

(6) T: ... What about you this girl? Don't be nervous. “OK”. Have a try. Do you think it is easy for a baby panda to grow into a giant panda?...

4.2.4 Seeking for assurance

“OK”, which has the function of seeking for assurance, occurs mostly at the end of a sentence and is usually pronounced in the rising tone. Teacher uses “OK” to seek for assurance for the following three purposes. First, ask students whether they can understand the classroom instruction; Second, ask students whether they can follow the teacher's teaching and understand the teaching content; Third, ask students whether they agree with the teacher's opinion. For example,

(7) T: Now, class, discuss with your group of members, discuss, “OK”? Think about the question, discuss with it. “OK”?

(8) T: If we see a kind of meat, it is a...an uncountable noun. But if we say different kinds of fishes, it is a countable noun. “OK”?

In example (7), after issuing classroom instruction, the teacher uses “OK” twice to confirm whether students can understand it, so as to ensure that they can make correct speech acts. In example (8), after the explanation of countable and uncountable nouns, the teacher uses “OK” to check their mastery.

5. Conclusion

This paper makes a detailed study of the pragmatic functions of discourse marker “OK” in Chinese EFL teacher talk. First of all, the present study builds a framework of the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker “OK”. Secondly, based on the framework, the author makes a comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analysis of the pragmatic functions of

“OK” in a classroom context. It is found that “OK” can help teachers manage topics, classroom activities, and speaking turns at the textual level. It can help teachers get more time to prepare for classroom teaching. At the interactional level, “OK” has five pragmatic functions: mitigating face threats, giving responses, seeking for assurance, attracting students' attention, and eliciting instructions. It can help teachers shorten the psychological distance between students and create a harmonious classroom atmosphere.

Based on the findings, the author puts forward the following suggestions for English classroom teaching and teachers' professional development: (1) Teachers should improve their language quality and provide students with natural and meaningful language input; (2) English classroom teaching should not be limited to language knowledge and skills. Teachers should also pay attention to the development of students' language application ability and verbal communication ability; (3) In order to avoid overusing or misusing discourse markers, teachers should choose the most suitable language according to the actual situation of classroom teaching and students' basic conditions.

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