THE USE OF OKAY IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

This paper investigates the utterances of okay during classroom discussions. The pragmatics of the word was focused in this study given the different teacher-student settings found in the classroom. There were sixteen classroom discussions in various subject areas that were recorded, transcribed and analyzed to explain the use of okay in the context of the classroom environment. The results of the study make way for an improved understanding of the linguistic features of the expression as habitually used in the classroom. The native sense of okay was used as the framework of the study in order to find out the semantics of the word in the classroom context. Out of seven native uses of okay, only three meanings were given emphasis as they were found in the context pertaining to its use as a predicative adjective or adverb, to convey the sense ‘acceptable to me’ and to convey the sense of ‘yes’. Other senses of okay were recorded as used in the Filipino context of classroom instruction. The results of the study manifest the different linguistic features of the word and could be observed by the people in the academe to arrive at a satisfactory rapport in the classroom.

Keywords: corpus; pragmatics; native senses; semantics; contextual analysis

1. Introduction

The concept of “world Englishes” provides the major conceptual framework for a useful and reasoned understanding of the spread and functions of the English language in global contexts. Language experts like Kachru, Smith, and Stevens have come up with various studies that confirmed the existence and acceptance of englishes globally. Melchers and Shaw[1] has classified the models of world englishes in which the Philippines makes use of English as a second language being a former colony of the United States. Kirkpatrick [2] further noted that in the postcolonial era English has been widely used as a second language in business and government and used as the medium of instruction. This is officially true in the Philippines.

The importance of English in the Philippine educational system has long been recognized by the virtue of the 1987 Constitution [3] that mandates both Filipino and English as the official languages in the country for purposes of communication and instruction. The
distinct regard for English by Filipinos in general has been strengthened further by the Executive Order No. 210 signed in 2003 [4] purposes that English shall be taught as a second language starting on the first grade and shall be used as the primary medium of instruction in all public and private institutions of learning in the secondary level. It is noteworthy that the Philippines has 19 major languages from approximately 175 languages and dialects being spoken and written, hence it is highly probable that English as a second language is used on dynamic varieties when studied on its contextual setting specifically on the use of *okay* in the classroom. Students and their teachers come from different linguistic orientations in which a compromise of the commonly-used ‘*okay*’ in the classroom setting can provide insight on the pragmatics of the word.

The Bataan Peninsula State University caters to students and personnel who come from the multi-lingual regions of the country. The town of Dinalupihan, Bataan is a strategic center for the *Kapampangans, Tagalogs* and *Ilocanos* not to mention the migrants that originate from different islands. The students and their teachers’ ethno-linguistic features yield an interesting study on the use of okay framed in a classroom setting.

The current paper then seeks to contribute to the improvement of language teaching and learning as it aims to find out in what ways were the native senses of *okay* utilized in the classroom discussions, the pragmatic differences on the original meaning of okay as observed in the classroom and the other uses and semantics of *okay* as perceived in the classroom context.

2. Method and Corpus

This case study focuses on the discourse analysis of “okay” as used in the classroom. The tape-recorded classroom activities and discussions were analyzed through their contextual and social settings. Paltridge[5] stressed that discourse analysis examines patterns of language across texts and considers the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used; thus, the analysis of the word ‘okay’ is examined on its practical use in the classroom.

The investigation makes use of a corpus in a classroom setting at the Bataan Peninsula State University, Dinalupihan campus which includes eight teachers engaged in a total of sixteen class discussions among high school and college students in different course areas. Teachers came from varied disciplines and the class discussions that were transcribed and encoded by the researcher were those that only completed the 30 - 40 minutes of class
interaction which included lectures and class discussion. There were two classes that did not meet the allotted time so these were eliminated from the corpus. The corpus represents every course area generally taken by both the secondary and college/university students. It is a composition of course offerings required among learners and taught by individual instructors. Courses intended for specialization were not included in the corpus. The selected course areas embody the curricular requirement for each program. The time limit was strictly observed.

The pragmatics of ‘okay’ is considered to aim for a better rapport inside the classroom. Pragmatics is focused on what is not explicitly stated and on how we interpret utterances in situational contexts. Finch [6] has expressed that they are concerned not so much with the sense of what is said as with its force, that is, with what is communicated by the manner and style of an utterance. The contextual situation in the classroom therefore provides the needed understanding and interpretation of the message imbued on the language interchanged between the teacher and the students that could either make a learning situation interesting or disappointing.

3. Results and Discussion

The theoretical perspective of the paper was drawn from Adegbija and Bello study in 2001 exploring the varied native senses of okay in the Nigerian contexts. The researchers made use of the Nigerian ESL contexts in their native environments gathered from casual conversations, newspaper clippings, telephone conversations, an interaction between a university lecturer and student, pragmatic context of respect for the words of elders, and the structure of authority between parents and children, among others. They [7] reported that only three possible uses of OK in the native English-speaking contexts are particularly common in the Nigerian ESL and these are when okay means ‘all right’, ‘a form of acknowledgement’ and ‘to endorse or approve’.

The current paper likewise mirrors the use of English as a second language in which the discourse analysis is focused on the tape recorded use of ‘okay’ exclusively in the classroom. Many researches undertook the semantics of okay as a discourse marker along with other words but the discourse analysis of it is examined during classroom discussion in different subject/course areas like English, Filipino, Mathematics, Science, Social Science and General education courses. The three most common uses of okay in everyday setting were found to be consistently used in the academe hence they are analyzed in the subsequent discussion. To explore further on the use of okay beyond its usual dictionary connotations,
the study further advanced on the other pragmatics of the word as found in the classroom contexts. The three native senses are shown and discussed on the succeeding:

3.1 The Use of ‘okay’ in the Classroom

- Its use as a predicative adjective or adverb to mean ‘all correct,’ ‘all right’, ‘satisfactory’, ‘good’, ‘well’, and ‘everything is in order’. The semantics of okay in the given native sense was used in the classroom as in the examples below:

Science Class
Teacher: All right, have you finished writing the formula?
Students: Yes ma’am.
Teacher: Okay, let’s proceed to the third law, the Gay Lusac law.

The use of okay by the teacher in the above example clearly illustrates its use as a predicative adjective and the students fully understood that. It was clear that the teacher was satisfied on the accomplishment of students and the students had nothing to worry about.

English Class
Teacher: Let’s start our film viewing today. I hope that everyone is ready. People at the back, are you okay?
Students: Yes ma’am, okay.

The pragmatics of okay in the English class was manifested through the concern showed by the teacher, students from the back row inferred that the teacher was asking if they were not at a disadvantage so that they can start the film showing in their class. The pragmatic sense of okay was decoded by both teacher and students so they started their activity without further clarifications.

General Course
Student-Presenter: okay, classmates, our group will discuss the “Obstacles to Reading”.
Teacher: Okay, please start your presentations.
Teacher: Okay, that would be all for today, you may continue next meeting.

The semantics of okay in the given contexts follow the native sense of the word which expresses ‘satisfactory’ or ‘everything is in order’. Both students and the teacher knew the implications of the word and the student-presenter was aware that she exerted a good effort.

From the first semantic meaning of okay in the given classroom context, both teachers and students comprehended that the use of okay conveyed a positive note. A mutual satisfaction is felt in the classroom.
Its use in the phrase OK by someone to convey the sense ‘acceptable to me’

Filipino Class

Teacher: O sigena, maarinatayongmagsimula, okay naaang schedule natin. (All right, we can start now, our schedule is okay)

Even in a Filipino class, the use of okay is regularly used and from the context of the discussion of the teacher and his advisory class, his okay signaled a passive attitude by the teacher. He does not have the upper hand on their schedule and implies that everyone has to do the same and that they should let the matter rest.

General Course

Teacher: Is that all for your report? Okay class, hurry up and get a sheet of paper for the quiz.

In this context, the students understood that the report did not meet the teacher’s standards and she communicates her dissatisfaction. Her use of okay conveys acceptance but the presentation does not please her. Her nuances of okay affirms her dissatisfaction but still tries to lighten the mood by her gesture of acceptance; nevertheless, she needed to evaluate the class, both for what they have learned and on their preparation on the report. Further, the teacher expected no resistance from the students as she announced a quiz.

English Class

Student: “Phonetic analysis deals with sounds”.

Teacher: Well, okay, you can say that.

From the given context, the student’s answer was acceptable yet the teacher needed more explanations so it was inevitable that other members of the class shall be asked for additional outputs. The concerned student also has a chance to give a follow-up on his/her response.

The second widely acknowledged use of okay conveys a little disappointment on the part of the teacher. The students need to exert more effort on their interaction. The presenter is found lacking on his explanations and the class exhibited a nonchalant attitude. The teacher tries to encourage the class for more outputs and not to settle on lukewarm presentation. The use of okay provides encouragement to the class that the teacher is fine but far from being wholly satisfied.

Moreover, both students and teachers assumed that they each understood one another in the sense of okay. No conflict was observed and the discussion went on ordinarily. The discourse is termed as pragmatic presuppositions [8] where the verbal expressions are
context-dependent and arise from an utterance in a particular context. Students knew the
disappointment on the part of the teacher and they acknowledged their part on that. The usual
positive empathy in the classroom dispels any defiant attitude.

- Its use as an exclamation that expresses agreement or conveys the sense of ‘yes’ or
‘certainly’

English Class
Teacher: Well class, I think you understood the lesson well. Please be ready for your long test
next meeting. Is that okay?
Student: Okay‘po’ (expression of respect) ma’am.

It can be observed from the context that when students reply with okay which conveys ‘yes’,
it is usually followed by ‘po’ to show not only respect but humility as well to the teacher.
This is attributed to the innate characteristics of learners to show deference to their teachers
no matter what age group they belong. Filipino students are mostly dutiful to their teachers
and their use of okay in a humble tone plainly expresses their consent. The reminder of a quiz
is understood to take place and the students’ okay affirms that.

Mathematics Class
Teacher: Are you sure you can follow?
Student: Yes ma’am.
Teacher: Okay, I hope so.

The teacher’s use of okay in the context was regarded as an affirmative by students. It was
well taken that had the teacher doubted their answer, there would be some clarifications to
follow and having none, the ‘I hope so’ by the teacher was disregarded since it is well taken
that it was an attempt to ease the otherwise defiant attitude of some students. The sense of
okay is a clear signal of a compromise.

The sense of okay in the given background goes beyond mere agreement. Students
were expected to answer in the affirmative to confirm their agreement. The teacher has to
compromise and she/he wants the consent of the class. A similar finding is found by Othman
[9] on her study of the use of okay, right and yeah in academic lectures. The author declares
that okay is not only used as a confirmation check but it also served as a response elicitor and
a ‘seek’ of assurance on the part of the lecturer. The use of okay? in the English class shows
the teacher’s attempt to get the guarantee for students that they will be ready for the long test.
3.2 Other Senses of Okay in the Classroom

- Okay means next

Filipino Class
Teacher: Okay, handana kayo sapagsusulit huh, magsimulanatayo, number 1(Okay, everyone seems to be ready on the exam, we’ll start... number 1) ...Number 2...Okay...(the teacher stated the number 3 question)...Okay...(stated the next question)...Number 4..

From the tape-recorded class discussions, the students did not express complaints or misunderstanding regarding the use of okay by the teacher to signal the next question. It was manifested that the pragmatics of okay in giving and taking of a test was clear to both students and teacher. No one from the students asked for clarifications on the instructions and the test was completed in its normal routine. The sense of okay against the classroom background was obviously clear.

General Course
Student-Presenter: Problems in reading arise because of different factors, example the language barriers, also the home environment, the personality of the reader, okay, the attitude of parents, okay, the teacher factor, okay, also the physical factors.

Okay to mean ‘next’ was also manifested when a student-presenter discusses the assigned topic for the day. The class was able to follow in the discussion and everybody was able to follow on the discussion. The discourse of the word appears to be a normal perception in a contextualized learning activity where both learners and teachers naturally adopt to the sense of okay when used in a classroom.

- Okay means showing authority

Mathematics Class
Teacher: Okay, paste your triangles on your activity sheet. I told you to bring all your activity materials. Get ready now, okay!

By the given context, students felt the urgency of the teacher’s order so when the latter uttered okay in a firm tone, students did not waste time and started to prepare their materials. The situation would go uneasy had the students failed to comply. The utterance and undertones of the word okay was quickly deciphered by students and the teacher knew that her manner of using it was in contention of her authority.

Filipino Class
Teacher: Sssh, okay, okay (sternly), basahinnaangnasa notebook! (Hush, okay, okay, read your notes!)
The addressees easily decode the intended meaning for okay. The pragmatic context of the classroom includes the message that the teacher had the authority and will not entertain any more queries; the class discussion had to start. Had the students failed to perceive the teacher’s meaning in her expression of okay, resentment in the classroom ensues.

- Okay means asking for consent
  English Class
Teacher: All right class, now that we’re through with the discussion, you need to take the exam, okay?
Students: But ma’am, we’re not yet ready, we need time to review.
Teacher: Okay, you have 10 minutes to review, okay, huh, okay?
The pragmatic sense of okay in the given context shows an open relationship between the teacher and students. Notwithstanding the authority the teacher has in the classroom, he/she makes use of okay to ask for students’ agreement to facilitate the exam. It is interesting to note that the expression is used to soften the otherwise highly charged atmosphere in the classroom and its use resulted in a conciliation.

- Okay means indicating that the class starts
Teacher: Okay, so what’s the topic for today? (Social Science)
Teacher: Okay class, bring out your assignment. (Science)
Teacher: Okay, get ready reporters. (General Course)
Teacher: Okay, any idea about Euclid? (Mathematics)
Teacher: Okay, what happened last meeting? (English)
In all the five subject areas used in the study, the utterance of okay signals the start of class discussion. Since Filipinos are exposed to English as their second language, the addressees decipher the message and this prompts them to do what is expected from them.

- Okay means acknowledging an answer (whether correct or incorrect)
Teacher: Now class, what can you say about Robert Frost as a student in the Harvard University?
Student: He wrote his stories.
Teacher: Okay, anyone who can give me the answer?

From the pragmatic structure of the utterance of okay, the teacher conveyed that the answer was incorrect and the student concerned was aware of this because of the context of interaction. From the classroom discussion, one would sense either the friendly or hostile attitude in the class atmosphere depending on the manner that the teacher uttered okay in acknowledging the answer. Since the social behavior of participants is observed, the semantics of okay is based on how the speaker and receiver react to the undertones of the word. The co-interlocutor may be prompted to participate more depending on how the teacher has enunciated the word okay.

Okay as a form of acknowledgement is similarly consistent on a study conducted by Ilustre in English language teaching by phone. She [10] concluded that the main function of okay was to give a simple acknowledgement which is probably caused by the lesson setting where face-to-face interaction is lacking, compelling teachers to acknowledge as much as they can. Ilustre’s respondents were also Filipino teachers but they differ to the present study in terms of personal discourse with students.

Another relevant study that shows interest on the use of okay was conducted by Kelly [11] when she analyzed the use of okay as an effective topic-changing device in service-request calls. She showed how okay was used as a marker to close off segments of an interaction and to mark verbally that agreement about a particular aspect of the request has been reached. The researcher recorded that both the trainee and the caller appear to use it to indicate an acceptance of the statements by the other and as a device for the closure of a particular focus. The study further affirms the usual sense of okay as a common perception to both teachers and learners.

On a different linguistic dynamics stressed by the multi-lingual background of respondents on the present study, the subsequent are categorized as the other connotations of okay as used in the classroom:

- Okay means conveying “time is up”
  
  Mathematics Class
Teacher: Now everybody we only have a few minutes left, please answer the exercises. Listen carefully, number 1 question…number 2…number 3…number 4…number 5…all right, I need your papers now. *Okay, okay, pass your paper, now!*

The contextual setting on this situation is remarkably obvious; there is a sense of urgency on the part of the teacher because of the time constraints. The use of *okay* here indicates that the teacher had already provided enough time for his students yet they failed to take it wisely, hence, they ran out of time. So *okay* in this context serves as an ‘I told you so, next time don’t repeat it’ warning to the students.

In view of the foregoing senses of okay, it is apparent that language use is vibrant and is bound to elicit more meanings when the situation varies. This correlates with the concept of Ferguson [12] when he cites about the third wave of sociolinguists whose emphasis is on localized community settings and local interaction. He elucidates further that language acts are acts of identity and that understanding language variation is an agentive, interactive hence a socially meaningful process. The additional senses of okay manifested in the classroom prove the contention.

**4. Conclusions**

The findings of the study manifest that the utterance of ‘okay’ in the classroom can be used in the context of encoding and decoding of meaning which can lead to better understanding of world Englishes. The corpus used in the study yielded additional lexical features of the expression *okay* that will set better appreciation and understanding in the classroom. From the investigation on the use of *okay*, we can conclude that only the basic meanings of it were seen in the classroom like its use as a predicative adjective or adverb, its sense to convey ‘acceptable to me’, and finally, its expression as an agreement. The other senses of ‘okay’ that were unfolded came from the pragmatic and semantic meanings of the expression that were inferred from the contexts of the classroom. This included the use of okay to mean ‘next’, to show authority, to ask for consent, to indicate that class starts, to acknowledge an answer, whether correct or incorrect, and conveying that ‘time is up’. The expression *okay* as a discourse marker changes its meaning depending on the contextual background in a given learning discourse.
5. Recommendations

The use of “okay” among teachers and students was not confined on the functions of using the expression as investigated in other researches but on the actual utterances of the word which had shown multiplicity of inferences and should therefore be regarded in this respect. The native senses of the word had only supported its few pragmatic meanings of which consequently failed to represent the intended messages from the varied contextual settings.

The results of the study urge the academic field to get familiar with the diverse linguistic features even of a very common expression in an academic setting. Its use in the classroom using English as a second language may differ from teachers and learners who are native English speakers and may be found to be significantly diverse from a classroom setting where English is used as a foreign language. Hence it is recommended that a further and more comprehensive study of the use of okay be considered by researchers. Some follow-up studies may be pursued on its use in a classroom setting using different approaches to language teaching and learning.

Personnel involved in the development of English language learning should promote the understanding of the unspoken and peculiar features of multiple expressions to be aware of the varied effects of world Englishes. More studies are enjoined to probe on the additional uses and functions of okay like its use during meetings and conferences or its use in public forums. The use of okay on media coverage and interviews may also be an interesting subject for the exploration of the multi-functional okay.

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