

Non-Native Speakers' Intention of Using Discourse Marker 'You Know': A Corpus-based Study

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Abstract

With the implementation of a corpus-based approach and a qualitative analysis, this research is aimed to investigate non-native speakers' intention of using the discourse marker 'you know' and to explore the potential alternative English expressions of 'you know' that contribute to a further understanding on the use of 'you know' in conversations by non-native speakers. The findings indicate that non-native speakers use 'you know' for various intentions. The intentions to mark hesitation and to seek confirmation are the most common intentions. Accordingly, the most frequent alternative expressions are "(uh)" and "right?". The findings are significant in the sense that it sheds some light on the diversification of non-native speakers' use of discourse marker 'you know' and raises English language learners' awareness about the use and the interpretation of discourse markers which is essential to achieving communicative competence.

Keywords: Corpus Linguistics, Discourse Marker, Speaker Intention, Non-Native Speaker

เจตนาการใช้ดัชนีปริจเฉท 'You Know' ของกลุ่มคนที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษาอังกฤษ:

กรณีศึกษาทางภาษาศาสตร์คลังข้อมูล

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยฉบับนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิเคราะห์เจตนาในการใช้ดัชนีปริจเฉท 'you know' ของผู้พูดที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษาอังกฤษและเสาะหาการใช้คำหรือกลุ่มคำภาษาอังกฤษอื่นที่สามารถแทนใจความของ 'you know' อันนำไปสู่การทำความเข้าใจการใช้ดัชนีปริจเฉทในบทสนทนาภาษาอังกฤษของกลุ่มคนที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษามากขึ้น โดยใช้เครื่องมือและวิธีการทางภาษาศาสตร์คลังข้อมูลรวมไปถึงวิธีการเชิงคุณภาพในการวิเคราะห์บรรทัดคอนคอร์แดนซ์ที่ปรากฏดัชนีปริจเฉทในแต่ละบริบท ผลการศึกษาพบว่า ผู้พูดที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษาอังกฤษใช้ดัชนีปริจเฉท 'you know' ด้วยเจตนาที่หลากหลาย โดยเจตนาที่พบได้ทั่วไปคือ การแสดงความลังเลใจ และการแสวงหาความเห็นชอบ ในทางเดียวกัน คำหรือกลุ่มคำภาษาอังกฤษอื่นที่สามารถใช้แทนใจความของ 'you know' ที่พบได้มากที่สุดคือ "(uh)" และ "right?" ตามลำดับ ซึ่งวิจัยฉบับนี้มีความสำคัญ

ในการชี้ให้เห็นถึงความหลากหลายทางภาษาในด้านดัชนีปริจเฉทของกลุ่มคนที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษา และสร้างการตระหนักรู้ของการใช้และการตีความดัชนีปริจเฉท ‘you know’ เพื่อเพิ่มความสามารถในการสื่อสารภาษาอังกฤษให้ดียิ่งขึ้น

คำสำคัญ: ภาษาศาสตร์คลังข้อมูล ดัชนีปริจเฉท เจตนาของผู้พูด กลุ่มคนที่ไม่ใช่เจ้าของภาษา

1. บทนำ (Introduction)

Discourse markers (DMs) are influential for effective communications. The use of DMs helps develop speaking skills since DMs aid language production and comprehension, control turn management, and sustain conversation consistency. DMs also urge a speaker to create an interpersonal atmosphere which promotes the connection of ideas that leads to coherent sentences (Bussman, 1984). Moreover, DMs are served as a tool for identifying the relations between the intended acts and the thoughts of the speaker (Sidner, 1985). Thus, DMs, which represent subtle linguistic interpretations and a pragmatic involvement in verbal interactions, have been extensively investigated (Watts, 1989). Each DM can be variously classified in accordance with several theories (Zwicky, 1985; Schiffrin, 1987; Jucker and Smith, 1998; Fraser, 2004). Despite their importance in the cultivation of communicative competence, DMs are not introduced directly in traditional language classroom setting (Hellermann & Vergun, 2007). The most feasible manner for non-native speakers (NNS) to acquire the correct use of DMs is through a contact with native speakers (NS) which does not guarantee that they will reach the native-like competency (Müller, 2005). Regarding the use of the discourse marker ‘you know’, it is thus necessary to study NNS’s diverse intentions when using it. The findings have a potential to reflect any thoughts that might influence the use that diverts from the standard use performed by native speakers. MICASE spoken corpus is used to detect any linguistic features used among NNS in authentic conversations.

Although the process of acquiring DMs by NNSs of English has been a focus in many studies, the use of DMs by NNSs living is emphasized in only few of them. This research attempts to fill this gap by investigating the use of DMs ‘you know’ used by NNSs in the University of Michigan using corpus tool and qualitative analysis of NNS intentions. A corpus-based data is gathered from academic conversations by both NSs and NNSs. Along with the context gained from the transcribed data, it is analyzed and categorized following Mei’s (2012) pragmatic functions of ‘you know’.

The investigation in the current research is in response to the following research questions: (1) What is the most common intention of NNS when using ‘you know’?; and (2) Is

the DM ‘*you know*’ used by NNSs consistently replaceable with other English expressions? If so, what is the most common alternative? It should be noted that this research has been carried out with some limitations. First, the data gathered from the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE) is American English only. Second, non-native speakers in this study are classified by MICASE corpus builder and the information of their first language is restricted. Finally, the phonology elements in conversations are not taken into account since the transcribed data from the corpus is in a text format.

2. ทฤษฎีที่เกี่ยวข้อง (Theoretical Framework)

The study of DMs has become a growing industry in linguistics and many approaches have been developed to further investigate them. The term discourse marker (DM) is defined differently depending on several perspectives. Early definitions were coined by Labov & Fanshel (1977:156) as “a linguistic entity which refers backwards to some topic that is already shared knowledge among participants”. Also, Zwicky (1985) proposed that DM is an independent word class which is separated from other function words. However, there has been an increasing interest in the dimensional status of DM. Schiffrin (1987:31) suggested that DMs are “dependent elements which bracket units of talk” that include entities such as sentence propositions, speech acts, and tone units. DMs do not easily fit into a linguistic class since some paralinguistic features and non-verbal gestures are potential DMs. Many researchers had worked on how to distinguish a DM by examining other words in the sentence and Fuller’s (2003) contribution was the remarkable one. She explained that there are two criteria that can be used to determine whether a particular unit possesses the status of a DM. Firstly, if the DM is removed, the semantic relationship between elements in the sentences remain the same. The second criterion is that the grammaticality of the sentence is still intact without the DM.

Every DM has certain pragmatic functions and most utterances are interpreted with the help of them. The importance of DMs is not only for the speaker, but also for the hearer. Fox Tree and Schrock (1999) found that listeners understand speech content better when it includes a discourse marker. Correspondingly, the absence of it in the same speech content impedes the hearer’s comprehension of the message. Moreover, recognizing and showing responsiveness to a speaker’s discourse markers can build trust and move the conversation forward. Jucker & Smith (1998) proposed a distinction between reception markers, which indicate the speaker’s reaction to an utterance (e.g. *oh*, *well*, and *yeah*), and

presentation markers, which modify the speaker's own utterance (e.g. *like*, *I mean*, and *you know*). Also, DMs such as *uh*, *um*, *like*, and *you know* function in the cognitive, social, expressive, and textual domains. These DMs are known as vocal hiccups (Bright, 1992).

A skillful use of DMs which reflects a higher level of fluency in spoken language and language competency also affects DMs comprehension (Sadeghi & Ramezan Yarandi, 2014). There is quantitative evidence that shows NSs' and NNSs' different uses of DMs. According to Hellermann & Vergun (2007), NSs use DMs more frequently than NNSs. Proficient language learners tend to use more DMs, but not to the degree NSs do. These findings are in accordance with what Hays (1992) proposed about the developmental order for the acquisition of DMs – presentation markers (*like*, *I mean*, and *you know*) tend to be acquired later. However, an interesting research study carried out by Müller (2004) suggested that, in some cases, NNS use DMs to a greater extent than NSs do. The findings from the study done by Jabeen et al. (2011) complied with these. EFL learners' use of DMs reflects various pragmatic functions and is incompatible with earlier theories (Östman, 1981; Holmes, 1986; Fuller, 2003) which restricted to the idea that the use of '*you know*' is only a matter of signaling common knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

According to O'Keeffe et al. (2007), '*you know*' is found to be the most common DM occurring in the top 2,000 in the spoken corpus. It carries a number of particular characteristics. It is used mostly in informal, face-to-face, narrative conversations (Östman, 1981). The presence of '*you know*' is one of the most salient features of spontaneous talks (Fox Tree and Schrock, 1999). Basically, this DM implies that the hearer is familiar with the information presented by the speaker (Fuller, 2003). The other observation by Schiffrin (1987) showed that '*you know*' does not always mean the hearer 'knows' the information; it can be used to present unknown content the speaker wishes to be accepted by the hearer. Furthermore, Holmes (1986) presented a detailed picture of '*you know*' which can be used for (1) expressing certainty (of the speaker), i.e. introducing mutual knowledge, stressing speaker's speech act, and expressing speaker's certainty concerning validity of the information; and for (2) expressing uncertainty, i.e. appealing for reassurance, signaling linguistic imprecision, and indicating false start. Although those subfunctions were proposed to explain in-depth features of '*you know*', Holmes's model did not include the previous claims about '*you know*' into consideration. Besides, the findings from Müller (2005) gave further descriptions of '*you know*' by focusing more on the specific verbal contexts in which it is used. She classified the functions into two major categories: textual and interactional

levels. However, she decided to categorize ‘*you know*’ that infrequently appeared in her corpus as ‘various functions’ and ‘unidentifiable’. This framework, thus, apparently overlooked the possible features of ‘*you know*’ that might be occur in different or bigger samples. Mei (2012) followed Müller’s study and took a step further. He claimed that all feasible functions of ‘*you know*’ should be taken into account regardless of their frequencies. Müller’s classification was further developed into twenty-four subcategories as follows: 1) Assumption-correction, 2) Introducing background information, 3) Cause, 4) Reason, 5) Result, 6) Explicitness, 7) Reformulation, 8) Exemplification, 9) Seeking confirmation, 10) Summarization, 11) Quotative, 12) Justification, 13) Conclusion, 14) Softener of face-threatening act, 15) Interactional repair, 16) Indicating marked expressions, 17) Indicating the most likely event, 18) Indicating the unspoken message to be completed by the hearer, 19) Indicating the coming message is meant to be evaluated, 20) Hesitation marker, 21) Restart, 22) Approximator, 23) Introducing a new topic, and 24) Indicating speaker attitude.

Mei’s study attempted to define the pragmatic functions of ‘*you know*’ based on the logical relationship between the messages linked by ‘*you know*’. He discovered that ‘*you know*’ link messages which are bound through a cause-and-effect relationship. The study also defined the pragmatic functions of ‘*you know*’ by the speech act that co-occurred. For example, ‘softener of face-threatening act’ was set up when ‘*you know*’ was found to mark a number of face-threatening acts such as giving a suggestion, disagreeing, and breaking bad news. Mei’s study presented a clearer picture of the speakers’ intention when using ‘*you know*’. His framework involving functions of ‘*you know*’ represented the most recent and detailed investigation and provided a great contribution to the investigation of ‘*you know*’ in general. However, NNS data he gained from the corpora was the collection of role-played conversations which were not authentic. This fact stresses the need to conduct the study which utilizes NNSs’ authentic conversations.

3. ข้อมูลและวิธีการวิจัย (Research Methodology)

3.1 การเก็บรวบรวมข้อมูล (Data Collection)

‘*You know*’ is chosen as the target phrase for the following reasons: (1) it is stated by Fuller (2003) and Müller (2005) to be one of the most frequently used DM in English; (2) ‘*you know*’ used by NNS is found by Jabeen et al. (2011) to show the diversity in meaning and intentions; (3) ‘*you know*’ as a DM is distinguishable from its use based on its literal meaning. This study is based on Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE). The

corpus was developed at the University of Michigan containing nearly 1.8 million words of transcribed academic conversations. Approximately 37,000 people are involved including faculty members, staff, and all levels of students, both NSs and NNSs. The researcher collects every occurrence of ‘*you know*’ and the surrounding contexts from transcribed data for analysis. These were completed through a couple of steps. Firstly, all occurrences of ‘*you know*’ in MICASE were counted with a filter set to NNSs only. After that, applying Fuller’s DM criteria (2013), the researcher manually examined if each occurrence of ‘*you know*’ is eligible for the study and eliminated irrelevant data such as “*do you know*”, “*people you know*”, and “*let you know*”.

3.2 การวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล (Data Analysis)

By utilizing Mei’s (2012) theory, the researcher manually analyzed each concordance line and surrounding contexts gained from the transcribed data to classify each ‘*you know*’ into 24 different intentions. Then, the researcher adopted paraphrasing technique. Each ‘*you know*’ is manually substituted by ten other expressions under two conditions: (1) with equivalent context, the alternative expression serves the same pragmatic function as ‘*you know*’ does, (2) the intended meaning remains the same. Those ten expressions include “*because*”, “*by the way*”, “*for example*”, “*I mean*”, “*I think*”, “*in other words*”, “*right?*”, “*so*”, “*that is*”, “*(uh)*”, and *unspecified*. Additionally, the rater who is a native speaker of English checks the categorization and substitutions to assure the reliability of the results. Eventually, every substitution is labeled and counted for the frequency. The data were shown in percentage.

4. ผลการวิจัย (Findings/Results)

To filter out the eligible data of ‘*you know*’ which functions as DM, other forms of ‘*you know*’ such as “*do you know*”, “*people you know*”, “*let you know*”, etc. were eliminated. The researcher adopted Fuller’s DM criteria (2003) to find whether each ‘*you know*’ is relevant for this study. Also, the surrounding context of each ‘*you know*’ was taken into account. The researcher analyzed all related written transcripts and eliminated all irrelevant ‘*you know*’. According to MICASE results in which a filter was set to ‘non-native speaker only’, there were 137 occurrences of ‘*you know*’, 37 of which were found to be non-DM.

*“well a little you know the easy ones are, these ones
are okay right? these probably a little bit tricky”*

*“hi how's your plan going on I wish you good luck with your (companion)
but I just want to let you know that I will be unable to participate”*

These two examples above are occurrences of ‘you know’ that do not match Fuller’s (2013) criteria which suggests that ‘you know’ have a literal meaning of being aware of information or ‘knowing’ something. Moreover, when remove ‘you know’ in these sentences, not only the semantic relationships between the elements in the sentences are lost, but the grammaticality of the sentences is also impaired.

*“so having said, that, uh, you know profound amounts of erosion
will take place only if these rocks are exposed to the elements”*

*“that's particularly true in the United States, if you read,
you know the New York Times last Sunday...”*

*“the guys who know plant science, they know, about...
soils and they know about um, you know crops and stuff”*

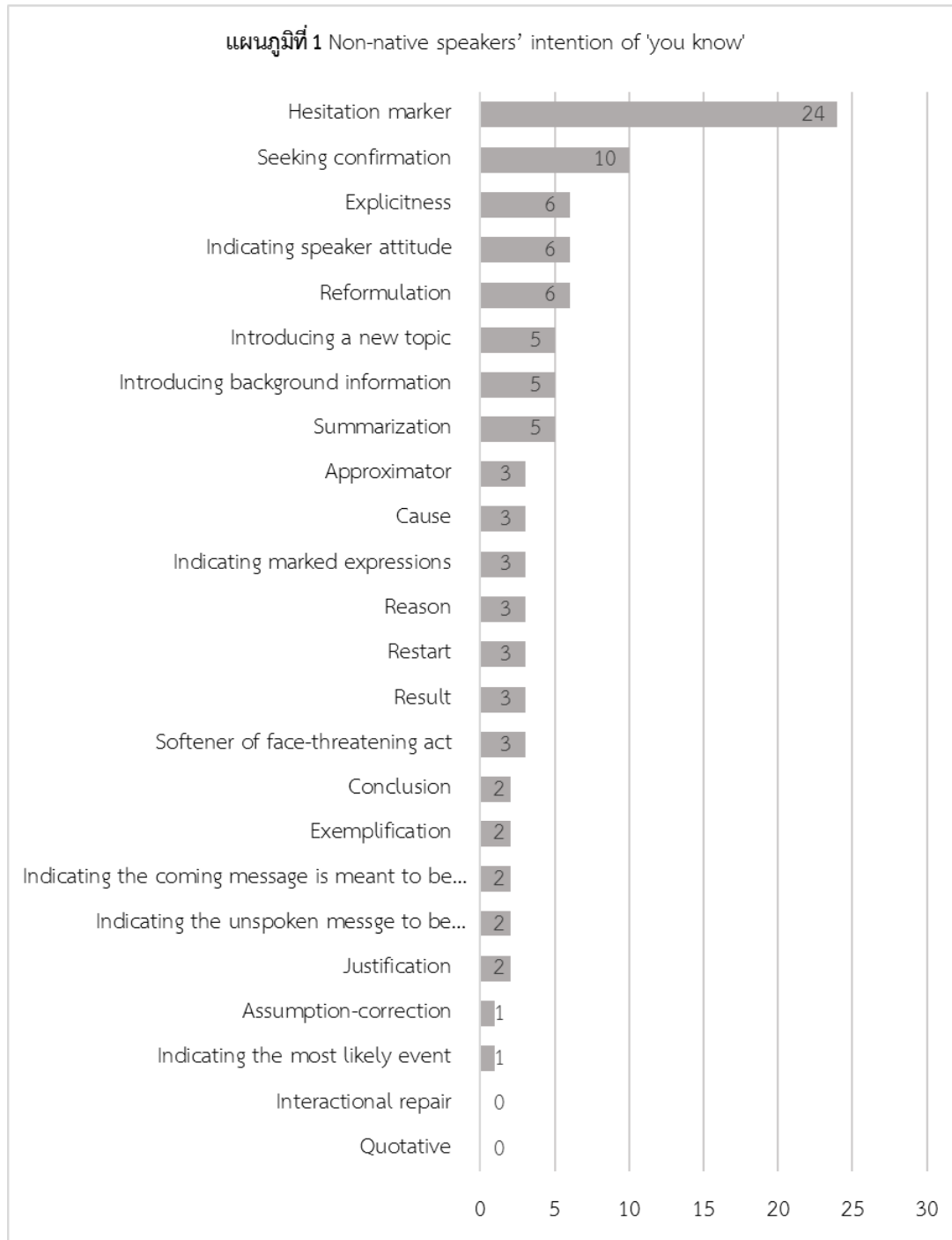
Meanwhile, these three examples of ‘you know’ possess the status of a DM can be removed without losing the semantic relationships and grammaticality. The meanings of ‘you know’ in these examples do not necessarily shade a meaning of ‘knowing’ something.

After manually analyzing the occurrences of ‘you know’ and their surrounding contexts, 37 tokens are found irrelevant. Thus, the total number of eligible data after eliminating all non-DMs are 100. They were then classified in accordance with the speakers’ intentions and alternative expressions. The results are reported in response to the research questions.

4.1 Non-Native Speakers’ Intention of ‘You Know’

Since ‘you know’ as a DM possesses various functions, the contexts and speech events are essential components when determining the intention of each ‘you know’. The researcher utilized Mei’s (2012) framework of 24 intentions when using ‘you know’. The

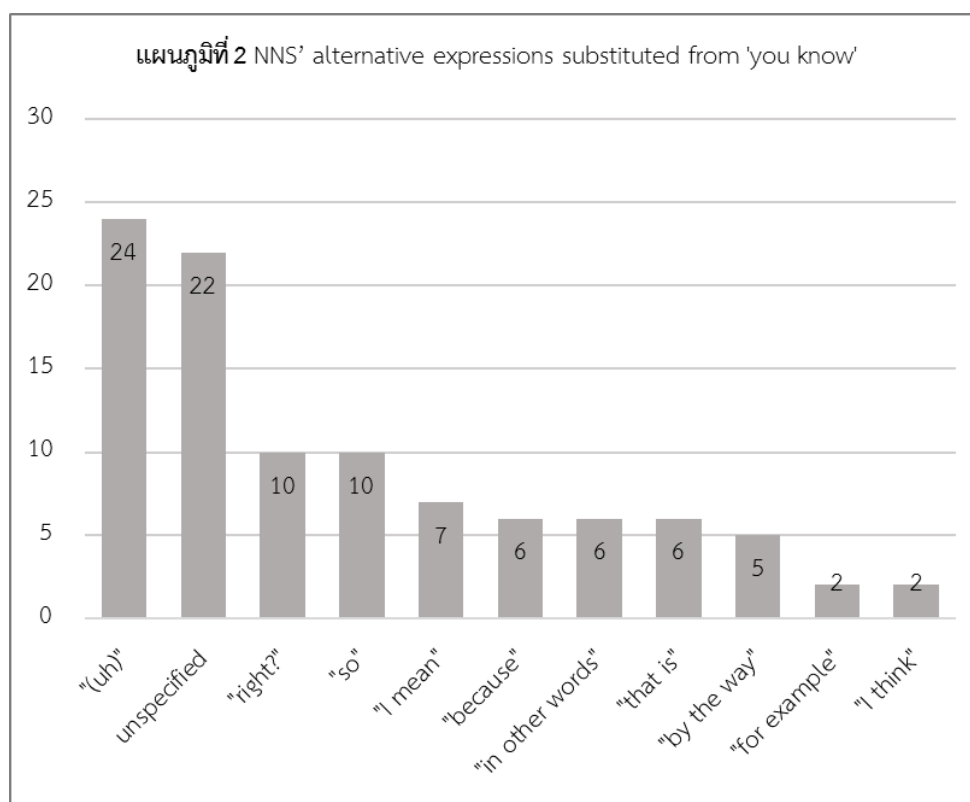
analyses of the tokens showed that NNS used ‘you know’ for various intentions as shown in Chart 1.



It is found that NNS in this study use ‘*you know*’ for 22 different intentions. The most common intentions of using ‘*you know*’ by NNSs are to mark hesitation (24%), to seek confirmation (10%), to suggest explicitness (6%), to indicate speaker’s attitude (6%), and to reformulate (6%), respectively. Apart from these frequent intentions of ‘*you know*’, the intention to introduce background information which activates the common function of ‘*you know*’ as cited in Östman (1981), is resulted at the rate of 5%. This shows that NNSs appear to use DMs for purposes different from those set by NSs. Notably, the result reveals that NNSs do not use ‘*you know*’ with an intention for a quotative and interactional repair.

4.2 Alternative Expressions of ‘You Know’

Following Östman (1981) and Mei (2012), ‘*you know*’ as a DM can be substituted by other English expressions based on its intended meaning and context. Subsequently, all intentions of ‘*you know*’ are grouped and labeled with the substituting expressions. The possible substituting English expressions of ‘*you know*’ used by NNSs are presented in Chart 2 below:



NNSs' uses of '*you know*' in this study can be substituted by 10 English expressions. From 100 eligible data, the most common substituting expressions of '*you know*' are "(uh)" (24%), "right?" (10%), and "so" (10%), respectively. Meanwhile, 22% of NNSs' intentions of '*you know*' cannot be represented by any expression. The least compatible substituting expressions are "for example" (2%) and "I think" (2%).

5. สรุปและอภิปรายผล (Conclusion and Discussion)

The results indicate that NNSs use the DM '*you know*' differently from NSs. These almost comply with Mei's (2012) findings. It shows that NNSs in this corpus are aware of the meaning of this marker and how to use it to achieve their communication needs. The common intentions of NNSs when using '*you know*' are to mark hesitation and to seek confirmation. '*You know*' can also be used to reform or restart a conversation indicating NNSs' uncertainty about what s/he is saying. It is possibly influenced by the non-native proficiencies and disfluency of NNSs which cause them some more time to think of the word. In some cases, NNSs also insert '*you know*' in the conversations to receive a positive reaction from the hearer. Apart from the frequent intentions, '*you know*' is used to mark a cause-and-effect relationship between events discussed in the conversations. Also, it is used when the speaker wants to give examples and giving further details. Furthermore, '*you know*' can also be used to summarize a talk or to indicate some possibilities mutually known by the interlocutors. '*You know*' can also be the determiner or indicator of the speaker's uncertainty about information. In contrast to Labov & Fanshel (1977:156) and Östman (1981), the intention of introducing background information which represents a common function of '*you know*' is seen less frequently in the data than the intention of introducing a new topic. This asserts that NNSs appear to use DMs for a purpose different from that of NSs, agreeing with Müller (2004) and Jabeen et al. (2011). Besides, for the intention of marking a quotation, the result reveals that NNSs in this study do not use '*you know*' for this intention. This contrasts Schiffrin's (1987:31) definition of DMs which says that a DM "brackets unit of talk". Lastly, the intention of interactional repairing is not found in the data. This is possibly because this function of '*you know*' involves a higher level of pragmatic awareness in the target language which has not been achieved by some NNSs.

Furthermore, the results show the substitution of English expressions for '*you know*'. "(Uh)" is the most common substituting expression. It shows the NNSs' hesitation and disfluency while at the same time maintaining the conversation turns. Other expressions that

can be used as the substitutes for ‘*you know*’ include “*right?*” which implies uncertainty and a need for a response and “*so*” which indicates a result and sums up a talk. The phrase “*I mean*” substitutes ‘*you know*’ when there is a need to correct or to restart the conversation while “*because*” is a possible substitute when the speaker wants to signal an effect before moving on to state the cause. There is a slight difference between the substitutes “*in other words*” and “*that is*” even though they both serve the purpose of giving a better understanding to the hearer. “*In other words*” becomes a proper substitute when the speaker inserts ‘*you know*’ to signal that s/he is finding other words that carry the same meaning. In contrast, “*that is*” substitutes ‘*you know*’ when the speaker is to offer the hearer some direct explanatory information. The expression “*by the way*” is acceptable when there is an intention to introduce a new topic and to signal a need to terminate the discussion about a topic to shift the conversation to another topic. The function of “*for example*” is obviously to provide examples. Lastly, “*I think*” is used to justify the speaker’s opinion or reason. However, there are many occurrences of ‘*you know*’ that cannot be replaced with any expression and are thus categorized as *unspecified* in this study. Even though they all carry an implied meaning, they perform a pragmatic function rather than a semantic one.

As discussed above, ‘*you know*’ can be replaced with various expressions while it does not shade much understanding of the speakers’ intention when it stands alone without a surrounding context. This affirms that surrounding contexts are inevitably significant for the investigation on the use of DMs. In conclusion, understanding how ‘*you know*’ works not only helps the speaker to use this marker correctly and appropriately, but also helps the hearer to comprehend the meanings and intentions of the speaker correctly.

With the purpose of providing convenience for further research, recommendations are presented based on the findings and conclusions of the study as follows. First, comparative corpus from native speakers of English could be used for further quantitative results. Second, other phonological factors such as pause, stress, and intonation could be taken into account for a paralinguistic investigation on the use of DMs to reach further understanding of conversations by non-native speakers and their context. Third, apart from ‘*you know*’, other DMs could be used as target phrases for further study to see whether all DMs produced by non-native speakers share the same characteristics. Finally, an investigation on English learners of Thai and their use of ‘*you know*’ and possibly other DMs would be interesting in the sense that it possibly reveals comparative sets of data which can be compared with the

data from NNSs and NSs. The findings would be useful both for English pedagogy and the study of discourse markers and the acquisition of discourse markers in general.

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