

The Use of *OK* by Native and Non-Native Teachers in Bilingual Classrooms: Mandarin, English and Code-Switching*

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This study investigates the relationship between the use of *OK* (or *okay*) and language choices by two native-speaking (NS) and two non-native-speaking (NNS) high school teachers in Taiwan. Four sessions were video-recorded and transcribed to examine *OK* in the teachers' utterances in English, Mandarin and when switching codes. The functional categories for 286 instances of *OK* in the 24,754-word total are described from the bottom up and assessed for reliability to reduce the subjectivity of category judgments. We found that NS teachers use *OK* most in their English utterances, whereas NNS teachers do so in their Mandarin utterances. All teachers tend to use it to mark discourse boundaries in various linguistic contexts. *OK* also has a limited role in code-switches. It mainly appears to mark a discourse boundary or to connect English, as the students' second language, with translation into Mandarin, as their first language.

Key words: discourse marker, bilingual, code-switching, classroom discourse, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

OK (also spelled *okay*) as a colloquial and informal word is widely used in utterances (Carter & McCarthy 2006). It has been discussed in various contexts, the classroom being one. A range of previous research indicates that *OK*, as a lexically free marker, plays a unique role in the academic context (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975, Levin & Gray 1983, Schlee 2005, 2008, Carter & McCarthy 2006, Fung & Carter 2007, Liao 2009, Shahbaz, Sheikh & Ali 2013). Writers investigating *OK* have shown certain common interests in classrooms where English is the only communicative channel: 1) its frequency, 2) its pragmatic functions, 3) social perspectives on its use, and 4) comparisons between the use made of it by native and non-native speakers.

While previous studies illustrated that *OK* is frequently used in monolingual English classrooms and it plays an important role in classroom communication, what does the use of *OK* look like in bilingual classrooms? To what extent is *OK* used and what functions does it play? Given the fact that the relevant research is limited, the current study aims to add a new dimension by investigating *OK* in a bilingual class where English and Mandarin are both used. It examines the functions of *OK* in English utterances, Mandarin utterances and utterances involving code-switching. It proposes, in a quantitative and qualitative manner, to illustrate the pragmatic functions

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of *OK* in the context of various language choices by NS and NNS teachers in a classroom setting. The present study is also interested in the frequency and pragmatic functions of *OK* and in comparisons between native speaking (NS) and non-native speaking (NNS) teachers' practice regarding this term.

2. Literature review

2.1 Frequencies of *OK* in academic contexts

A range of studies have examined how frequently *OK* is used in the classroom, especially in teachers' utterances (for example, Levin & Gray 1983, Schleef 2005, 2008, Liao 2009, Shahbaz, Sheikh & Ali 2013). They all show a common indication that *OK* is widely used by both NS teachers and NNS teachers, although the frequency is rather individual. Levin & Gray (1983) studied the use of *OK* by three male and seven female NS lecturers in their classroom discourse. It was found that the frequency of *OK* varied, ranging from nil to 27 instances in one lecturer's talk. This variety in the frequency rate of *OK* was also reflected in non-native speakers' utterances. Liao (2009) investigated six NNS international teaching assistants, who were Mandarin native speakers in a research university in California. They had studied English formally for more than eight years and had been in the U.S. for between two and four years. Their utterances were collected in two settings, a formal setting of classroom discussions led by the teaching assistants and an informal setting of individual interviews with each teaching assistant. This yielded a similar result to the above: one teaching assistant recorded 14 instances per 1000 words in her classroom discussions, more than the other five, and another teaching assistant used *OK* only 2 times per 1000 words in the classroom discussion, fewer than the others. Another study examined how *OK* is adopted in utterances from NS professors and NNS professors in their classes (Shahbaz, Sheikh & Ali 2013). Although the distribution in each professor's discourse is individual, the frequency is generally high. The two NNS professors produce on average 7.5 instances of *OK* per 1000 words while the two NS professors utter on average 5.5 per 1000 words. It is interesting to note that *OK* in one NNS professor's talk appears on average 27 times per 1000 words. This frequency is much higher than in the other professors' speech. Although the frequencies among the teachers are various, it clearly shows that *OK* is one of the frequently used words in classroom discussion.

2.2 Functions of *OK* in academic contexts

In addition to frequency, a range of research asks what functions *OK* plays in classroom settings. The results indicate that *OK* serves unique functions. The essential function is as a ‘boundary marker’. A famous study, which was seen to mark a major step forward in classroom discourse analysis, was made by Sinclair & Coulthard (1975). They incorporated both linguistic and sociolinguistic traditions in their conception of classroom interaction with minority children in British primary school classrooms and noted that teachers mark boundaries in discourse by uttering *OK*. Similarly, Schlee (2005:178) defines *OK* as a ‘transition marker’ that ‘marks information stage transitions to express discourse structure’. Liao (2009) adopted Stenström’s (1994) pragmatic function of *OK*, to acknowledge the preceding utterance. All of the above comments actually refer to the same fact: that *OK* regularly marks a discourse boundary. An example extracted from Levin & Gray’s (1983) work is shown in (1).

- (1) I copied that for you because it shows the influence of self-concept for both the subordinate and the superior on the communication process. [Pause.] **OK**. First of all, one of the problems going through the research literature is that actually no studies...
(Levin & Gray 1983:196)

OK can also signal an opening (Levin & Gray 1983, Schlee 2005, Fung & Carter 2007). When it is used for this purpose, it is placed at the beginning of an utterance, as in (2). It is not part of the formal lecture and it is uttered in full voice as the speaker looks at the audience (Levin & Gray 1983). *OK*, in addition, closes or pre-closes an utterance when a teacher moves from the body to the conclusion (Levin & Gray 1983, Fung & Carter 2007), as shown in (3).

- (2) **OK**, students. [Pause.] **OK**. [Pause.] My topic is an organizations’ communication with its external public. ((The first *OK* was an attention getter; full voice; eyes up. The second was spoken with a full voice, eyes down))
(Levin & Gray 1983:196)
- (3) ... American-trained people and Russians and Germans, and they have a different system of education. [Pause] **OK**. [Pause.] So in conclusion, in nonverbal communication it’s not any easy thing to decide.
(Levin & Gray 1983:197)

OK also occurs when a teacher acknowledges that the student's response is being heard (Sinclair & Coulthard 1975). An example was provided as in (4) which was extracted from an EFL classroom in China observed by You (2011).

(4) T: [C]an you see any trees on top of the Ayers Rock?

S: I can see some trees and some sheep. [A]nd a cow. [A]nd Ayers Rock.

T: [G]ood. **OK**. [A]nd cow. [G]ood.

(You 2011:86)

OK spoken with a rising tone is presented as '*OK?*' which works to check progression or comprehension. It is interesting that *OK* serves different functions in a classroom and outside of it. Schlee (2005) reviews how in non-academic contexts, '*OK?*' in a form of a facilitative question tag is linked to powerness (O'Barr & Atkins 1980). In this role as a facilitative question tag *OK* is used more frequently in women's utterances than men's (Lakoff 1973) although some scholars argue that the use of question tags is dependent on who has the more powerful conversational role, and is not based on gender only (Cameron, McAlinden & O'Leary 1988). However, *OK* as a question tag in a classroom plays the opposite role. It is actually linked to the powerful role of the teacher, who uses '*OK?*' as a question tag to check progress (Schlee 2005, Othman 2010) or comprehension (Liao 2009). Othman (2010) examined discourse markers of 12 lectures and found that '*OK?*' functions to check progress, when the lecturer looks at the students. In doing this, s/he seems to be waiting for a response or a question from a student and is checking whether the students have understood her/him. An example is presented below in (5). Schlee (2005) compares *OK* as used by natural sciences and humanities lecturers and notes the former may use '*OK?*' more frequently to check students' comprehension than the latter. They attribute this to the fact that many students may struggle with fact-oriented subject matter and therefore a lecture needs to check students' understanding before progressing to the next stage.

(5) So you've done it, now, then I'll take it in the end. Just one per company, I don't need two per company, [**OK**]?? ((LOOKS AT STUDENTS)).

(Othman 2010:673)

The present study was inspired by the existing studies because *OK* in bilingual contexts has not yet been broadly discussed. This study is designed to compare the frequencies of *OK* in NS and NNS teachers' utterances in an EFL classroom where English is the foreign and target language (L2) and Mandarin is the first language

(L1). It also aims to examine the functions of *OK* in three different language choices: monolingual English utterances, monolingual Mandarin utterances and code-switching where *OK* is a switch or linked to code-switching. Moreover, are there any functions favored by a particular language choice? This study proposes, in a quantitative and qualitative manner, to illustrate the pragmatic functions of *OK* in the context of various language choices by NS and NNS teachers.

3. Methods

This work is based on utterances collected by Chang (2016) from the practice of two NS teachers, labelled Teacher A and Teacher B and two NNS teachers, labelled Teacher C and Teacher D. The NS Teacher A and the NNS Teacher D shared the same group of students, and the NS Teacher B and the NNS Teacher C taught the same group of students. This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- (1) How does *OK* perform in a bilingual classroom where English is the target language and Mandarin is the learners' first language?
- (2) Does *OK* serve similar functions in the context of English as discussed in previous studies?
- (3) What roles does *OK* play in monolingual Mandarin utterances?
- (4) How does *OK* perform in bilingual utterances in relation to code-switching?

3.1 Data collection

All the NNS and NS teachers had teaching experience of between 5 and 15 years and all of them were qualified EFL teachers. Both NS teachers are from the USA and received their teaching qualification there. They both taught 'English conversation' in the observed classrooms and although they are able to speak Mandarin at beginner's level from the observed classes, it appears that they try to exclude Mandarin from their utterances and those of their students'. The two NNS teachers are from Taiwan and they both taught 'English reading and writing' in the observed classrooms. One received her Master's qualification in the USA and returned to Taiwan afterwards. The other received her BA in Canada and lived there for 7 years after her studies. Their native language is Mandarin and both of them have an advanced level of English. In respect of the participating students, one group was in the first year of a senior high school programme while the other group was in the second year of a senior high school programme. Their English level was on average lower intermediate.

A 50-minute session of each teacher's discourse was video-recorded and this was followed by a brief interview with each teacher. Information regarding the teacher's educational and personal background, the length of their teaching experience, and their students' English proficiency was provided by the teacher in the interview.

These 200-minute video-recordings generated 24,752-word utterances, which were transcribed using the Du Bois's coding system (1991). In order to study the nature of the classroom discourse focusing on the interactions, the transcription excluded all the text which did not include interaction, i.e., the students' reading the textbook aloud and the song sung together by the teacher and the students.

In terms of language choices, it was found that the NNS and NS teachers all included both English and Mandarin in their utterances. Although the NS teachers mentioned in their interviews that they try to avoid Mandarin, they both used it to some extent. English was predominantly used by Teacher A, whose English utterances were 96.8% of the total; Teacher B make 96.4% of utterances in English. In contrast to the NS teachers, both of the NNS teachers uttered much more Mandarin. Teacher C's Mandarin utterances totalled 86% with 14% in English. Teacher D mainly spoke Mandarin (96.5%).

3.2 The bottom-up approach to categorizing the uses of *OK*

Instead of using pre-defined categories, this study adopted a bottom-up approach that treats each instance of *OK* as something individual. In other words, occurrences of *OK* were not manipulated to fit into pre-defined categories. Rather, the categories were developed to describe every instance of *OK* and adjusted to fit the collected utterances. Following this approach, all the switches were collected and examined individually. This study grouped the instances of *OK* that share the same speech acts within the four observed classrooms. A list of functional categories for *OK* was then generated. Müller (2005) adopted a similar approach in her study for investigating discourse markers, treating each discourse marker as something new and individual. Following Tognini-Bonelli (2001), she believes that each category that stems from her corpus takes precedence over theoretical construction (Müller 2005). However, we argue that it is difficult to provide evidence that the categorization is new and not influenced by the literature, including theories and previous studies. In the present study, although the instances of *OK* were not adjusted to fit pre-defined categories, the categorization was, to some extent, influenced by previous empirical studies. The present study also adopted some categories of the functions that were found in the literature because they fit the utterances. In short, the categories of functions in this study were developed from the collected utterances instead of adjusting all the *OKs* to

pre-defined categories. Although we call it a bottom-up approach, it is slightly different from Müller's (2005) bottom-up approach.

3.3 Reliability assessment

Although the categorization was developed from the collected utterances via a bottom-up approach, it may cause subjectivity from a sole rater's decision. To reduce possible subjectivity and test its reliability, an assessment was made after the categorization was completed. The reliability assessment was done to evaluate the two raters' performance. When a list of categories was completed, it was sent to the second rater, who was asked to allocate all the *OK*s in the categories that were generated by the first rater. The second rater is an English linguistics professor proficient in both English and Mandarin. Comparing the two ratings, it was found that 33 out of the 286 instances of *OK* were allocated to different categories. The discrepancy rate was 11%. The two raters agreed to further investigate the discrepancies and tried to improve their categorization although it had already met high agreement. The two raters discussed these 33 items and revised the categories slightly. Through this process, the categorization of all 286 instances in this study was confirmed. This approach helped to reduce the subjective judgment of rating by a single examiner.

3.4 The definition of an utterance

To investigate the relationship between the frequency of *OK* and teachers' language choices, an 'utterance' needs to be clearly defined. An utterance was identified when it starts with a capital letter and ends with a final symbol '.' or an appealing symbol '?' according to the transcription. Taking example (5) in Section 2.2, two utterances are counted. The first utterance is 'So you've done it, now, then I'll take it in the end.' It starts with a capital letter and ends with a final symbol. The second utterance is 'Just one per company, I don't need two per company, OK?' It again starts with a capital letter and ends with an appealing symbol.

4. Functions of *OK*: Categories in this study

This study categorized all 286 instances of *OK* which appeared in the collected utterances. As mentioned in Section 2, the categorization adopted existing categories with some being revised slightly in order to better accommodate the instances for analysis. It also generated new categories based on the utterances. A comparison

between existing categories and new categories generated from the present utterances is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of *OK*'s functions between the literature and the present study

<i>OK</i> 's functions in literature	<i>OK</i> 's functions in this study
1. <i>OK</i> as a boundary marker	1. <i>OK</i> as a boundary marker
2. <i>OK</i> as an opener or a closure	2. <i>OK</i> as an opener or a closure
3. <i>OK</i> as an acknowledgement	3. <i>OK</i> as an acknowledgement token
4. <i>OK?</i> as a comprehension checker	4. <i>OK?</i> as a comprehension checker or confirmation seeker
	5. <i>OK</i> as a direct translation connector
	6. <i>OK</i> as an indirect translation connector
	7. <i>OK</i> as an informal adjective
	8. Others

4.1 *OK* as a boundary marker

In line with many previous studies, *OK* in teachers' utterances plays the role to mark discourse boundaries. An example is shown in (6). This conversation took place at the beginning of the session when the teacher was taking attendance. The teacher was checking a student's attendance and then checked another student's attendance after uttering *OK*. This instance of *OK* worked to help the utterance proceed to the next topic. This function is also found in the previous research although the terminology is slightly different. Sinclair & Coulthard (1975:40) call it 'marking boundary'; in the other studies, the same function is categorized as a 'transition marker' (Schleef 2005, Liao 2009).

(6) T: Who is sick? Did she come to school today?

S1: Yes, *baojian shi*.

health room

'Yes, the health room.'

T: She is in the health room. **OK**. Alright. And..Amy, who is with you?

(NS_A_11-13)

4.2 *OK* as an opener or a closure

OK can also be used as a first utterance when a teacher starts a new speaking turn. An example is given in (7). This function is actually different from the *OK* that the teacher uses to get attention from the students. Levin & Gray (1983) identified the difference between the *OK* which works to open an utterance and to get attention by saying ‘the ‘attention-getting *OK* which may occur at the start of the talk and which is uttered with a full voice while the speaker looks at the audience’ (p.197).

(7) T: **OK**, let me hear your dialogue.
(NS_B_74)

OK works to close an utterance as well and is uttered last, shown in (8), or before the end of the utterance when leading to pre-close a topic. An example is shown in (9).

(8) T: Uh ha ha. I am very happy then. **OK, OK**.
(NS_A_743)

(9) T: Name, *xiangdui de*, *opposite*, *xiangdui de*. *Zhexie doushi*. ((Ss ARE then opposite DE opposite DE these all. are PUTTING THE NOTES ON THEIR HANDOUT)). Hao! *Zailai, tongxue*, alright further students *zhege hoaxiang shangguo, hen kuai guoqu*. **OK** *keyi liaojie*. Na this seem taught very quick pass can understand then women yao kan lingwai yipian. we want look another one. piece
‘Then, the Chinese word *xiangdui de* means *opposite*, *xiangdui de*. They all refer to *opposite*. Alright, further to this, everybody, this seems to have already been taught. Let’s skip through it quickly. **OK**, it’s understood. Then let’s look at the next article.’
(NNS_D_368-370)

4.3 *OK* as an acknowledgement token

Echoing previous studies, the teachers uttered *OK* to acknowledge a response from a student. On some occasions in this study, either *OK* or a teacher repeating a student’s response signals the acknowledgement. Some utterances even show that a teacher includes both of them to acknowledge a student’s response. It was found that

OK is uttered before or after a repetition of a student's response. The extract (10) below presents an example of how the repetition and *OK* work together to acknowledge a reply from a student.

(10) T: Go ahead, Joan.

Joan: Two ten.

T: Two ten, **OK**, alright. It's two ten. ((WRITES ON BOARD)) Very good.
Alright. Well done, alright. Next one. ((STARTS THE TAPE))

(NS_A_179-182)

4.4 *OK?* as a comprehension checker or a confirmation seeker

OK is also used to check comprehension and ask for confirmation. It appears with a rising tone after it and therefore is labelled '*OK?*' Whether checking comprehension or asking for confirmation, it normally appears at the end of an utterance although it is not necessarily followed by a student's response. Extract (11) shows an example in which the teacher checks a student's comprehension by saying '*OK?*' Another example, (12), presents the teachers' '*OK?*' which functions to ask for confirmation.

(11) T: Just like the word 'until' but sometimes we will say it quickly. If you say what time is it, I'll say it's twenty till four. Just means it's the same as 'to', **OK?**

(NS_A_611-613)

(12) T: Dabibi, you wanna flip a coin? ((DOING THE ACTION OF FLIPPING A COIN))

Dabibi: ...

T: Let's flip a coin, **OK?**

Dabibi: ...

(NS_A_679-682)

4.5 *OK* as a direct translation connector

This function was not discussed in previous studies where English, as a monolingual communicative channel, was involved. When looking at a bilingual classroom, this study finds *OK* plays a role when a teacher switches in an utterance. *OK* is used to introduce a direct translation of Mandarin and normally takes place before the translation. An example is presented in extract (13) below. The native teacher repeated a student's response by saying 'Twenty-nine minutes until twelve'. He then uttered *OK* and followed with a translation in Mandarin.

- (13) T: To twelve. Good job. Twenty-nine to twelve. This is a very strange way to say it ((GESTURING S19 TO SIT DOWN)) but you are right. Twenty-nine minutes until twelve. **OK**. *Zai ershijiu fenzhong biancheng* 12 another twenty-nine minute become o'clock. Good, good, good, good. How about? How about? How do I say this? ((WRITES ON BOARD)) How do I say this time?
(NS_A_400-403)
'To twelve. Good job. Twenty-nine to twelve. This is a very strange way to say it, but you are right. Twenty-nine minutes until twelve. **OK**. In another 29 minutes it will become 12 o'clock. Good, good, good, good. How about? How about? How do I say this? How do I say this time?'

4.6 *OK* as an indirect translation connector

In addition to leading to a direct translation from English to Mandarin, *OK* can link to an indirect translation. An indirect translation is formed as a question by a teacher who expects the students to provide a translation in the following speaking turn. The questions are structured in either English or Mandarin and are followed by a student's translation in Mandarin, as illustrated in extract (14). The teacher uttered in English 'the invention of compact discs' and then said *OK* leading to a question asking her students to translate 'disc' into Mandarin.

- (14) T: ... *suoyi biancheng the invention of compact..disc*. **OK**, *na shenme* so become then what
jiaozuo..disc? *Shenme yisi ya?* call what mean YA
'...So it becomes the invention of compact..discs. **OK**, What does..*disc* mean then? What does it mean?'
(NNS_C_81-82)

4.7 *OK* as an informal adjective

OK to denote a satisfactory or unproblematic state or situation, defined by Carter & McCarthy (2006), is also found in the corpus although this use is relatively infrequent. In (15) below, the teacher uttered *OK* to tell the students who were presenting their dialogue that it was not a problem to write Chinese on the board.

- (15) T: OK. It's **OK** to write Chinese. You can write Chinese. ((TALKING TO THE STUDENTS WHO ARE WRITING ON BOARD)) Alright, go ahead. Everybody!
(NS_B_67-68)

4.8 Other functions

Apart from the above functions, *OK* also serves other functions in an utterance although this happens quite rarely in teachers' utterances.

4.8.1 *OK* between repetition

It was found that *OK* is uttered before a teacher repeats something. This occurred only twice in this study; an example is shown below. The repetition with *OK* ahead of it in (16) leads to the end of the topic and is followed by a new topic, *OK* and the repetition.

- (16) T: At, at, I get up at- *OK*, Willy. No no no, Willy is too noisy. I want to hear someone who is not so noisy. Oh, Dora, never mind. **OK**, never mind. Uh! Let's see. Joan ... what time do you get up?
(NS_A_981-983)

4.8.2 *OK* before self-correction

OK is also used when a teacher wishes to self-correct. It appears before the correction, as shown in (17).

- (17) T: Kuangrezhe a, zhege zi shi dui mouxie shi de kuangrezhe ya! Jiao fanatic A this word is to certain things DE fanatic YA call *fan..fanitic..OK..fanatic*.
'*Fanatic*. This word refers to someone who is extremely enthusiastic about something. Called *fan..fanitic..OK..fanatic*.'
(NNS_C_227)

4.8.3 *OK* to get attention

OK used to get attention has been reported in previous studies. Levin & Gray (1983) identify the difference between *OK* used to get attention and *OK* to open an

utterance. An attention-getting *OK* ‘may occur at the start of the talk and is uttered with a full voice while the speaker looks at the audience’ (Levin & Gray 1983:197). One of the two instances identified in this study is shown in (18).

(18) T: **OK**. ((FULL VOICE)) Sh! Listen listen listen.
(NS_B_533)

5. Results and discussions

With regard to frequency, this varied among the four participating teachers. This result reflects Levin & Gray’s (1983) finding among their ten teachers. As shown in Table 2, the NNS Teacher D utters *OK* significantly less often than the two NS teachers and other NNS teacher. It can be seen that the frequencies of the two NS teachers are very close. However, the two NNS teachers’ frequencies do not show any such consistency.

Table 2. Normalized frequencies of *OK* used by NS and NNS teachers

NS teacher		NNS teacher	
Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
3.5	3.4	2.0	0.9

Note: Frequency represents the number of times per 1000 words.

5.1 The frequencies of *OK* in the language choices

This study found that *OK* appears in three different language choices: 1) *OK* in an English utterance; 2) *OK* in a Mandarin utterance; and 3) *OK* in code-switching. Examples for these three language choices are presented in the following (19)–(21).

(19) *OK* in an English utterance

T: **OK**, let me hear your dialogue.

(20) *OK* in a Mandarin utterance

T: **OK**, keyi liaojie. Na women yao kan lingwai yi pian lo.
can understand then we want look other a piece LO
‘**OK**, this is understandable. Let’s look at the next piece of article.’

(21) *OK* in code-switching

T: *The invention of compact...disc*, **OK**, na shenme jiaozuo...*disc*?
then what call
‘The invention of compact...disc. **OK**; what does *disc* mean?’

How are the instances of *OK* distributed in the participating teachers’ language choices? As shown in Table 3, the differences are significant. The NS teachers’ use of *OK*, Teacher B’s in particular, are predominately uttered in an English context. *OK* appears in 21% of Teacher B’s English utterances, meaning that every 5 English utterances includes *OK*. This is similar to Teacher A who used *OK* in 22% of his English utterances. He also included *OK* in his bilingual utterances (8%) although the percentage is much lower than in the English ones. Teachers C used *OK* more in her bilingual utterances (34%) while it was found in 13% of her Mandarin utterances and 2% in her English ones. Teacher D’s *OK* was only found in Mandarin utterances and only appeared in 1% of her Mandarin utterances.

Table 3. Frequencies of *OK* used by NS (Teachers A and B) and NNS (Teachers C and D) teachers

	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
<i>OK</i> in English utterances	22%	21%	2%	0%
<i>OK</i> in Mandarin utterances	0%	0%	13%	1%
<i>OK</i> in bilingual utterances	8%	0%	34%	0%

Note: The percentage represents the frequency in each teachers’ various linguistic type of utterances.

5.2 The functions of *OK* in language choices

As discussed in the literature, *OK* exercises specific functions for classroom purposes and the current study reflects this finding. The functions in English utterances are shown below in Figure 1, in Mandarin utterances in Figure 2 and in bilingual utterances where code-switching takes place in Figure 3.

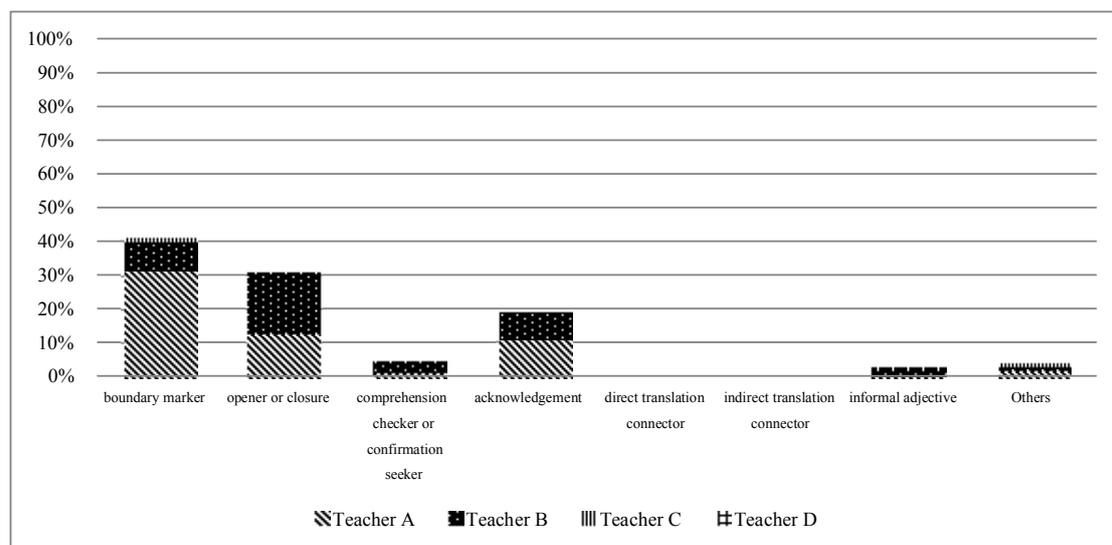


Figure 1. The functions of *OK* in English utterances, no data from Teacher D

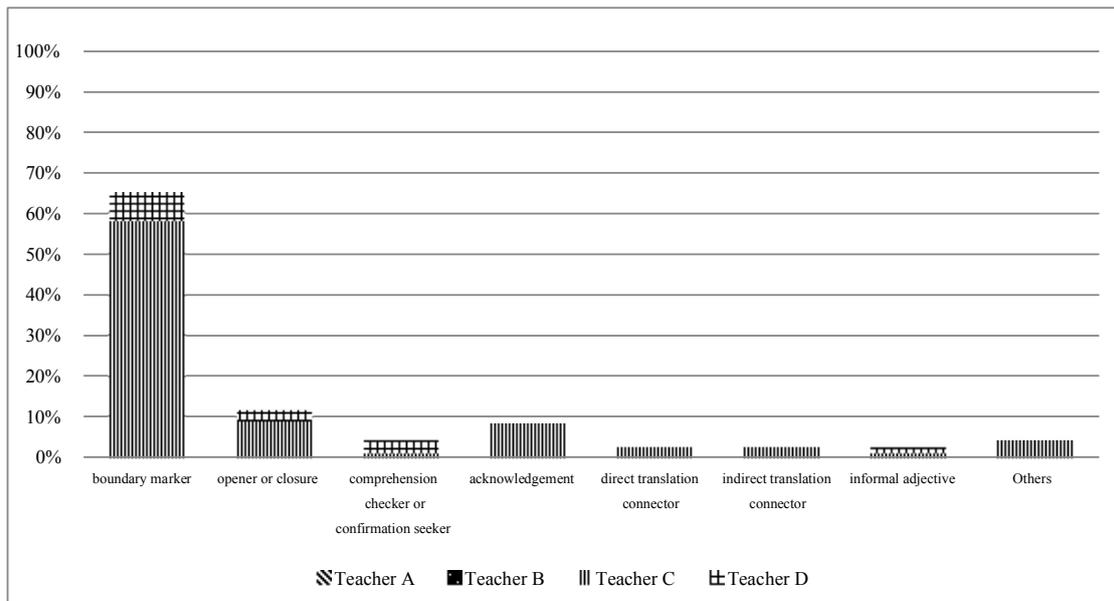


Figure 2. The functions of *OK* in Mandarin utterances, no data from Teachers A & B

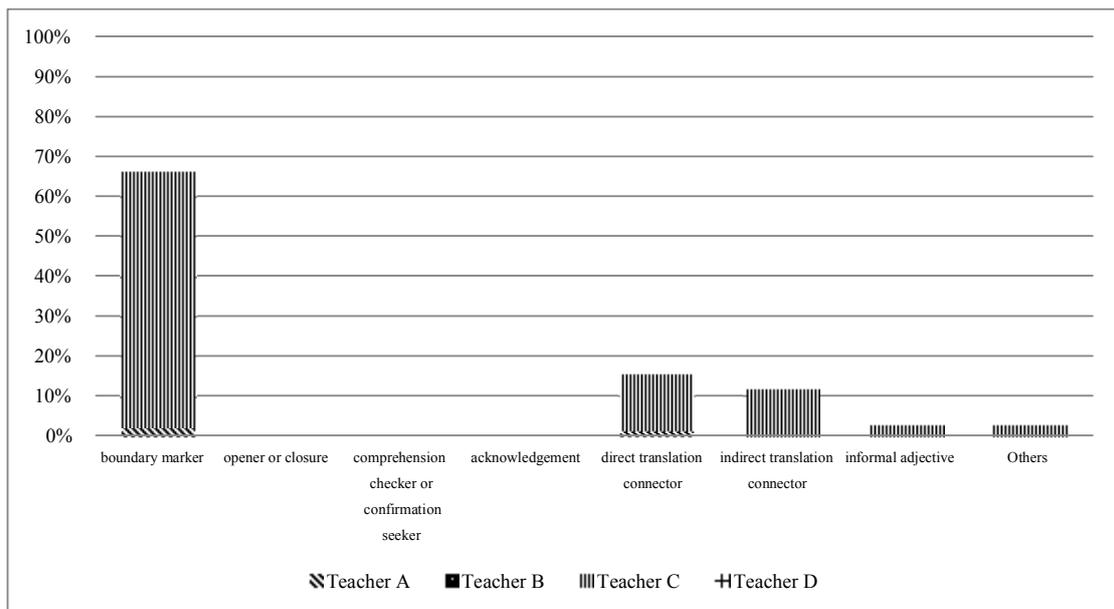


Figure 3. The functions of *OK* in bilingual utterances where code-switching takes place, no data from Teachers B & D

5.3 Major function across the language choices: boundary marker

The above three figures clearly show that *OK* is used most frequently as a boundary marker. This is most prominent in the monolingual Mandarin utterances and in the bilingual utterances. In monolingual English contexts, Teacher A, Teacher B and Teacher C all utter *OK* to mark a boundary; this function applies to over 40% of

all the utterances of *OK*. Although NNS Teacher C recorded only one instance of *OK* in an English utterance which may not be sufficient for further discussion, it is interesting to note that both NS teachers often use *OK* to mark the boundary between a response and a new topic, a common teaching act. In (22) below, Teacher B's students in pairs presented dialogues involving phrasal verbs consisting of 'look'; for example, 'look up' in the extract below. S20 and S21 presented their dialogue in the first three lines and Teacher B then acknowledged it by saying '*OK*, alright' followed by clapping as a compliment. He followed this by uttering '*OK*, cool, now' before asking the students to look at the paper he provided. *OK* here marks the move from a response to a new teaching act.

(22) S20: I am looking up a new word in a dictionary.

S21: Do you want me to give you a hand?

S20: No, thank you. I think I am *OK*.

T: *OK*, alright. ((CLAPING)) **OK**, cool, now. Please take a look at this paper.

(NS_B_538-541)

OK predominately serves to mark off a discourse in Mandarin (64% of the total) and in bilingual contexts (67% of the total). Just as NS teachers use *OK* in an English context to lead to a new teaching act, NNS teachers' use of *OK* also appears with the same function in monolingual Mandarin and in bilingual contexts. An example is shown in (23), where Teacher C in the last utterance started with a response to the student then uttered *OK* and finally went on to ask the students to turn to page 40 of the textbook.

(23) T: Meiyou ba! Shangci zhiyou jiangdao danzi ba.

no BA last.time only mention vocabulary BA

'No! We stopped at the section of vocabulary at the end of the last session.'

S3: Dui. Danzi.

yes vocabulary

'Yes, vocabulary.'

T: Dui danzi, **OK**. Hao, xianzai dakai sishi ye.

yes vocabulary alright now open forty page

'Yes, the section of vocabulary, **OK**. Alright, let's go to page 40 of the textbook.'

(NNS_C_13-15)

a need to create common ground and that they take up more space in the utterances of natives. Therefore, it increases the level of challenge for non-native speakers in an negotiating interaction to learn these discourse markers. In this study, although the NS and NNS teachers speak both English and Mandarin in their classrooms, the NS teachers on average utter more *OKs* than the NNS teachers do. Therefore, in terms of frequency, this study also shows a higher frequency of *OKs* in NS teachers' discourse than in NNS teachers'. However, although the literature claims that non-native speakers utter fewer discourse markers because they are less competent in the language than native speakers, this study does not reflect it. As illustrated in Table 3, NS and NNS teachers' *OKs* seem to be uttered predominantly in their first language, English for NS teachers and Mandarin for the NNS teachers. This indicates that, although *OK* is produced in their competent languages, NS teachers still utter *OK* more frequently than NNS teachers do. Therefore, the influence of language competence does not seem to have an impact (Chang 2016).

In addition to frequency, it is also interesting to note that *OK* in Mandarin utterances serves similar functions to that in English utterances. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, apart from the two functions which are used for translation, the functions of *OK* in Mandarin utterances, mostly from NNS teachers, also appear in English utterances which come mainly from NS teachers. This is discussed in more detail in the following section.

5.5 Similar functions of *OK* in English and Mandarin utterances

Why is *OK* so accepted in the Mandarin utterances of the NNS teachers? *OK* is a word from English but it is widely used in Mandarin contexts. Yuan (2012) conducted a survey among 182 Chinese people from various groups in China. They were grouped by age, educational background and profession. Their ages varied from teenage to adult. Their educational backgrounds included senior high school and lower, university degree and master's degree levels. Their professions ranged from students, farmers, and blue-collar workers to white-collar workers. The selection of the subjects who participated in this survey shows that Yu examined the use of *OK* among a wide range of people. The survey asked the subjects to reflect on their own habits to assess the frequency of *OK*. The five options were 'rarely use', 'sometimes use', 'normally use', 'usually use' and 'frequently use'. Although the results show that most of them 'normally used' *OK*, the median option, the loan word '*OK*' was accepted across the groups by 71% of the subjects. It was used more in face-to-face conversations with classmates, friends and colleagues than otherwise. The interlocutor was limited because *OK* is seen as an informal word and consequently the subjects

felt less comfortable about using it when they spoke to teachers or those in a higher position at work, i.e., managers.

Why does *OK* play a similar role in English and Mandarin utterances? It should be noted that *OK* in the NNS teachers' utterances played similar roles to that in NS teachers' English utterances. *OK* seems to some extent to be accepted and adopted in the language of a wide selection of Mandarin speakers, as discussed above. However, as regards function, why are they similar? Several researchers suggest that *OK* and the Mandarin term '*hao*' have pragmatic similarities. Miracle (1991) notes in his study that the usage of *hao* is close to *OK* when *hao* marks a transition between topics or the closing of a topic. Wang & Tsai (2005) have studied *hao* and compared it in two sources of data, casual conversations and interactional texts related to radio interviews and call-ins. Both sources show that *hao* functions to mark a discourse transit. *Hao* also appears when acknowledging or agreeing with the previous turn of an interaction. Wang & Tsai say "[s]imilar to English [*OK*], *hao*, which is used to respond to a prior turn and also indicates a readiness to close the current exchange and/or move on to the next stage of the talk or the next topic of discussion, is a free-standing receipt marker employed by both the recipient and the current speaker" (Wang & Tsai 2005:226). A more recent study (Wang et al. 2010) collected 594 instances of *hao* in a 24.5-hour daily conversation corpus and investigated the non-propositional (i.e., textual and interpersonal) functions of *hao*. In line with the earlier studies (i.e., Miracle 1991, Wang & Tsai 2005), Wang et al. believe that the Mandarin *hao* is parallel to the English *OK*. *Hao* in their corpus usually appears at the beginning of a speaking turn. It is used to introduce a new topic, express agreement and accept a request.

In addition, *hao* in classroom discourse also has similar functions to *OK*. He (2000) has conducted a study of Chinese language classrooms which were offered to Chinese-American children whose parents were from a Chinese background and who were living in the United States. She notes that in the observed classes *hao*, as a discourse marker, was used by the Mandarin native speaking teachers before an imperative. An example is presented in (25), where the teacher first says '*hao*' and then asks the students to put it into parentheses. An instructional activity initiated by the teacher is proposed after the discourse marker, *hao* alone or after *hao* with *OK*, as shown in (26) where the teacher, after saying '*OK hao*', asks the students to write as s/he does.

- (25) Ts: **Hao**, zhe yang ba ta kuahu qilai.
 alright this way put it parenthesize QILAI
 'Alright, like this, put it in parentheses'
 (He 2000:124)

(26) Ts: *OK hao, gen laoshi yiqi xie.*
 alright follow teacher together write
 ‘OK. **Alright**, write with me.’
 (He 2000:124)

In short, although the above does not provide direct information that the use of *OK* in a Mandarin context is related to the Mandarin *hao*, it is what Wang et al. (2010) suggest—that *hao* can be viewed as an equivalent to the English *OK*. The similarity between *hao* and *OK* may be one reason why NNS teachers who are Mandarin native speakers utter *OK* to provide the same functions in a Mandarin context to those provided by NS teachers in an English context.

5.6 *OK* and code-switching

OK in code-switching, from English to Mandarin or from Mandarin to Chinese, plays a relatively limited role, comparable to its usage in English and in Mandarin utterances. Most of them serve to mark off a boundary. A few are used to mark a translation, as an adjective or serving another function. As a boundary marker, it is often used to switch to a further explanation. In (27), Teacher A wants to explain how much *sifenzhiyi* ‘a quarter of an hour’ is. He repeats a student’s reply *sifenzhiyi* and *OK* leads to a further explanation formed by the question ‘*sifenzhiyi* is how many minutes?’. This use of *OK* also often appears in Teacher C’s utterances.

(27) T: *Sifenzhiyi, very good, it’s sifenzhiyi, OK, so, we have du du du du...*
 a.quarter a.quarter
 ((MAKES FUNNY SOUND))
 ‘A quarter, very good, it’s a quarter. **OK**. so. We have du du du du...’
 S1: Du du du du ((MIMICKING THE SOUND))
 T: *Our clock has sixty, alright, so sifenzhiyi... is how many minutes?*
 a.quarter
 ‘Our clock has sixty, alright, so *sifenzhiyi* ... is how many minutes?’
 S1: Fif...teen.
 (NS_A_118-122)

OK also connects a direct or indirect translation to help students understand a specific term. Teacher C, in (28) introduces the word ‘fanatic’ and defines its meaning by giving a translation in Mandarin. *OK* in her utterance leads to a direct translation.

- (28) T: ...*fanatic*. **OK**, zhege zi shi zhege zi de shenmen ((POINTING TO this word is this word DE what EACH WORD))... jianxie, jiushi kuangrezhe. abbreviation that.is fanatic
 ‘...*fanatic*. **OK**. What’s the relationship between this word and this word? Abbreviation. It is *fanatic*.’
 (NS_C_227-228)

6. Conclusions

While previous studies analyze discourse makers in classrooms where English is the only channel, this study contributes by examining the performance of NS and NNS teachers using *OK* in the contexts of English, Mandarin and code-switching. The results show that *OK* is preferred by the NS teachers in the English context and by NNS teachers in the context of Mandarin or code-switching. This finding indicates that teachers’ L1s may be an attributing factor in the use of *OK*. In terms of frequency, it echoes the finding in the literature that NS teachers utter more discourse markers than NNS teachers but we need to bear in mind that the comparison between the literature and this study is not on the same basis. The literature compares NS and NNS teachers in the context of mono-English discourse but the observed classrooms in this study are bilingual. The participating NS teachers predominately speak English in their classes while the NNS teachers speak in Mandarin more than 85% of the time. At least, this result shows *OK* is favored in a monolingual English context by NS teachers and in monolingual Mandarin by NNS teachers.

In regard to functions, some new functions have been identified by this study. With the bottom-up approach and reliability assessment, the categories were generated from the teachers’ utterances. It is interesting to note the functions in monolingual English and in monolingual Mandarin contexts are similar. This might be attributed to the fact that *OK* is widely used by Chinese speakers and its use might be influenced by the term ‘hao’ that plays a similar role to *OK*. *OK* in code-switching mainly leads to an explanation of an earlier term. This implies that the teachers are focusing on the cognition load of the students when uttering it. They make sure that the students understand a term which the teachers think they may not understand.

Although this article aims to capture and analyze NS and NNS teachers’ use of *OK* in various linguistic contexts, its findings also contribute to teacher education for English as a foreign language. The NNS teachers are being made of awareness of their use of *OK*. Although *OK* serves as multi-functional device in classroom discourse, too much of a good thing could serve as a bad example for language learners. Students in

senior high school, in particular, may immitate their teachers' use of *OK* without considering its pragmatic roles when using it in other contexts. Echoing some previous research (e.g., Romero Trillo 2002, Fung & Carter 2007), it suggests that discourse markers (e.g., *OK* and *alright*) should be included in the curriculum for students to learn systematically.

This article provides another angle from which to examine *OK* in bilingual context. Bearing the data limitation, it illustrates the use of *OK* in bilingual classrooms by NS and NNS teachers. However, future studies could be conducted to examine the categories using a larger volume of teachers' utterances.

Appendix. Transcription symbols

Speaker

Speaker identity/turn start :

Transitional continuity

Final .
Continuing ,
Appeal ?

Pause

Medium ...
Short ..

Vocal noises

Laughter @

Transcriber's perspective

Transcriber's note (())
Indecipherable syllable X

Glossing abbreviations

A	the morpheme A
BA	the morpheme BA
DE	the morpheme DE
LA	the morpheme LA
LO	the morpheme LO
YA	the morpheme YA
QILAI	the morpheme QILAI

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母語和非母語英語教師在雙語教室中 *OK* 之分析：

中文、英語和語碼轉換

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