
EXPLORING EFL LEARNERS' PREFERENCES FOR PRAGMATIC MARKERS

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Abstract- *This preliminary study is motivated by the role of pragmatic markers in both spoken and written communication, which reflects speaking fluency. It employs Beeching's (2016) matched-guise methodology, utilizing online forms to engage participants from two different locations. The primary aim of this study is to investigate EFL learners' preferences for using pragmatic markers in their utterances. To gather data, Google Forms were distributed to universities students in two different locations. A total of 39 participants completed the questionnaire, among them were 17 respondents from Central Java, 1 from Bali, 1 from West Java, and 20 from West Kalimantan. Notably, 21 participants identified English as their second language, while 18 reported it as their third language. Upon analysis, the data indicated that participants perceived utterances containing the pragmatic markers "well," "I mean," and "sort of" as embodying polite, direct, and friendly attitudes. While "like" tends to contribute to a sense of indirectness in communication, the utterances featuring "you know" and "just" had no significant impact on the directness of the statements. Future researchers should investigate the broader categories and contextual variations of these markers that were potentially overlooked in the current study.*

Keywords: *Pragmatic Markers; Matched-guise Methodology; EFL learners*

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INTRODUCTION

This study is a preliminary survey to present English learners' preferences of pragmatic markers (PMs), illustrating the responses of EFL learners in two cities in Indonesia. Pragmatic markers that have multiple functions are inherent in spoken and written forms. They are commonly a part of spoken discourses (Brinton, 2017), meaning they are a good indicator of oral fluency (Beeching, 2016). Containing miscellaneous linguistic features (Aijmer, 2013), pragmatic markers signify the speakers' future

communicative objectives (Schourup, 1999). Pragmatic markers *of course, actually, in fact* reflect the speaker's awareness during communication process (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2004). Furthermore, (Rühlemann, 2019) confirmed that the functions of pragmatic markers in the given contexts signify the usage of markers. These functions are recognisable through contextualisation and metalinguistic indicators (Aijmer, 2013a).

Previous studies focused on the frequency and functions of the markers yet did not specifically associate the markers with (im)politeness or reveal learners' pragmatic competence. In the meantime, some experts have shown the relevance. Aijmer (2015) suggested politeness principles and felicitous conditions should be taken into consideration in certain cultural situations. Considering the function, pragmatic markers added to performative verbs can intensify or soften perceived (im)politeness (Leech, 2014). The aforementioned previous studies compared the learners' pragmatic markers to those of first speakers, indicating that the learners used them aptly during their interactions. It also means a learner using pragmatic markers appropriately comprehends cultural context similarly to natives. Considering that teaching activities do not specifically discuss discourse markers (Hellermann & Vergun, 2007) and pragmatic markers, using pragmatic markers in conversation demonstrates learners' adequate pragmatic competence. Pragmatic competence is generally one of the substantial outcomes of acquiring a second language that determines the success of communicative interactions (Salgado, 2011). Communicating in a foreign language using proper pragmatic markers indicates the learners' proficiency (Brown, Fernández, & Huensch, 2023).

In the Indonesian context, English is an elective subject that can be taken a maximum of two hours a week, or 72 hours annually, according to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology in Indonesia. This confirms that limited duration leads to English learning not focusing on pragmatic markers but on grammatical knowledge. Only a few recent studies in Indonesia have discussed the pragmatic competence of EFL learners (Putri, Utomo, & Fargianti, 2021; Al-Rawafi, Sudana, Lukmana, & Syihabuddin, 2021). They should have thoroughly explored the frequency and functions of pragmatic markers, associating them with (im)politeness and pragmatic competence. Considering the urgency, the study addresses the following question: What pragmatic markers of Beeching's questionnaire are known by EFL learners? Therefore,

the study investigates pragmatic markers commonly used in American and British English.

The examination of pragmatic markers is broader than discourse markers because the former relates to discourse, textual, and communicative functions ((Beeching, 2016). Linguistic researchers have applied fourteen labels with various theoretical and methodological approaches to investigate at least six similar expressions (Beeching, 2016). Researchers adopt varied labels that suit their methodologies to analyse linguistic expressions, such as discourse particles (Hansen, 1998a), ‘discourse-pragmatic features’ (Pichler, 2016), discourse markers, or modal particles (Degand et al., 2013). Previous researchers, such as (Fuller, 2003), (Müller, 2005), (Hellermann & Vergun, 2007) and (Buysse, 2017), have used different approaches to study the markers. The first three researchers adopted varied methodologies to examine the distribution and intention of discourse markers “well”, “like” and “you know”.

They also compared native speakers’ and non-native speakers’ markers. Unlike those three researchers, Buysse, (2017) compared the occurrence and intention of using the pragmatic marker “you know”, and found that non-native speakers did not use the marker as much as natives. In the discourse marker analysis, the marker “you know” emphasizes the significance of the following statement (Hellermann & Vergun, 2007). Meanwhile, the analysis of the pragmatic marker confirms the interlocutor’s preceding proposition to save people’s faces as a politeness marker and to draw an inference implicitly (Buysse, 2017). By comparing these two findings, it is clear that the investigation of the pragmatic markers included an analysis of the markers' linguistic, social, and communicative features.

Pragmatic markers intensify the politeness degree. Brinton (2017) stated that the parenthetical *I guess* as a speaker-oriented marker completing the function of intimacy and politeness. Aijmer (2013) verified that pragmatic markers serve diverse politeness purposes, including intensifying, mitigating, downtoning, softening, hedging, and expressing shared knowledge. The politeness presented in the pragmatic markers may differ from one to another. A survey to identify one’s perspective toward the politeness of pragmatic markers becomes a preliminary study to examine pragmatic markers further. This study utilizes Beeching’s questionnaire regarding the usage of words such as "well," "just," "you know," "I mean," "like," and "sort of." Beeching (2016) demonstrated how a

pragmatic marker can convey politeness, directness, level of education, and friendliness. Out of six pragmatic markers that Beeching (2016) studied, *sort of*, *like* and *well* can also be used to indicate hesitation, while *just* mostly found in teenagers' expressions tends to minimise the implications of the messages. She elaborated that the marker *like* can be polysemous and multifunctional because "*like* might be considered to be simultaneously a hesitation marker, an identity marker, an approximator and a focuser" (p.6). Comparing to another marker, *I know* and *you mean* apparently have comparable structure; however, they are not interchanged as the basic meaning of *you know* encourage addressee's deduction, and *I mean* becomes an advance warning of a modified message (Beeching, 2016). In addition to the functions, gender and age groups were taken into consideration in studying pragmatic markers. The current survey, however, intends to focus on learners' preferences in responding to some utterances with or without pragmatic markers *just*, *like*, *well*, *you know*, *I mean*, and *sort of*.

METHODS

This study explored semasiological variants (Beeching, 2016) of pragmatic markers of learner and native-speaker data. While Beeching (2016) modified the matched-guise methodology by adding focus group approach, the current study utilized online platform (the Google form) to gather learners' responses of two universities. The questionnaire had six Beeching's (2016) selected functions of the pragmatic markers. It includes instruction and expressions with and without the marker, as presented in the following example.

Exchange 1

Read the following exchange and think about **the difference** between the **response with *well*** and **the response without *well***. Do you feel more positively disposed towards Speaker B or Speaker C? What difference does using *well* make?

Speaker A: Could you help me with my maths tomorrow morning?

Speaker B: I have to take Cindy to nursery school.

Speaker C: **Well,** I have to take Cindy to nursery school.

Compared to Speaker Speaker B (**without *well***), **Speaker C is more:**

polite	1	2	3	4	5	impolite
direct	1	2	3	4	5	indirect
educated	1	2	3	4	5	uneducated
friendly	1	2	3	4	5	unfriendly

The visual presentation within Google Forms corresponds seamlessly with the aforementioned exchange, wherein participants are required to carefully read the instructions prior to responding to the subsequent scale. This design ensures clarity and encourages thoughtful engagement with the material presented. According to Beeching (2016), the bipolar scales (polite/impolite; direct/indirect; educated/not educated; friendly/ unfriendly) in the study aim to test the hypothesis on the function of pragmatic markers and the social identity aspect. It is known that pragmatic markers indicate the interlocutors' friendliness, although it reflects lower educational background. "From a functional viewpoint, markers can make implicit or indirect references, and these could be considered to render the utterance either more or less polite" (Beeching, 2016, p. 41). The Likert scale enables participants to choose the middle point if they feel that the statements with the pragmatic marker are neither more nor less polite, direct, friendly, or educated compared to those without the pragmatic marker.

The modified questionnaire is accessible (please check it here); it requested participants' personal information (gender, age, origin, mother tongue, educational background, English language experience), and their perceptions toward English pragmatic markers. In accordance with the ethical guidelines (Schneider, 2018), no participants were harmed in this study. Additionally, the study intentionally concealed where the questionnaire was distributed to keep their information confidential.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

A total of 39 participants from the second to eighth semester completed the questionnaire. Among them, 17 were from Central Java, 1 from Bali, 1 from West Java, and 20 from West Kalimantan. Of the participants, 21 reported that English was their second language, while 18 identified it as their third language. Table 1 presented the first

part of the questionnaire asking participants' perception toward English discourse markers.

Table 1: Percentage of Preferred Linguistic Expressions

No	Pragmatic Markers	Participants	
		Location 1 (%)	Location 2 (%)
1	Well	78,9	90
2	Actually	73,7	90
3	Like	52,6	75
4	In fact	42,1	25
5	You Know	57,9	75
6	I mean	63,2	85
7	...and stuff	5,3	10
8	...and things	15,8	10
9	I admit	15,8	25
10	<i>I must admit</i>	0	5
11	<i>that being said</i>	0	5
12	<i>having said this</i>	0	10
13	<i>admittedly</i>	0	10

The table shows that students in the first location generally did not choose the use of pragmatic markers like "I must admit," "that being said," "having said this," and "admittedly." Contrarily, English learners in the second location used all markers. This difference may suggest how the two groups of learners prefer different variations of English, presenting an opportunity for further discussion. While studying learners' English variations requires an inclusive approach, this preliminary survey specifically highlights the participants' responses to six pragmatic markers. The study confirms the suitability of Beeching's questionnaire for thirty-nine Indonesian English learners. It examines whether four optional variables (polite/impolite, direct/indirect, educated/uneducated, friendly/unfriendly) align with Beeching's hypothesis.

EFL learners' pragmatic markers

Most participants selected the polite, direct, and friendly attitudes toward the pragmatic markers *well*, *I mean*, and *sort of*. Interestingly, a notable proportion of participants expressed neutrality regarding the assessment of statements containing pragmatic markers compared to those devoid of such markers. The use of pragmatic markers like "you know" and "just" does not significantly affect the directness of

utterances. Participants suggested that these terms do not make statements more or less direct than those without them. The respondents predominantly expressed the view that the use of the word "like" tends to contribute to a sense of indirectness in communication. While the study did not examine the sociolinguistic features, including macro categories and situational variations of the markers, the preliminary findings on learners' chosen markers significantly contribute to the empirical findings on pragmatic markers. The table below presents only the most prevalent responses across a five-point scale for each variable: politeness, directness, education, and friendliness. Additionally, the researcher noted some pragmatic markers that appeared with similar frequencies, such as "you know" and "just." According to the table, the utterances "you know," "I mean," "like," and "well" each represented approximately 38.5% in the more educated category.

Table 2. Participants' Perceptions of Utterances Containing Pragmatic Markers

Pragmatic Markers	The scale of			
	Polite/impolite	Direct/indirect	Educated/uneducated	Friendly/unfriendly
Well	Polite: 43,5%	Direct: 35,9%	More or less educated: 38,5%	Friendly: 53,8%
I mean	polite 41%	direct 28,2%	more or less educated 38,5%	friendly 48,71
Sort of	polite 35,9%	direct 28,2%	more or less educated 43,6%	friendly 38,5%
You know	more or less polite and direct 25,6%		more or less educated 38,5%	friendly 38,5%
Just	Polite and more or less polite: 30,8%	Direct and more or less direct and somewhat indirect: 25,6%	more or less educated: 35,9%	friendly: 25%
Like	polite 43,6%	somewhat indirect 30,8%	more or less educated 38,5%	friendly 35,9%

Beeching (2016) claimed that "well" becomes the hesitation and transitional marker; additionally, it can be used to change the topic, raise an objection, preface dispreferred responses, take turns, or interrupt politely. The subsequent chart illustrates the predominant responses regarding four variables—politeness, directness, educational background, and friendliness—pertaining to the use of the utterance "well." In Beeching's questionnaire, "well" that put before the future action of the speaker indicating a hesitation toward the request. In assessing "well" in the utterance, participants expressed a clear preference for option 1, which conveys a polite attitude. Option 4, suggesting a somewhat impolite stance, ranked second among respondents. This indicates that

participants view utterances featuring the discourse marker "well" as more direct and friendly in tone compared to those that do not include it. However, these findings contrast with Beeching's (2016) claims, which suggest that the hesitation and transitional functions of "well" make utterances that utilize this marker more indirect in nature.

Most participants indicated that utterances incorporating "I mean" conveyed a polite, direct, and friendly attitude compared to those that did not. Responses revealed that nearly half of the participants felt that the use of "I mean" rendered the statement somewhat indirect. At the same time, the majority considered it neither an indicator of education nor a lack thereof. The utterance *Yeah sure but I mean you can work for money during the year* can be construed that the pragmatic marker "I mean" meant to clarify and act as a self-repair after the affirmative expression *yeah sure*. The predominant response among the participants corresponds with Beeching's empirical findings concerning the utilization of the phrase "I mean" within British English discourse.

In this study, the researcher initially did not anticipate that the participants would be familiar with the pragmatic marker "sort of," as it is infrequently used in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts within Indonesian teaching. However, it was discovered that most participants view the expression "sort of" as a marker of politeness and friendliness, contributing to a more direct and amicable tone in conversation compared to utterances that do not include it. Theoretically, the marker *sort of* in semi-formal contexts aims to hedge, downplay, qualify adjectival and verbal expressions, mitigate face-threatening acts, and fill the pause. Beeching (2016, p.170) claimed that "sort of accompanies an adjective, is intentionally a straightforward one." It means that the participants' responses in this study aligns with Beeching's rationale in comparing utterances with and without "sort of".

The marker "you know" mainly shares the common grounds between interlocutors and has textual and interpersonal functions. Beeching (2016) argued that combining the second person pronoun (*you*) and the cognitive verb (*know*) attracts the addressee's attention to the shared knowledge between interlocutors. Nonetheless, the unique placement of the phrase "you know" within an utterance delineates its diverse functional roles in discourse. The initial position attracts the addressee's attention to the main proposition. At the same time, "you know" situated in the middle of utterance marks to edit or invite co-construction of the content or message formulation. The final

position of “you know” in an utterance and falling intonation aims to strengthen the self-evident proposition and seek agreement from others. Therefore, the final position of "you know" in the statement *They obviously thought he was a bit stupid, you know* aims to point out the self-evident fact. Participants' responses suggest that utterances incorporating the pragmatic marker "you know" do not inherently reflect characteristics of politeness or impoliteness, directness or indirectness, or indicators of education level. This finding indicates that a majority of participants are cognizant of the friendly connotation associated with "you know." However, it strongly suggests that they may not fully comprehend the nuances of its proper usage within conversational contexts.

The pragmatic marker “just” aims at downplaying and intensifying expressions. It can minimise directive or expressive speech acts, assertions, and justifications. Additionally, it also functions as a hedged imperative and filler. The marker “just” in the statement *I just think you should go with your own* aims to minimise the imposition of suggestion as it can be interpreted as aggressive from the hearer’s standpoint (Beeching, 2016). According to the learners' responses, perceived utterances that include "just" with those that do not demonstrate a preference for both a polite demeanor and a neutral stance. The feedback indicates a balanced distribution between neutrality and a somewhat indirect attitude. The participants mostly agreed that utterances containing "just" do not indicate higher or lower levels of education; however, they generally felt it conveyed a somewhat friendly tone.

The marker *like* in *It was like 20 minutes’ walk away* expresses approximation as *like* followed by the duration. “As a pragmatic marker, “like” has an overarching core function, which is to flag approximation and hedge discourse, and five main sub-functions which are as follows: to introduce an example, as an approximative, in the quotative construction, as a focuser and as a hedging discourse marker” (Beeching, 2016, pp. 127-128). The study revealed that participants generally believe that the use of "like" in speech conveys politeness and friendliness, though it is perceived as somewhat indirect and not necessarily indicative of either educated or uneducated speech.

Beeching’s six pragmatic markers are variedly tailored to the contexts and functions. While the markers *you know* and *I mean* have quite comparably structures, they are not interchanged as the basic meaning of *you know* encourages addressee’s deduction but *I mean* becomes an advance warning of a modified message (Beeching, 2016). She

claimed, “I mean is multifunctional and may serve several purposes at the same time” (p. 185). In the utterance *Yeah sure but I mean you can work for money during the year*, the pragmatic marker *I mean* aims to justify and gloss the affirmative response. The findings suggest that the speaker can use pragmatic markers “just”, “like”, “I mean” to hedge their utterances, while utilizing the marker “sort of”, “like”, and “well” to indicate hesitation.

Differences in using pragmatic markers

The study revealed that participants from two locations exhibited distinct findings in using pragmatic markers. This discrepancy suggests that EFL learners in these two Indonesian contexts may have been exposed to varying pragmatic markers during their learning or communication experiences. Participants from both locations valued the friendly tone of utterances that included pragmatic markers, followed closely by a consideration for the politeness conveyed through these markers. Regarding English varieties, 69% of participants reported primarily using American English, while 20.8% indicated a preference for British English. A smaller group, comprising 5.15%, tends to mix both American and British English. The remaining participants mentioned a preference for Australian English or a specific variant they refer to as Indonesian English. This information suggests that further research is needed to explore how learners' choices of English relate to their use of pragmatic markers.

The participants' preference for American or British English varieties is significantly shaped by their learning exposure as Indonesian students are introduced to both English varieties from the inception of their language education. English textbooks used in junior high schools in Indonesia feature a blend of British and American English (Hardianti & Sudarsono, 2021). This exposure persists at the university level, where students become familiar with British and American English expressions through the instructional materials utilized in their courses. Future research could delve deeper into this area of study.

CONCLUSION

The study provides evidence that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in two distinct Indonesian contexts exhibit familiarity with the use of pragmatic markers in their communication. While acknowledging certain limitations, the study significantly enhances our understanding of learners' perceptions regarding the role of pragmatic markers in their language usage. Beeching (2016) correlated her findings with various sociolinguistic variables and also highlighted different results across age groups. In contrast, the current article focuses solely on surface findings, specifically presenting EFL learners' preferences regarding six pragmatic markers. The findings in general primarily focused on geographical differences. Additionally, the preliminary survey did not explore learners' motivations regarding using pragmatic markers in their utterances. The limitations of this study highlight an opportunity for future research to address the gaps that were not covered in this article.

Given the limited scope of these findings and the potential for broader exploration in the future, subsequent researchers should examine the differences in pragmatic marker usage based on age and gender. Additionally, they should explore the use of pragmatic markers in everyday conversation and examine their correlation with different varieties of English.

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