

Checking Understandings: Comparing Textbooks and a Corpus of Spoken English in Hong Kong

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Two interactional strategies explicitly taught to learners of English in Hong Kong are how to check that the hearer understands what you are saying as you communicate and, conversely, how to check that you have understood another speaker's message. The forms of these strategies that are taught in Hong Kong schools are fairly limited. This study seeks, through examining authentic spoken discourse in the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE), to determine the ways in which these strategies are linguistically realised in real life communication, compared to the intuitions of materials writers that find their way into school textbooks. The findings suggest that more awareness of the realities of language use would be of benefit to textbook writers and teachers, enabling them to incorporate a wider and more accurate range of forms into their teaching materials, in order, in turn, to foster a more accurate awareness of language and language use in their learners. The approaches of corpus-driven research and data-driven learning are useful; through these, language learners can also become language researchers themselves, engaging themselves in the examination and analysis of corpus data.

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Introduction

In the 1980s, researchers in second language acquisition (e.g. see Doughty & Pica, 1986; Long & Sato, 1983; Pica & Doughty, 1985; Pica & Long, 1986) began to observe the relative absence in classroom discourse of such interactional features as comprehension checks through which learners and their teachers check the comprehension of each other's message meaning (Pica, 1987). Pica remarks that this absence is a reflection of the unequal speaker relationships due to the predominance of teacher-fronted classroom discourse. To promote 'more equalised relationships among classroom participants' and negotiation of meaning that is necessary for comprehensible input and output, Pica (1987: 3) suggests the use of decisionmaking discussions and information exchange tasks as classroom activities. Indeed, the importance and use of small-group communicative interaction as a way of developing language learners' oral skills is well documented in current ESL/EFL approaches and methods such as

Communicative Language Teaching and Task-based Language Teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

To promote interactive speaking skills among learners, it is not enough to teach learners a set of formulaic phrases and expressions (Lam, 1995). Bejarano *et al.* (1997: 204) argue for the need to provide learners with training in the skilled use of 'social interaction strategies' during small group discussion that are necessary for better attentive listening and participation skills and maintaining the flow of a cohesive and coherent group discussion, rather than individual students delivering independent or unrelated short speeches. In Bejarano *et al.*'s (1997) study, strategy training resulted in learners' increased participation in discussions and improved discussion quality.

Lam and Wong (2000: 247) provided training to 58 Sixth Form Hong Kong students to use three interaction strategies, namely (1) clarifying oneself, (2) seeking clarification, and (3) checking one's understanding of other people's messages. Their study confirms the value of interaction strategy training and suggests the need to support strategy training with linguistic scaffolding. Their training materials which provide linguistic input were adopted from one of the students' coursebooks (Lam & Wong, 2000: 247). Recent studies comparing English presented in ELT textbooks and English used in natural communicative situations outside of the classroom have, however, found that textbook accounts of language use are often decontextualised and lack empirical basis (e.g. see Cheng & Warren, 2005; Römer, 2005). For example, in their study of the speech act of disagreement, Cheng and Warren (2005) conclude that textbook writers need to incorporate a wider range of and more accurate forms into their materials in order to better reflect the realities of actual language use.

In upper secondary schools in Hong Kong the focus in English language learning is the preparation of students for their future workplaces and tertiary education. Oral English, particularly group discussion, is considered an important skill for the students to master. Nevertheless, a consistent comment made by oral examiners of the Use of English of the Advanced Supplementary Level Examination (2002, 2003 and 2004), a public examination taken by 17/18-year-olds in Hong Kong, is that in general candidates are weak in interaction in group discussion. The 2004 report, for instance, contains this comment: 'Most candidates demonstrated poor turn-taking skills and failed to ask specific relevant questions pertaining to the ideas expressed by other candidates during the discussion. . . . Some weaker candidates experienced problems in understanding other candidates' questions and thus failed to respond to them or to develop the conversation appropriately' (p. 133). One of the strategies, as described in the examination syllabus for Use of English (2006, 2007), is that candidates are expected to demonstrate the oral skills of 'seeking understanding and clarification through questioning and discussion' among others. In order for the group discussion to proceed appropriately, it is important that the candidates learn and master key interaction strategies relevant to group discussions.

Monitoring and checking understanding in spoken discourse

The interactional strategies of monitoring and checking understanding and their linguistic realisations in authentic use of language have been described

by discourse analysts and corpus linguists. Stenström (1994), for instance, distinguishes between monitoring understanding and checking understanding. Stenström (1994: 131) uses the term 'monitoring' to describe the speaker's attempts to rectify what (s)he has said when observing that the hearer cannot follow what is being said or is not convinced. In these contexts, the speaker may explicitly use *I mean* and sometimes *well you know, well you see, well I mean you know, you know, sorry, pardon me* and *actually* (Stenström, 1994: 131–132), but Stenström does not describe the intonation associated with these words and phrases. The words and phrases used for monitoring hearers' understandings may be accompanied by the speaker making a fresh start or rephrasing what (s)he is saying in mid-utterance. Stenström (1994: 107–108) uses the term 'checking' to describe requests from the hearer for repetition and clarification. These forms of checking understanding are realised by *what, sorry, pardon* and *I beg your pardon* and by Wh-interrogatives (Stenström, 1994: 107). According to Carter and McCarthy (2006: 822), 'checking' refers to hearers using indirect reported speech to serve as a 'memory or comprehension check', e.g. *you say. . . ?* and *did you say. . . ?*. They also point out that in spoken discourse speakers are always monitoring the state of shared knowledge and the assumptions that they make about the common ground that exists among the participants by using, for example, *you know, do you know what I mean, I mean* and *you know what I mean* (Carter & McCarthy, 2006: 835).

Pedagogical applications of corpora

Corpora and corpus evidence have been used in language teaching for the last two or three decades (e.g. see Johns, 1986, 1991; Sinclair, 1987, 1991); however, as observed by Römer (2006), corpora have yet to become part of the 'pedagogical landscape' (Sinclair, 2004: 2). In the field of language teaching and corpus linguistics, the potential of data-driven learning (Johns, 1991) and corpus-driven research (Tognini-Bonelli, 1996) to make a significant contribution is vast. 'Corpus-driven' research emphasises that theoretical statements are a product of the evidence from the corpus (Tognini-Bonelli, 2002: 75). Most importantly, studies examining corpus data have helped researchers to identify patterning that differs from traditional models of the English language, and have demonstrated the shortcomings of relying solely on intuitive models of language in use. According to Johns (1991), 'data-driven learning' (DDL) means that the language learner can at the same time be a language researcher and that in order to more effectively learn the target language, the learner needs to be able to have available authentic data. Using corpora as the source of language input, DDL brings to the class abundant examples of authentic language samples that can be studied in many different ways. Such an approach usurps the traditional roles of the teacher/researcher and student because, as Johns (1991: 2) claims, 'research is too serious to be left to the researchers'. The teacher becomes a facilitator of language study instead of being seen as the language expert responsible for both teaching and research, and the students acquire a new role as language investigator in addition to that of language learner.

In Cheng *et al.* (2003) study, undergraduate English language majors were trained to become language researchers themselves by conducting individual

corpus-driven mini-research projects. The learners identified lexical, syntactic or discursial features they wished to study in selected corpora, conducted the study, described their findings, and lastly reflected on their learning experiences. The majority of the learners found both project experiences and outcomes interesting and useful (Cheng *et al.*, 2003: 181). The greatest benefit was found to be the systematic study of authentic language, followed by a much better and informed understanding and increased knowledge of a wide range of language patterns and use. Despite reported difficulties encountered at different stages of the corpus-driven language research studies, the learners were able to overcome them and completed their language research projects successfully.

Aims of the Study

Motivated by the comments found in the Hong Kong Advanced Level oral examiners' reports (2002, 2003 and 2004), the present study sets out to examine two interactional strategies explicitly taught to learners of English in Hong Kong. These are how to monitor that the hearer understands what you are saying as you communicate and, conversely, how to check that you have understood another speaker's message.

When examining what is taught in some English language textbooks used in secondary schools in Hong Kong, the authors felt strongly that many of the examples of spoken language were not an accurate reflection of real-world language use. Mindful of Trudgill's (1996: xii) insightful comment that 'In the final analysis if linguistics is not about language as it is actually being spoken and written by human beings, then it is about nothing at all', the authors decided to put their opinion regarding textbook content to the test.

The study examines a spoken English corpus, the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE) (Cheng *et al.*, 2005), which comprises academic, business, conversational and public discourse, spoken by Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) and primarily native speakers (NES) of English. As described, the study aims to find out how the speakers' contextual usage of monitoring and checking understanding strategies compare across different types of spoken genres. The study, however, does not attempt to make distinctions between the speakers in terms of their mother tongues. The speakers are all highly competent speakers of English communicating effectively in intercultural contexts, which is commonplace and, indeed, the norm for the international use of English. The discourse intonation that is associated with the strategies is discussed. The study then compares the findings with what the English language textbooks in upper secondary schools in Hong Kong say, which, it can be argued, in some way reflects the levels of conscious awareness of the textbook authors. Lastly, the study discusses some pedagogical applications of corpora which adopt the approaches of corpus-driven research and data-driven learning.

Data

The Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE) is a two-million-word corpus of academic, business, conversational and public discourse between Hong Kong Chinese and non-Cantonese speaking interlocutors (typically native English speakers). Importantly, the HKCSE is not a learner corpus, but rather

it is comprised of competent speakers of English communicating in the kinds of typical intercultural contexts which account for much, if not most, of the English spoken in today's world. The four sub-corpora represent the main overarching spoken genres found in the Hong Kong context: academic discourse (lectures, seminars, supervisions, student presentations, telephone interviews etc.), business discourse (meetings, service encounters, workplace presentations, job and placement interviews, informal office talk, etc.), conversation (conversations recorded in restaurants, pubs, cafés, homes etc.) and public discourse (public speeches [followed by Q&A], forum discussions, radio and television broadcasts, press briefings [followed by Q&A], etc.). The participants in the HKCSE are made up of HKC (first language Cantonese) and primarily NES, with some speakers of languages other than Cantonese and English. All of the participants were monitored in terms of place of birth, age, gender, occupation, educational background, time spent living or studying overseas (for the HKC) and mother tongue.

The data in this study consist of 920,000 words (230,000 words from each of the four sub-corpora of the HKCSE), and have an overall spread of 72.7% and 27.3% between HKC and NES. This spread differs across the four sub-corpora reflecting the reality of the use of spoken English in Hong Kong. In two-party conversation the spread is very even (51.4% HKC and 48.6% NES). In business contexts in Hong Kong the majority of the data (74.8%) is spoken by HKC. This rises to 80.3% in the academic context in Hong Kong where the medium of instruction is English. In spoken public discourse it becomes 87.1% which illustrates the widespread use of English in the media, public administration and political spheres.

The data have all been prosodically transcribed, using Brazil's (1997) discourse intonation systems (see Appendix 1 for the transcription conventions that denote discourse intonation). In this paper, the role of the speaker's choice of tone is discussed. There are five tones available to speakers in discourse intonation (Brazil, 1997: 67–81): two rise tones (fall-rise and rise), two fall tones (fall and rise-fall) and the level tone.

The Forms of Monitoring and Checking Understanding in Hong Kong Textbooks

The study began by examining 15 textbooks (listed in Appendix 2) endorsed by the Education and Manpower Bureau of the Hong Kong Government (equivalent to a Ministry or Department of Education) for use in Hong Kong's upper secondary schools to find out how strategies of monitoring and checking understanding are perceived and presented by the textbook authors. Appendix 3 contains all of the examples of the interactional strategies used by speakers monitoring hearers' understanding (function 1) and hearers checking from speakers their own understanding (function 2) of the discourse at given points. Before the textbook authors' examples are examined against corpus evidence, a significant point needs to be made, and that is, all of the textbook writers are found to be placing the greatest responsibility for the checking understanding process on the hearer rather than the speaker. While nine textbooks devote some space to how hearers 'seek clarification', 'ask for repetition', 'check understanding',

'listen effectively' and 'say they don't understand', only four of the fifteen textbooks provide any examples of how speakers 'check others' understanding' and 'clarify'. This paper will show that corpus evidence strongly suggests that the textbooks authors' perception of the primary responsibility residing in the hearers is misplaced, and that it is in fact the speaker who assumes the greatest responsibility for this monitoring process.

In terms of the examples of the speaker monitoring the hearer's understanding (function 1), the authors of the four textbooks all cover examples of the speaker directly and explicitly asking the hearer if she or he understands (e.g. *are you with me, do you understand me, is that clear*) and only one textbook (Sutton, 1998) includes the less direct and explicit, and structurally simpler, *okay* as an example of how a speaker might monitor the hearer's understanding. A search of the HKCSE for the examples presented by the textbook authors has found no examples of speakers using *do you see my point* or *are you with me*. Examples of speakers actually using the word *understand* to monitor the hearer's understanding are seven in all, but they are confined to teachers in the academic sub-corpus, and the same is found for *is that clear* (4 instances) which is only said by teachers to students. Similarly, most of the instances of *do you see* and *know what I mean* (6 out of 11) are used by teachers. Thus the limited use of direct and explicit forms is further limited in terms of both genre and speaker role in the corpus data. However, the use of *okay* to monitor hearers' understanding, while under-represented by the textbook authors, is prevalent in the data and, with 469 instances, *okay* is the second most common form, although, interestingly, two thirds of the examples are found in the academic sub-corpus.

Only one of the textbooks (Sutton, 1998) pays attention to the ongoing process by which the speakers directly and explicitly clarify what they are saying in real time and the strategies employed (e.g. *what I mean is, I think what he meant was*, etc.) to signal that this process is underway. A search of the HKCSE has found that while the forms presented in the textbooks are not forms commonly employed by speakers, the role of simply *I mean* (750 instances) in the monitoring process is very important but missed by the textbook authors, while the form *what I mean* is relatively less common with 31 instances in the HKCSE.

The 15 school textbooks are equally lacking when it comes to describing how hearers check their understanding. Many of the examples in the textbooks begin with *sorry* or *I'm sorry* or *I'm afraid* which serves as a preface to an explicit statement that there is a communication problem (e.g. *I'm not sure that I understand, are you talking about, I'm not very clear about*). The only other examples in the textbooks are of hearers checking understanding by asking the previous speaker to repeat all or part of what she or he has said or by seeking confirmation of the hearer's current understanding (e.g. *do you mean, are you saying/talking about*). When the HKCSE was searched, it is found that the use of an apology followed by an explicit statement that there is a communication problem is not used at all by any of the speakers in the corpus, although the use of *sorry* on its own to seek clarification (fall tone) or repetition (rise tone) is used 30 times, and *pardon* is used 14 times. Similarly, most of the other examples (*you are suggesting that, are you talking about, are we discussing, I'm not really following* etc.) given by the textbook writers are not found in the HKCSE. Even on the rare occasions when the HKCSE and the textbook evidence concur, the textbook writers emphasise

the atypical over the typical expressions. Thus while *do you mean* and *what do you mean* are found in the HKCSE (46 instances), the more commonly used *you mean* (103 instances) is not included in any of the textbooks. Other lesser used forms involving the words *understand*, *repeat* and *explain*, while prominent in the textbooks, occur very rarely in the HKCSE and only in the academic sub-corpus (2, 3 and 3 instances respectively).

Generally speaking, it can be concluded that the textbook writers are inaccurate in a number of respects. First, the fact that they over-emphasise the hearer's role relative to the speaker's role is misleading. Second, a major form used by speakers – *okay* – is only found in one of the fifteen textbooks examined. The forms that are presented in the textbooks, with the sole exception of *okay*, are not borne out by corpus evidence. Third, where, on occasion, the textbook examples can be found in the HKCSE, they are few in number and tend to be related to the academic genre. This may reflect the background of the textbook writers, which in turn influences their intuitive selection of examples. If the goal of the textbooks is to present to learners the most common ways of performing the interactional strategy of checking understanding, the writers have left out the majority of the most frequent language forms, as well as the forms used in other genres, as we shall see in the following section.

Corpus-driven Evidence

Table 1 shows the top eight forms used by speakers in the HKCSE to monitor, check and clarify their meanings respectively, and in the academic, business, conversation and public sub-corpora. The eight forms are *I mean*, *right*, *okay*, *you know*, *alright*, *yeah*, *you see* and *yes*. As discussed above, all the forms, except *okay*, employed by speakers are absent from the textbooks. The forms are structurally simple, unlike the textbook examples, and typically rely on speaker intonation, rather than incorporating explicit additional comments of the kind found in the textbooks, to make their purpose clear. These forms seem to fall into two main categories: tags such as *right*, *okay*, *you know*, *alright*, *yeah* and *yes* which seek to directly monitor the hearer's understanding, and the use of *I mean* and *you see* which both signal to the hearer that the speaker is about to reformulate or

Table 1 Speaker-initiated forms

<i>Speaker</i>	<i>HKCSE Total</i>	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Business</i>	<i>Conversation</i>	<i>Public</i>
I mean	750	41	263	325	121
Right	485	178	191	94	22
Okay	469	297	133	37	2
You know	274	14	70	184	6
Alright	110	9	82	12	7
Yeah	105	3	11	89	2
You see	93	14	18	48	13
Yes	43	8	16	13	6

expand upon what she or he is saying. Level or fall tone is used for *I mean* and *you see*, and rise tone is used for tags (i.e. when used for this function, tags may be used for a number of other functions: see Cheng & Warren, 2001).

Table 1 also shows that these eight forms are not equally distributed across the four sub-corpora. For example, *I mean*, *you know*, *yeah* and *you see* are more common in conversations, while the academic sub-corpus has more instances of *okay* and *right*. The public sub-corpus has the fewest forms, except for the use of *I mean*, where it is ranked third with more occurrences than the academic sub-corpus. This might be because public discourse is more likely to be wholly or partially scripted, and so lacks this feature of spontaneous and more interactive spoken discourse. In fact, if one studies the ranking of the four sub-genres in terms of the overall frequency of use of the forms of the interactional strategy of checking understanding, there is clearly a relationship between the level of interactivity between the participants and the use of this strategy. Conversations are highly interactive with a small number of participants engaged in a spontaneous speech event, whereas other speech events found in the other sub-genres (e.g. formal business presentations, lectures, public speeches) are much less interactive, and this interactional strategy is used less frequently and in fewer and different forms.

Table 2 shows the top eight forms used by the hearer to check her or his understanding of what the speaker has said. It shows that the overall frequencies of occurrence of the hearer-initiated forms and strategies are much lower than those employed by speakers (see Table 1). This suggests that, as discussed above, the textbook writers should place greater emphasis on the role played by the speaker than they do at present. The most frequent form employed by the hearer is the *wh*-question, followed by the use of *you mean*, *so*, *yeah*, *yes*, and *sorry*. An interesting finding is that checking one's understanding is also performed by repeating, paraphrasing and summing up the previous speaker's utterances. The forms employed by the hearers in the HKCSE fall into three basic categories.

Table 2 Hearer-initiated forms

<i>Hearer</i>	<i>HKCSE Total</i>	<i>Academic</i>	<i>Business</i>	<i>Conversation</i>	<i>Public</i>
Wh-question	183	3	35	130	15
[Repeating and paraphrasing]*	[160]	[15]	[55]	[85]	[5]
You mean	103	12	36	51	4
So	88	57	13	12	6
Yeah	70	3	16	50	1
[# Summing-up]*	[65]	[5]	[20]	[35]	[5]
Yes	45	8	17	19	1
Sorry	30	5	10	14	1

*NB These figures have been extrapolated from a qualitative study of 5 hours of data from each sub-corpus.

Excludes summing-up signalled with *you mean* or *so*.

One category is when the hearer effectively requests the previous speaker to repeat what she or he has said by means of repeating or paraphrasing what was said, employing the rise tone, or by saying *sorry* with a rise tone. The second category seeks clarification of what was said using the fall tone (*wh*-questions; repeat or paraphrase). The last category of language forms employed by the hearers is to seek confirmation of what the hearer thinks to be the case (*you mean*, summing-up, *so*, *yea*, *yes*). The last category can be said with either the rise or fall tone, depending on whether the hearer's perception is 'This is what I infer, or think I heard. Please confirm that I am right' (rise tone), or 'Can I infer, or did you say (mean), this or something else? Please confirm that it was *this*' (fall tone) (Brazil, 1997: 104). Again, these forms are not found in the textbooks. Again, they are structurally simpler and less explicit than those provided by the textbook authors, and the speaker's choice of discourse intonation is often the key to their interpretation in context.

The forms are unevenly distributed by genre. It would seem that it is hearers in conversations that most actively perform this interactional strategy, possibly as a result of the greater equality that exists between the participants, compared to other genres such as academic and public discourse, where the responsibility for the message is more likely to be much more in the hands of the speaker rather than the hearer (or at times many hearers). In addition, as discussed earlier, there is a higher level of interactivity in conversation than in a number of the specialised discourse types, such as presentations, lectures and public speeches in the other sub-genres.

Examples of the top three speaker and hearer forms

Below are extracts exemplifying the most frequently occurring speaker and hearer forms, *I mean*, *right*, *okay*, *wh*-question and *you mean*. Appendix 1 contains the transcription conventions, but readers should also note that, in the HKCSE, lower case letters indicate HKC speakers (e.g. Speaker a) and upper case indicate NES speakers (e.g. Speaker A). Speaker A or a indicates a female speaker, and Speaker B or b indicates a male speaker.

In Extract 1 below, Speaker a is being interviewed on television and has been asked what she understands by the term 'cultural diversity'. In lines 1–2, Speaker a gives a brief definition of cultural diversity, and then says *people used to have*, but changes direction mid-utterance to clarify her definition by providing an example which is signalled by her saying *I mean* on line 3.

Extract 1

I mean

- 1a: { = i [THINK] < diVERsity > } { = [CULTural] diVERsity < MEANS >
 2 er } { = < _ ER > } { \ < enRIching > } { = the < _ imagiNAtion > }
 3 { \ people [^ USED] to have } { = < _ I > mean } { = like < JUMping > }
 4 { \ < ^ OUT > } { = of the < STereotyping > } * { \ [WAY] of
 5b: ** { = < MM > }
 6 < ^ THINKing > } ...

In Extract 2, a student in a university seminar is describing the qualities needed to coordinate a team of people in the workplace and he gives an example, *interpersonal skill stuff*, followed by *right* (line 5) said with a rise tone, which serves to monitor that this is understood by the hearers before providing another example of a required quality.

Extract 2

right

- 1b4: { = [^ WHAT] i < MEAN > is that } { = < ERM > } { = < BEcause > }
 2 { \ you [HAVE] to < coORDinate > } (.) * { \ a [TEAM] of people
 3B: ** { \ < _ YEAH > }
 4 to do SUCH a < ^ WORK > } { = and < THEN > } { = it's [SOMETHing]
 5 < LIKE > er } { \ [INterpersonal] SKILL < STUFF > } { / < RIGHT > }
 6 { = and [ALso] you < GIVE > er } { = < GOOD > } { \ < inSTRUction > }
 ...

In Extract 3, a speaker is giving a presentation on intercultural communication and begins with an outline of what he intends to cover. He completes his outline in line 6, and then says *okay* with a rise tone to check that his audience has understood what he has just said.

Extract 3

okay

- 1B: { = er when you < LOOK > at } { = < OUR > } { \ [Other] < ^
 2 WAYS > } { \ that you can [ACTually] < GET > } { = < ^ YOUR > }
 3 { / < COMmuniCation > } { = to be < effEctive > } { = in the
 4 [interNAtional] < ^ enVIronment > } { \ < withOUT > } { / <
 5 withOUT > } { = < VIolating > } { = < YOUR > } { \ [CHInese] <
 6 _ VALues > } (.) { / < Okay > } { \ so [THAT'S] what we're <
 7 TALKing > about the mor } { \ this < MORning > }

In Extract 4, Speaker B is saying that another friend has suggested that he should purchase a *more standard* kind of tape recorder (line 1). In line 5, speaker a asks what speaker B means by *more standard*. Speaker a does this by asking a *wh*-question (*what is more standard*) with a fall tone. In the HKCSE, most of the *wh*-questions are found to be *what*-questions.

Extract 4

wh-question

- 1B: { / and he [THOUGHT] i should GET a more < STANdard > one } (.)
 2 { \ he's [GOing] WITH me on < MONday > } (.) { \ we're [GOing]
 3 TAPE recorder < HUNting > }
 4a: { = < WHY > } (.) { = what < WHAT > } (.) { ? < WHAT > } { = < ER
 5 > } { ? < WHAT > } { \ [WHAT] is more < STANdard > }

In Extract 5, taken from a service encounter at an airport check-in desk, Speaker a is explaining that the airline has a very early start for its check-in service. The passenger repeats the time in line 6 with a rise tone to confirm her understanding, and speaker a confirms and also provides additional information to the passenger in lines 7–9.

Extract 5

repeat/paraphrase

- 1a: { \ < ^ ACtually > } { \ for [CAthay] < paCIfic > } { = < WE > have }
 2 { = er < ER > } { = < ER > } { = < SPeCials > } { = < ER > } { \ early
 3 [CHECK] in < SERvice > for } { \ for < PASsengers > } { \ at the
 4 < AIRport > } { \ we [START] CHECK in at FOUR < THIRty > }
 5 { \ this < AFterNOON > }
 6A: { = < AT > } { / [FOUR] < THIRty > }
 7a: { = < _ YES > } { = for [ALL] our < Evening > } { = [LONG] haul
 8 < FLIGHT > } { \ we [START] CHECK in at FOUR < THIRty > }
 9 { \ this < Afternoon > }

In Extract 6, the speakers are engaged in a service encounter at an airport information desk. In line 1, Speaker a asks Speaker B if he still has his boarding pass and he replies somewhat vaguely and hesitantly in lines 2–4. In lines 5–6, Speaker a then seeks confirmation of her interpretation of Speaker B's response, and begins her utterance by saying *oh you mean* with a fall tone, which is confirmed as correct by Speaker B in line 7.

Extract 6

you mean

- 1a: { = do you [STILL] have the BOARding < PASS > }
 2B: { ? < ER > } { ? < ER > } { ? < LET > me } { \ [LET] me < SEE > }
 3 { \ the [BOARding] < PASS > } { \ no i am < NOT > } (.) { ? i am
 4 not < TAKing > }
 5a: { \ oh you < MEAN > } { \ / the [CHECK] in STAFF collect the
 6 boarding CARD < alREAdy > }
 7B: { \ < YEAH > } * { \ < _ YEAH > }

Implications for Language Teaching

What are the implications of corpus evidence for teaching methods and the writing of learning and teaching materials? The research reported in this paper provides a contextualised description of language forms and patterns of use, and finds mismatches between the linguistic realisations of monitoring and checking understanding strategies in naturally-occurring English on the one hand, and, on the other, how these are perceived by textbook authors and represented by them to English language learners. This research has clearly indicated an urgent need for some realignment in learning and teaching materials in terms of language forms and functions selected and presented to language learners. This implies a need for English language materials writers to revise their understandings on the basis of the findings of corpus researchers, found in

the form of research papers, dictionaries, grammar books, and other resources, when they author and revise materials, tasks and activities from which learners draw their own understandings. Examples are the Collins Cobuild books and resources developed from The Bank of English; Carter and McCarthy's (2006) *Cambridge Grammar of English*; Biber *et al.*'s (1999) *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*; Hunston and Francis's (2000) study of pattern grammar; Sinclair's (2003) *Reading Concordances*, and papers describing how corpora can be used in language teaching and learning (e.g. see Aston *et al.*, 2004; Botley *et al.*, 1996; Burnard & McEnery, 2000; Connor & Upton, 2004; Hunston, 2002; Nesselhauf, 2005; Sinclair, 2004; Wichmann *et al.*, 1997). In Hong Kong, recent corpus-driven research studies include the speech function of disagreement (Cheng & Warren, 2005), lexical cohesion (Cheng, 2006), the discourse intonation of vague language (Warren, 2006), and discourse particles (Lam, 2006).

Another pedagogical implication is to combine the approaches of corpus-driven study (Tognini-Bonelli, 1996) and data-driven learning (DDL) (Johns, 1991). In explaining DDL, Johns (2002: 108) suggests that teachers should 'confront the learner as directly as possible with the data, and make the learner a linguistic researcher'. In this context, the 'learner' can be the language learner, the teacher or the materials writer, and she or he becomes a researcher and analyses relevant corpora data to acquire knowledge and understanding about language use in context. To benefit from these approaches the learners need to familiarise themselves with the relevant resources, including useful spoken and written corpora available on the web and on CD-ROM, and software packages for corpus study such as Chris Greaves' *ConcApp* (2006) and *ConGram* (Cheng *et al.*, 2006) and Mike Scott's *WordSmith Tools* (2004). The importance of corpus data is described by Johns (1991: 30) who supports giving 'the learner direct access to the data, the underlying assumption being that effective language learning is a form of linguistic research, and that the concordance printout offers a unique way of stimulating inductive learning strategies – in particular the strategies of perceiving similarities and differences of hypothesis formation and testing'.

What might these approaches mean in terms of actual learning and teaching activities? An example of such a learning and teaching activity based on converting the study of how speakers and hearers check understanding into a whole class activity is described below. The following steps outline an approach that the authors have found to be effective in their own teaching.

- (1) The teacher introduces the notion to be investigated, i.e. how speakers and hearers check understanding.
- (2) The teacher asks students to form pairs or small groups to brainstorm how they think speakers and hearers check understanding. Each group then reports back and a central list is compiled.
- (3) The teacher provides a list of the forms given in a selection of textbooks and adds these to those brainstormed by the students.
- (4) The list is divided up and two to three forms are given to pairs or small groups of students who then search for them in an appropriate corpus (care is needed when studying the concordance lines derived from a search that all of the instances are functioning to check understanding).

- (5) Each pair or small group reports back the frequencies of occurrence of the forms that they have studied and other points of interest which they have found and discusses their findings (both similarities and differences with possible explanations).
- (6) In pairs or small groups, students conduct a qualitative analysis of several transcripts of spoken data from the corpus (each pair or small group studies different transcripts) to identify forms used by speakers and hearers to check understanding.
- (7) Each pair or small group reports back to the whole class, and a list of the forms found is compiled.
- (8) This list is then broken up, and each pair or small group searches the corpus to determine the frequencies of occurrence of the forms that they have studied (care is needed when studying the concordance lines derived from a search that all of the instances are functioning to check understanding).
- (9) Each pair or small group reports back what they have found and discusses their findings in relation to their earlier findings (both similarities and differences with possible explanations).
- (10) Students critically reflect on what they have learned from the activity, and can then be encouraged to come up with their own ideas for future activities of this kind.

Another useful resource is learner corpora compiled by the teacher, the materials writer, or even the language learners themselves. A collection of the spoken English of the language learners recorded in, for instance, group discussions could reveal use of language specific to the groups of language learners. The corpus can serve as a useful diagnostic tool for both learners and teachers to study characteristic errors made by individual students when checking understanding in the group interaction activity; and through diagnosing errors, the language learners 'develop the skills required to identify, explain and rectify recurrent errors' (Tognini-Bonelli, 2001: 9). Learner autonomy can hence be developed.

Conclusions

This study has explored the potentially valuable contribution of corpus-driven research and data-driven learning to facilitate more accurate awareness in learners with regard to performing the interactional strategies of monitoring and checking understanding. It has shown that textbooks contain language forms that are rarely, if ever, used in the real world and are overly influenced by academic genres. The study shows that the most common forms found in the corpus are both simpler and less explicit than those included in the textbooks. These forms also tend to be predominantly employed by speakers rather than hearers, unlike the portrayal of this strategy in the textbooks. The study also discusses the benefits that can be derived in the secondary school context in Hong Kong, mainly through teachers' explicit classroom instruction and learners' conscious understanding and hands-on experience of how essential strategies in group interaction are realised in real-life language use, through examining existing corpora such as the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English, or a learner corpus that captures their own group discussions. Finally, the study also describes the textbook contents in terms of their being a reflection (or representation) of the

textbook writers' own language awareness, and suggests that textbook writers use corpora and corpus-informed resource materials as sources for exemplifying the roles and usage of specific speech functions, such as monitoring and checking understanding.

In the 2007 version of the assessment criteria for group interaction described in the *Handbook for the School-based Assessment Component* (2005: 18), Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, under Communication Strategies, candidates will be awarded the top score if they 'can avoid the use of narrowly-formulaic expressions' when drawing others into extending the interaction (e.g. by summarising for others' benefit, or by redirecting a conversation). This study has suggested that the more essential criterion should be to assess student performance against language as it is actually spoken, rather than against the intuitive notions of examiners and textbook writers.

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Appendix 1: Discourse Intonation Transcription Conventions

- Tone group boundaries are marked with '{ }' brackets.
- The referring and proclaiming tones are shown using combinations of forward and back slashes: rise '/', fall-rise '\', fall '\', and rise-fall '/\'.
- Level tones are marked ' = ' and unclassifiable tones ' ? '.
- Prominence is shown by means of UPPER CASE letters.
- Key is marked with '[]' brackets, high key and low key are indicated with '/^' and '/_ ' respectively, while mid key is not marked (i.e. it is the default).
- Termination is marked with '< >' brackets with high, mid, and low termination using the same forms of notation used for key choices.
- Points in the discourse where simultaneous talk occurs are marked with a single * in the utterance of the current speaker, and ** in the utterance of the 'interrupter'

Appendix 2

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Appendix 3: What the Textbooks in Hong Kong Say about Monitoring and Checking Understandings

Function 1: Speaker monitoring hearer understandings.

<i>Textbook description</i>	<i>Textbook examples</i>
Checking that others understand you	<i>Do you see what I mean?</i> <i>Are you with me?</i> <i>OK?</i> (Sutton, 1998: 11, 13, 16, 18; Duncan & Sutton, 1999: 12)
To check others' understandings	<i>Do you understand me?</i> <i>Do you get what I mean?</i> <i>Do you see my point?</i> (Esser, 1998: 57, 143)
Checking if others understand you	<i>Do you see what I mean?</i> <i>Are you with me?</i> <i>Is that clear?</i> <i>Am I making myself clear?</i> (Potter, 2003: 40, 44)
Clarifying	<i>What I mean is . . .</i> <i>I think what he meant was . . .</i> (Sutton, 1998)

Function 2: Hearer checking understandings from speaker.

<i>Textbook description</i>	<i>Textbook examples</i>
Needing clarification	<i>I'm sorry, but I'm not really following</i> <i>I'm afraid I don't get your point</i> <i>I'm not sure what exactly you mean</i> (Free Press, 2000: 70)
To ask for repetition	<i>Can you please repeat your point? I didn't quite understand.</i> (Mau, 2003: 95–96)
To clarify a point	<i>Do you mean . . . ?</i> <i>I'm a little confused.</i> <i>I thought you said . . . , didn't you?</i> (Mau, 2003: 95–96)
Checking your understandings	<i>Do you mean . . . ?</i> <i>Are we now discussing . . . ?</i> <i>Are you talking about . . . ?</i> (Duncan, 1994: 13–15)
Checking if you understand others	<i>Sorry, do you mean . . .</i> <i>Sorry, are we now discussing . . .</i> <i>Sorry, are you talking about . . .</i> <i>So you are saying . . .</i> (Duncan & Sutton, 1999: 12)

Function 2: (contd)

<i>Textbook description</i>	<i>Textbook examples</i>
Checking your understandings	<i>I'm sorry, I'm not sure that I understand the part about ... I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. Could you repeat the part about ... ? Let me make sure that I understand what you mean. You are saying that ... (or) You are suggesting that ... (Gran, 1993: 18)</i>
Effective listening	<i>Sorry, I'm not sure what you mean. Could you explain what you mean by ... ? Do you mean that ... ? (Lee & Holzer, 1999: 113)</i>
Checking your understandings	<i>Sorry, I am not very clear about ... I don't follow you, can you say that again? (Esser, 1998: 57, 143)</i>
Checking understandings	<i>Sorry, but I don't quite understand. Sorry, but I'm not with you. Sorry, could you say that again, please? Sorry, would you mind explaining that again, please? (Potter, 2003: 40)</i>
Clarifying a point	<i>Do you mean that ... ? So you're saying that ... Let me see if I understand you. You think that ... (Potter, 2003: 40)</i>
Checking if you understand others	<i>Sorry, do you mean ... ? Sorry, are we now discussing ... ? Sorry, are you talking about ... ? So, are you saying that ... Sorry, did you say ... ? (Sutton, 1998: 11, 13, 16, 18)</i>
Saying that you don't understand	<i>I'm sorry, I don't understand. Sorry, I'm not (quite) with you. Sorry, can you say that again? Sorry, I'm not following you. Sorry, I didn't get that. (Sutton, 1998: 11, 13, 16, 18)</i>
Not understanding	<i>I'm sorry. I don't understand. Sorry, I'm not quite with you Sorry, can you say that again. Sorry, I'm not following you ... (Sutton, 1998: 11, 13, 16, 18)</i>
Saying you don't understand	<i>Sorry, but I don't quite understand. Sorry, but I'm not with you. Sorry, could you say that again, please? Sorry, would you mind explaining that again, please? Sorry, but what do you mean? (Potter, 2003: 44)</i>
Checking if you understand	<i>Do you mean that ... ? So you're saying that ... Let me see if I understand you. You think that ... As I understand you, ... (Potter, 2003: 44)</i>