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'I Agree With You' – A Corpus-based Study Of Agreement

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Abstract

The paper is a corpus-based study comparing the expressions of agreement in textbook English and in genuine English to suggest how corpus data can help to improve the authenticity of English textbook material in Hong Kong. The data sets included textbook data and selected parts of the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches are used to analyze the data. The findings show that there are significant differences between textbook English and genuine English in expressing agreement. Not only the expressions of agreement but also the ways in which agreement is expressed vary. Many expressions of agreement mentioned in the textbooks cannot be found in the corpus data sets. Simultaneously, the common ways of expressing agreement in naturally occurring spoken English are not introduced in the textbook data. It is argued that textbook writers need to enhance the authenticity of textbook material for language learners by using examples from genuine English and corpus data is one importance source in providing naturally occurring expressions of agreement for local secondary schools students in Hong Kong.

Keywords: agreement; corpus-based approach; genuine English; Hong Kong Chinese; native speakers of English, textbook English

Introduction

This paper on the pragmatic speech act of agreement is a corpus-based study comparing the use of expressions of agreement between textbook English from five textbooks published in Hong Kong and genuine English from a local corpus. It aims to find out the similarities

and differences between textbook English and genuine English with a view to discussing how corpus data can help to improve the textbook material.

The issue of genuineness in English Language Teaching (ELT) has long been discussed (Breen, 1985; Taylor, 1994; Widdowson, 2000; Römer, 2004b). Inadequate or inappropriate descriptions of linguistic features in teaching material are believed to adversely affect the learning of genuine English. Textbooks sometimes contain invented texts and examples constructed with a particular teaching purpose or around a particular topic or a grammatical feature. The descriptions and explanations are usually based on intuition or second-hand accounts (McEnery & Wilson, 2001). As some of these texts and examples may not have occurred in natural speech situations, it is likely that there will be mismatches between textbook English and genuine English (Römer, 2004a; 2004b; 2005a; 2005b). Therefore, teaching material based on invented examples may not accurately reflect the use of a particular linguistic feature in real-life communication. In this paper, the linguistic feature refers to the form and function of the speech act of agreement (Austin, 1975; Searle, 1969, 1979; Stenström, 1994) as used in the group discussion context.

The corpus-based approach to the study of language uses corpus evidence to quantify existing categories in research. Before the examination of the corpus data, there are pre-formulated ideas and fixed categories in the mind of the researcher (Römer, 2005a, 2005b). Tognini-Bonelli (2001:65) defines the corpus-based approach as "a methodology that avails itself of the corpus mainly to expound, test or exemplify theories and descriptions that were formulated before large corpora became available to inform language study". T

The corpus-based approach does not put the corpus at the center of the research. Rather it is used to provide frequency data, to prove hypotheses, and to answer research questions. Thus, the use of corpus data is selective and restricted. In language teaching, the corpus-based approach can be adopted to help front-line teachers and textbook writers to prepare teaching material from genuine English, as corpus data can provide tremendous evidence of various features of natural language. The study reported in this paper is a corpus-based comparison of expressions of agreement collected respectively from a data set of textbooks and a spoken corpus.

Studies have examined corpus data to critically evaluate existing language textbooks and to inform their production (Tribble & Jones, 1990; Meunier, 2002; Römer, 2005b). The most obvious pedagogical use of corpus data is to treat it as a source of classroom material that the teachers select from and adapt (Aston, 1997). As Sinclair (2001: xii - xiii) puts it, "corpus evidence can illuminate language teaching from many different angles" as "there is the accurate description of structure, reliable models of usage, how words and phrases are actually translated, what are the essentials in a syllabus, what are the characteristic errors of learners". Corpus examples are important in language learning as they expose learners to the kinds of sentences and vocabulary which they will encounter in reading genuine texts in the language or in using the language in real communicative situations (McEnery & Wilson, 2001). In other words, the use of corpus data enables learners to learn genuine English used in real communicative situations and corpus evidence can contribute to an improvement of teaching material.

Literature review of speech act of agreement

According to Eggins and Slade (1997), agreement is an example of preferred acts that indicates a willingness to accept the propositions or the proposals of the other speakers, and thus creating an alignment between the speakers. In conversation analysis, when the first part of an adjacency pair (Sacks et al., 1974) contains a request or an offer, it is typically expected that the second part is an acceptance rather than a refusal (Eggins and Slade, 1997), and this is called a preference structure.

The preference structure divides the second part into preferred and dispreferred social acts. The preferred act is the structurally expected following act while the dispreferred the unexpected. Preferred responses are unmarked, immediate, and contain simple structural elements, while dispreferred are marked, delayed, and contain complex elements like hedges and hesitations (e.g., 'well'), pauses, and false starts (e.g., 'er') (Levinson, 1983; Pomerantz, 1984; Mey, 2001; Cheng, 2003). A preferred response represents closeness and quick connection (Yule, 1996). When the first part of an adjacency pair is an assessment or a proposal, the preferred second part will be an agreement, whereas

the dispreferred second part will be a disagreement. For instance, an assessment 'Isn't that really great?' is expected to be responded to by 'Yes, it is.'; a proposal 'Maybe we could go for a walk?' is expected to be responded to by 'That's great.'

In Pomerantz's (1984: 65-69) study, three types of agreement are identified, which are "upgraded" (or "strong agreement"), "same evaluation", and "downgraded" (or "weak agreement"). In an "upgraded agreement", either a stronger evaluative term than the prior evaluative descriptor in the first part is selected or an intensifier modifying the prior evaluative descriptor is included. In a "same evaluation", the same prior evaluative descriptor is repeated with "too" or pro terms indicating the same descriptor. In a "downgraded agreement", a scaled-down or weakened evaluation term than the prior evaluative descriptor is selected. When an agreement is invited, an upgraded (or strong) agreement is usually performed with a minimization of gap or even in slight overlap.

Though an agreement is usually expressed in the preferred format and normally comes after a speaker's assessment, there are exceptions, for example, when the initial assessment is negative, such as a self-deprecation, the usual preference for an agreement is non-operative (Pomerantz, 1984). Stenström (1994) categorises agreement, <Agree>, as one realization of the primary act of <Reply>. <Agree>, as a reply to <opines>, shows the listener's approval of what the speaker "means". Stenström (1994) examines the London-Lund Spoken Corpus (0.5 million words) and finds that <agree> markers include *absolutely, all right, fine, good, OK, precisely, quite, right, that's right,* and *yes (no)*.

A number of research studies have focused on the speech act of agreement, usually accompanied with disagreement, for example, Wong (2006) examines the realizations of agreement and disagreement in an authentic situation and argues for the adoption of speech act theory in language teaching. Hilliard, Ostendorf, and Shriberg (2003) introduce a classifier to recognize agreement and disagreement utterances with word-based and prosodic cues. Hand-labeling efforts can be minimized by the use of unsupervised training on a large amount of unlabeled data and by the use of supervised training on a small amount of data. The system recovers nearly 80% of agree or disagree utterances with a confusion rate of 3%.

Galley et al. (2004) describe a statistical approach for modeling agreements and disagreements in conversational interaction. They first identify adjacency pairs based on a set of lexical, durational, and structural features that look both forward and backward in the discourse. Second, they classify utterances as agreement or disagreements using those adjacency pairs and features that represent various pragmatic influences of previous agreement or disagreement on the current utterance. Their approach is found to have 86.9% accuracy.

Methodology

The data collected for the present study came from five textbooks published in Hong Kong (Drave, Gillies, & Simpson-Giles, 2005; Esser, 2005; Meibbor, 2005; Nancarrow, Leung, & Choi, 2005; Potter, 2005) and the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE) (Cheng and Warren, 2005, 2006, 2007). The language forms that realize the act of agreement identified in the HKCSE were compared with those in English language textbooks published in Hong Kong.

The five textbooks selected were the widely-used textbooks in Hong Kong secondary schools when this study was conducted as they were the only published textbook materials available in the market then. The contents of the textbooks largely followed the examination syllabus published by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA). The textbook data collected represent a considerable variety of expressions of agreement that students would learn in the classroom for the group discussion in the speaking examination.

The HKCSE represents the main overarching spoken genres collected in the Hong Kong context (Cheng and Warren, 1999). The HKCSE is a 2-million-word corpus of naturally occurring spoken discourses primarily between Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) and native speakers of English (NSE). The corpus comprises 200 hours of data, consisting of four sub-corpora, namely academic, business, conversation, and public. Each sub-corpus consists of a variety of discourse types and participants.

The data was sourced from meetings, discussion forums, and tutorials in the academic, business, and public sub-corpora, due to similarities in the communicative purposes and contexts found in the

group discussion in the speaking examination. From these three sub-corpora, 9 meetings of 217 minutes of recordings and 36,272 transcribed words, 2 discussion forums of 39 minutes of recordings and 6,699 transcribed words, and 2 tutorials of 91 minutes of recordings and 8,267 transcribed words were used. The total recording length is 347 minutes, with a total word count of 51,238 (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Data collected from the HKCSE

	The HKCSE		
	Number of files	**Minute**	**Word**
Meetings	9	217	36,272
Discussion forums	2	39	6,699
Tutorials	2	91	8,267

The data from the HKCSE was interrogated with *ConcApp* developed by Chris Greaves from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were conducted. Quantitative analysis of the corpus data provides frequency lists of expressions of agreement while qualitative analysis offers a more detailed understanding of the data that helps identify the real functions of expressions of agreement. Manual qualitative data analysis of the corpora was conducted to identify instances of language usage that performs the agreement function (McEnery & Wilson, 2001).

Analysis of findings

Expressions of agreement in textbooks

Examining all the five textbooks results in a total of 54 expressions of agreement to teach students how to express an agreement in group discussions (Table 2).

TABLE 2: Expressions of Agreement in five Hong Kong textbooks

Textbooks	Expressions of Agreement
1. Drave, Gillies, & Simpson-Giles (2005: 56)	1. Certainly 2. I agree 3. That's right 4. That's true 5. Yes, you're right
2. Esser (2005: 43)	1. Do you agree with me? 2. Yes, absolutely. 3. I think you are right to say … 4. I agree with you. 5. I completely agree with you. 6. I couldn't agree with you more. 7. I definitely agree. 8. I feel the same too. 9. I suppose you are right. 10. I think so too. 11. I think you can say so. 12. I think you choice is the best. 13. That's a good idea. 14. That's a good suggestion. 15. That's exactly what I think. 16. That's right. 17. True, but in fact … 18. You're right to say that … 19. You're right.

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3.	Nancarrow, Leung, & Choi (2005:21)	**Mild agreement**: 1. I suppose so 2. you're right. 3. In a way, you're right. 4. That's a fair point (to make). 5. To a certain extent, I agree (with you). 6. You could say so. **Normal agreement**: 1. I agree 2. I agree with you. 3. I also think so. 4. I feel the same too. 5. I support your view. 6. Of course 7. Certainly. 8. That's a good suggestion. 9. That's right 10. That's true. 11. Yes, you're right. **Strong agreement**: 1. Absolutely! 2. Exactly! 3. Indeed! 4. I agree with you entirely. 5. I couldn't agree (with you) more. 6. I see eye to eye with you (on this point). 7. I'm strongly in favour of this. 8. That's just the point. 9. That's exactly the point.

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4.	Meibbor, (2005: 8-10)	1. I agree. 2. I think so too. 3. Yes, that's right.
5.	Potter (2005:14,30)	**To support a suggestion**: 1. I like your idea. 2. I support that suggestion. 3. That's a good idea. 4. That's a wonderful suggestion. 5. Well, that's an interesting suggestion. **To agree with others' opinions**: 1. I agree with you. 2. I agree. 3. I think you're right. 4. Neither do I. 5. I don't, either. 6. So do I. 7. I do, too.

The 54 expressions of agreement in the textbooks vary in length from three to nineteen words. None of the textbooks rank the expressions in terms of importance of use. In the textbooks, an agreement is made as a response to the previous speaker's opinion or suggestion. In general, across all the five textbooks, invented situations of interaction and examples are used to illustrate agreements in group discussions (Figures 1 to 5).

Opinion	Agreeing	Supporting
I think we should travel by train.	Yes, you're right. That's right. Certainly. I agree with you. Of course.	It'll be much quicker.

Figure 1: Extract from Drave, Gillies, & Simpson-Giles (2005: 34)

In Figure 1, the writers invent a situation in which a suggestion is made about the means of travelling. Expressions of agreement are shown with a supporting reason.

Expressing agreement	A: They shouldn't go any further into the woods. Do you agree with me? B: Yes, absolutely. I think you are right to say that they should stay where they are and wait for rescuers to come, instead of going blindly into the woods again.

Figure 2: Extract from Esser (2005: 43)

In Figure 2, the writer invents a situation to show the response of 'Do you agree with me?' is 'Yes, absolutely.'

Opinion	Agree
I think someone should give their seat to the woman with the child.	● Yes, that's right. ● I agree ● I think so too.

Figure 3: Extract from Meibbor (2005: 9)

In Figure 3, the writer shows three expressions of agreement in response to an invented opinion.

Agreeing with others' opinions

If you are agreeing with others' opinions, you can say:

I agree.
I agree with you.
I think you're right.

Figure 4: Extract from Potter (2005: 30)

In Figure 4, the writer shows the expressions of agreement directly without any contextual information. In one textbook (Nancarrow, Leung, & Choi, 2005), expressions of agreement are divided into three categories, namely mild, normal, and strong (cf. Pomerantz, 1984).

Their uses are illustrated in Figure 3.5 below with invented examples to show the listener's different attitudes towards the speaker's opinion or suggestion.

Mild agreement	: I think we should spend less time watching TV. B: **I suppose you're right**. Our teachers are often telling us to work harder.
Normal agreement	A: I think French fries are not good for us. B: **I agree with you**. They make us fat.
Strong agreement	: I think all students in Hong Kong should take computer lessons. B: **I agree with you entirely** as computer skills are very useful.

Figure 5: Extract from Nancarrow, Leung, & Choi (2005: 29)

In Figure 5, the writers use different invented situations to show how expressions are used to show different levels of agreement.

Expressions of agreement in the HKCSE

With *ConcApp*, the frequencies of occurrence of the 54 expressions of agreement in the textbooks as found in the found in meetings (M), discussions (D), and tutorials (T) in the HKCSE were obtained (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Frequency of occurrence of expressions of potential agreements in the HKCSE

		HKCSE			
Textbooks	**Expressions**	**M**	**D**	**T**	**total**
1. Drave, Gillies, & Simpson-Giles, (2005:.56)	1. Certainly.	3	5	0	8
	2. I agree.	0	0	2	2
	3. That's right.	5	0	0	5
	4. That's true.	0	0	0	0
	5. Yes, you're right.	0	0	0	0
2. Esser, (2005:43)	1. Do you agree with me?	0	0	0	0
	2. Yes, absolutely.	0	0	0	0
	3. I think you are right to say …	0	0	0	0
	4. I agree with you.	0	0	0	0
	5. I completely agree with you.	0	0	0	0
	6. I couldn't agree with you more.	0	0	0	0
	7. I definitely agree.	0	0	0	0
	8. I feel the same too.	0	0	0	0
	9. I suppose you are right.	0	0	0	0
	10. I think so too.	0	0	0	0
	11. I think you can say so.	0	0	0	0
	12. I think your choice is the best.	0	0	0	0
	13. That's a good idea.	0	0	0	0
	14. That's a good suggestion.	0	0	0	0

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	15. That's exactly what I think.	0	0	0	0
	16. That's right.	5	0	0	5
	17. True, but in fact …	0	0	0	0
	18. You're right to say that …	0	0	0	0
	19. You're right.	1	0	0	1
3. Nancarrow, Leung, & Chi (2005:.21)	*Mild agreement:*				
	1. I suppose so.	0	0	0	0
	2. You're right.	1	0	0	1
	3. In a way, you're right.	0	0	0	0
	4. That's a fair point (to make).	0	0	0	0
	5. To a certain extent, I agree (with you).	0	0	0	0
	6. You could say so.	0	0	0	0
	Normal agreement:				
	1. I agree.	0	0	2	2
	2. I agree with you.	0	0	0	0
	3. I also think so.	0	0	0	0
	4. I feel the same too.	0	0	0	0
	5. I support your view.	0	0	0	0
	6. Of course.	3	15	2	20
	7. Certainly.	3	5	0	8
	8. That's a good suggestion.	0	0	0	0
	9. That's right.	5	0	0	5
	10. That's true.	0	0	0	0
	11. Yes, you're right.	0	0	0	0

Continued...

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	Strong agreement:				
	1. Absolutely!	1	0	0	1
	2. Exactly!	1	1	0	2
	3. Indeed!	0	0	0	0
	4. I agree with you entirely.	0	0	0	0
	5. I couldn't agree (with you) more.	0	0	0	0
	6. I see eye to eye with you (on this point).	0	0	0	0
	7. I'm strongly in favour of this.	0	0	0	0
	8. That's just the point.	0	0	0	0
	9. That's exactly the point.	0	0	0	0
4. Meibbor (2005:8-10)	1. I agree.	0	0	0	2
	2. I think so too.	0	0	0	0
	3. Yes, that's right.	0	0	0	0
5. Potter (2005:14, 30)	To support a suggestion:				
	1. I like your idea.	0	0	0	0
	2. I support that suggestion.	0	0	0	0
	3. That's a good idea.	0	0	0	0
	4. That's a wonderful suggestion.	0	0	0	0
	5. Well, that's an interesting suggestion.	0	0	0	0

Continued...

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To agree with others' opinions:				
1. I agree with you.	0	0	0	0
2. I agree.	0	0	2	2
3. I think you're right.	0	0	0	0
4. Neither do I	0	0	0	0
5. I don't, either.	0	0	0	0
6. So do I.	0	0	0	0
7. I do, too.	0	0	0	0

Key: M – Meetings; D – Discussions; T – Tutorials

Out of the 54 expressions, only seven are found in the HKCSE, namely, in alphabetical order, *absolutely, certainly, exactly, I agree, of course, that's right,* and *you're righ*t (Figure 6). In this paper, these expressions are called 'potential expressions of agreement' as they only show the particular linguistic features of agreement but do not necessarily carry the function of agreeing. The real function of the expression can only be confirmed by referring to the specific context of the speech event and the interpretation of what the speaker intends to express. The most frequent expression of potential agreement is *of course* (52.63 %) with 20 occurrences in the HKCSE, followed *by certainly* (21.05%) with 8 occurrences, and *that's right* (13.16%) with 5 occurrences. The frequencies of the remaining 51 expressions of potential agreement are from 2 to 0 occurrences.

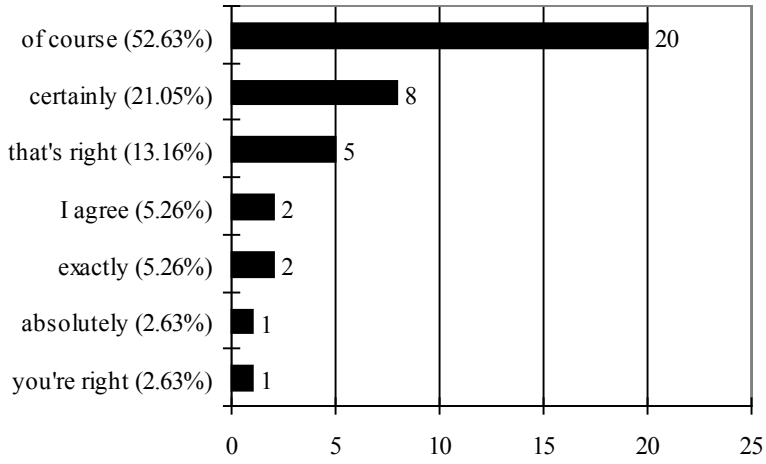

Figure 6: Frequency of expressions of potential agreement in the HKCSE

Contextual analysis of each instance potential agreement shows that apart from *that's right, I agree*, and *you're right*, other expressions *of course, certainly, exactly,* and *absolutely* can carry functions other than agreeing. A manual filtering analysis of the HKCSE shows that only 1 occurrence of *of course* (as compared to 20 occurrences in the textbook dataset) and 1 occurrence of *exactly* (as compared to 2 occurrences in the textbook dataset) carry the function of agreeing. The examples are as follows[1]:

Example 1: ***of course*** (HKCSE: P066)
b3: HKC male b1: HKC male

b3… I think we still need do we still need to do quite a bit of work on that

b1: ***of course*** the six million dollar question is that are those er people who've been infected or immune from further infection it's er er the worry is if they get infected again and they have to go through another course of pulse steroids that wouldn't be very nice …

In example 1, the participants are having a conversation at a SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndromes) update discussion forum. **b3**, a doctor, is explaining if it is safe for recovered patients to go back into the community. **b3** tells **b1**, the host of the discussion forum, that the doctors need to do more studies about the discharged infected patients. The host (**b1**) agrees with the doctor (**b3**) that more work should be done to make sure if the patient is safe to go back to the community.

Example 2: ***exactly*** (HKCSE: B060)
B: NSE male a2: HKC female

B: twenty dollars all of those concerns could be wiped outyou know
a2: ***exactly***

In example 2, the participants are university associate professor, **B**, and research assistant, **a2**. They are talking about Mark Six Lottery, a popular lotto game in Hong Kong. The associate professor (**B**) says that by spending twenty dollars one may win the sixty-million prize and wipe out all concerns about one's career. The research assistant (**a2**) agrees by saying 'exactly'.

However, these adverbs (*of course, certainly, exactly, and absolutely*) are mostly used to suggest that something is normal, obvious, and well-known, rather than to agree:

Example 3: ***of course*** (HKCSE: A044)
b: HKC male A: NSE female

b1… your strength now strength here ***of course*** is dealing with Yaohan strength how Yaohan use the strength to predict advantage of the opportunity …

In example 3, **b1**, a university lecturer, is conducting an academic tutorial discussing the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Yaohan, a former Japanese department store in Hong Kong. He uses 'of course' to emphasize that 'strength' in the discussion refers to 'Yaohan strength'.

Example 4: ***certainly*** (HKCSE: P066)
A: NSE female

A: I er because I'm a epidemiologist one of the first things I'll say is more data is needed and ***certainly*** more data is needed on any of the therapeutic treatments for any illness ***certainly*** of this magnitude and as I st- stated in one of my earlier slides during my presentation it said a study of therapeutics and efficacy is ***certainly*** needed.

In example 4, **A**, an epistemologist, is expressing her views on the use of Ribavirin in treating SARS patients in a SARS update discussion forum. She uses 'certainly' to show the necessity of acquiring more data related to the effectiveness of the drug in tackling the disease.
They can also be used to increase the force of the speaker's statement:

Example 5: ***of course*** (HKCSE: B019)
b2: HKC male A: NSE female

b2… if you have any problem come to us talk to us and then we will try to accommodate the best we can ***of course*** we'll write down the problem …

b2 is reporting a business agreement signed between an airline and the hotel in which **b2** is working. In the meeting, he asks his colleagues to raise any problems that they may have with the airline. And he uses 'of course' to show their determination to resolve any problems.

Example 6: ***absolutely*** (HKCSE: B058)
A: NSE female

A: erm (.) but what we have to do ***absolutely*** sure is the quality of the sound I mean what what's the quality of the sound like on those ones that you've done

A is a university teacher. She is talking to a research staff in a meeting about the quality of the sound in a video recording. With the use of 'absolutely', she stresses the determination of maintaining a good sound quality.

In short, almost all the 54 expressions from the textbooks are not commonly used or used at all to convey an agreement in the HKCSE. This may suggest that many of these expressions are not commonly used in genuine English to convey an agreement.

Expressions of agreement not found in the textbooks

The manual contextual analysis of the HKCSE shows that there are twelve other expressions of potential agreement that are not found in the five textbooks (Table 3.3). It should be noted that some of the markers could be delays in response or back-channel responses. Moreover, comparing written and spoken data is rather difficult as written data does not always indicate expressions of potential agreement. It would therefore be difficult to determine the functions of expressions like 'mm' and 'uhuh' and there are other possibilities when interpreting the functions of these expressions.

TABLE 3: Frequency of occurrence of expressions of potential agreement in the HKCSE that are not found in Hong Kong textbooks

	HKCSE			
Expressions	**M**	**D**	**T**	**Total**
1. agree	0	2	7	9
2. hmm	0	0	6	4
3. mhmm	70	0	4	74
4. mm	271	3	7	281
5. okay	315	2	64	381
6. right	85	6	34	125
7. sure	52	8	3	63
8. uhuh	10	0	2	12
9. yea	498	1	36	535
10. yeah	5	0	0	5
11. yep	71	0	1	72
12. yes	120	15	15	150

Keys: M – Meetings; D – Discussions; T – Tutorials

Figure 7 shows the frequency distribution of these twelve other expressions of potential agreement in the HKCSE.

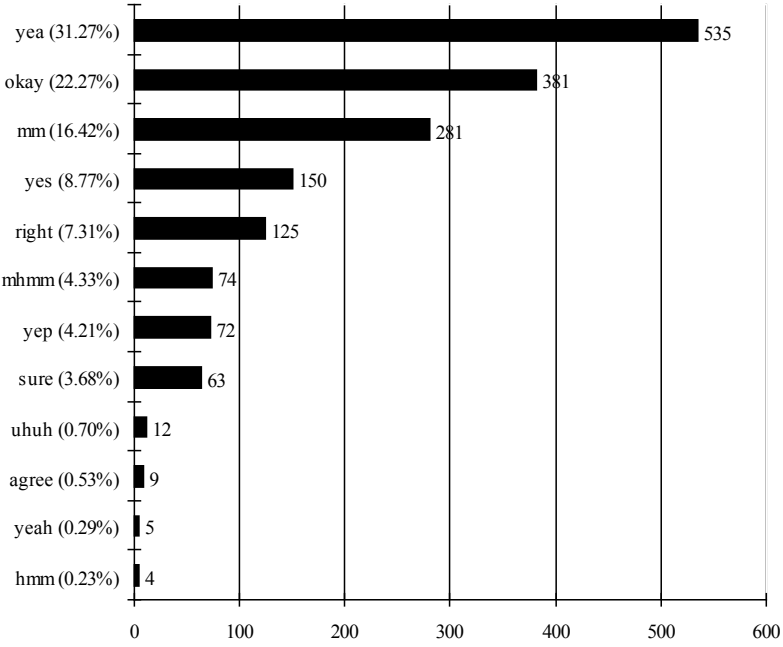

Figure 7: Frequency of expressions of potential agreement in the HKCSE that are not found in the textbooks

A frequency count in the HKCSE subset shows that there is a huge frequency gap between *yea, okay*, and *mm* on the one hand and the other nine expressions on the other. 535 occurrences of *yea* (31.27%), 381 occurrences of *okay* (22.27 %), and 281 occurrences of *mm* (16.42%) are found. For the remaining nine expressions, the occurrences only range from 4 to 150.

The HKCSE data was then manually analyzed to exclude the expressions of agreement that do not function as agreeing to a suggestion or an opinion. The result shows that the frequency counts of these three linguistic realizations with a relative frequency of over 10% drop significantly (Figure 3.8). Only 147 occurrences of *yea* (as

compared to 535 occurrences), 12 occurrences of *okay* (as compared to 381 occurrences), and 39 occurrences of *mm* (as compared to 281 occurrences) are found to express agreement. The frequency counts of the remaining nine expressions in the HKCSE also drop, indicating that these expressions carry multiple functions, including agreeing..

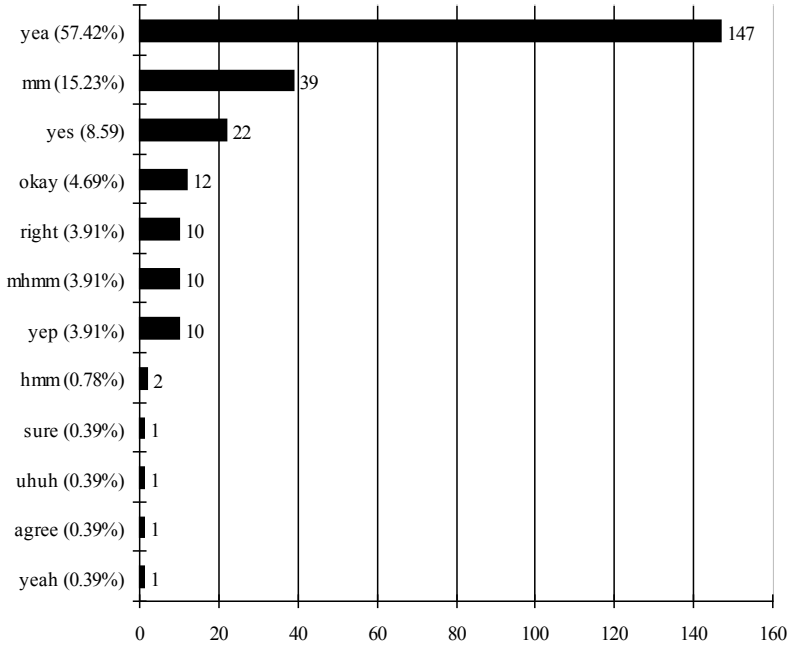

Figure 8: Frequency of expressions of agreement in the HKCSE that are not found in the textbooks

It is found that yea (57.42%) and mm (15.23%) remain the most frequently occurring expressions of agreement with a relative frequency of over 10%:

Example 1: ***yea*** (HKCSE: A045)–
B: NSE male a2: HKC female

B: and we've got bogged down in er turn taking adjacency exchange structure er –s we've spent longer than I wanted to because I think people found it difficult

a2: mhmm (.) hmm hmm ***yea*** it it is difficult (.) [you know ((laugh))

The conversation takes place in an academic tutorial. The tutor, **B**, and his students are talking about adjacency exchange structures in different discourse types. After expressing that adjacency exchange structures may be difficult to learn, one of his students, **a2**, shows her agreement by uttering 'yea'.

Example 2: ***mm*** –(HKCSE: B058)
A: NSE female b: HKC male

A: erm so on on Thursday (.) well we we have to decide we have to be talking about how we write the paper for ILEC
b: so you need to write up the paper before giving a speech
A: I think we have to give it in on the day
b: ***mm***

The conversation takes place in a meeting. A university teacher (**A**) and a research staff (**b**) are discussing a paper to be prepared for the ILEC (International Legal English Certificate). With the utterance of 'mm', **b** agrees with **A** that the paper has to be submitted before the speech is given.

Apart from yea and *mm*, the occurrences of the remaining ten expressions of agreement are from 1 to 22 only. *Okay*, with a relative frequency of 22.27% in a simple frequency count, only yields 4.69% in the manual analysis.

In some cases, it is not straightforward to clearly identify the particular function an expression of agreement carries. For example, many expressions in Figure 4.13 are also known as back-channel responses, such as *mhmm, yes, mm, hmm,* and *yea*. These responses are used not only to convey agreement (Cheng, 2004) but also to indicate the hearers' attention, interest, or understanding of the speakers (Duncan & Fiske, 1977, as cited in Cheng, 2004), and to show that hearers recognize an extended unit of talk is underway and indicate their support and compliance (Schegloff, 1982, as cited in Cheng, 2004). Hence, to decide whether an expression is a back-channel response of

the listener or an agreement to an opinion or a suggestion is not always clear, especially when a back-channel response is also used to express agreement. For example,

B: NSE male a1: HKC female

B: er well that's not that's not that's not certain I need to follow that up that up er at the moment I've said to erm (.) A_ to give it back [but to [make sure we've got
a1: **[mm [yea**
B: copies of it [and I'll check the status of it (**HKCSE: B060**)

In this extract, the conversation takes place in a meeting about the sound and video recordings collected from lectures. The participants are discussing if the data collected could be used. While **B** is saying that he will follow up the case, **a1** utters 'mm' and 'yea' simultaneously. Here 'mm' and 'yea' could be treated as either back-channel responses or expressions of agreement; it is difficult to distinguish between them in this extract.

A number of differences are found between textbook English and genuine English in expressing an agreement. First, the number of expressions of agreement is lower in the corpus data than in the textbook dataset. Out of the 54 expressions of agreement listed in the textbooks, only 7 are found in the HKCSE. It indicates that a number of the expressions in the textbooks do not exist in genuine English, and that they may be artificial examples invented by the textbook writers. Second, the expressions of agreement in the textbook dataset range from one-word utterances (*certainly*) to ten-word utterances (*I see eye to eye with you on this point*). Some textbook writers use complete sentences to convey agreement; however, expressions found in the corpus data are primarily one-word utterance (e.g. *yea, right, okay*). In real-life communication, the listeners tend to use short and simple utterances to respond to speakers. Moreover, agreement in real conversation is non-linguistic; a nod, a lifting of eyebrows, or a smile could all be expressions of agreement. Third, the expressions of agreement are presented with invented situations of interaction in textbooks, probably based on the writers' own preferences, intuition or retrospection. None

of the textbooks explain how the different expressions are used in genuine English for authentic communication.

Conclusion

The study has found that a number of expressions of agreement (47 of 54) found in the textbooks do not exist in the HKCSE, and that many expressions of agreement (12) cannot be found in the textbooks. These confirm that the selected textbook material does not adequately reflect the use of expressions of agreement in genuine English. To improve the relevance and accuracy of the teaching material, textbook writers could refer to corpus evidence when designing the material for both genuine contexts of communication and language input. Moreover, corpus data can be used inductively for the learners to find out how agreement is performed in genuine English (Cheng & Warren, 2005, 2006; Römer, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b).

Textbook materials should be based on genuine examples from corpora and expose learners to natural language use. If textbook writers want to bring what they write about agreement closer to its use in genuine English, they should make reference to corpus evidence, such as *yeah* and *mm*, both in terms of the actual language forms and the relative frequencies of the different forms. The most obvious pedagogical use of corpora is to treat them as sources of classroom material for teachers to select and adapt from (Aston, 1997). As shown in the corpus findings, the list of expressions of agreement need to be reduced from 54 to 3, including *that's right, yea,* and *mm* only. Moreover, it is necessary to familiarize learners with the contexts in which the expressions of agreement are used in real-life speech situations so that learners can use the expressions appropriately and effectively.

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Footnotes

[1] In the HKCSE, lower case letters indicate Hong Kong Chinese (HKC) and upper case letters indicate native speakers of English (NSE). The letters "a" and "A" are used for female speakers and "b" and "B" for male speakers. The number after the letter, if any, indicates individual speaker (Cheng & Warren, 2005).

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