Task Type Effects on Pragmatic Marker Use by Learners at Varying Proficiency Levels

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Previous research has shown that the degree of structure in a task affects the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of L2 oral production (Foster & Skehan 1999). The acquisition of pragmatic markers may be related to the development of second language fluency, but there is limited research on their use by second language learners on different task types. This study examines the use of pragmatic markers on four different tasks that differ in their degree of inherent structure. The results show that the most structured task, leaving a telephone message, led to a significantly lower frequency of pragmatic marker use than the other tasks. The results also suggest that learners at different proficiency levels react differently to the degree of structure in various tasks.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Tasks

In a series of studies (Foster & Skehan, 1996, 1999; Skehan & Foster 1997, 1999) Foster and Skehan have looked at the effects of various task characteristics and task conditions on the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of the subjects' output. Skehan (1992, 1996, 1998) has argued that these three aspects of learner performance enter into competition with each other and that gains in one area will come at the expense of losses in the others.

The origin of the competition among fluency, accuracy, and complexity lies in the limitations that exist in the learner's attentional resources. Foster and Skehan (1996, 1999), Skehan and Foster (1997, 1999) and Skehen (1998, 2003) have foregrounded the role of attention and the effects that the allocation of attentional resources have on second language production. These two researchers see attention as a limited-capacity system. That is, whenever learners focus their attention on one aspect of their language production, some other aspect is likely to suffer. This relationship is the basis for Skehan's idea that a learner's language production should be subdivided into fluency, accuracy and complexity and that each of these areas should be examined separately

Rather than viewing tasks in simple categories such as *narration*, Skehan and Foster (1999) examined the effects of task structure, or the degree to which a task requires a particular structure or sequence of information (e.g., giving directions), on learner production. They hypothesized that tasks with a greater degree of clearly inherent structure would result in a more fluent and accurate performance, but that task structure would not

have any effect on complexity. They examined two narrative retelling tasks, both based on retelling the events shown in videos that differed in their degree of inherent structure. Skehan and Foster found that the degree of structure in the task did significantly affect the fluency of learner output, but not its accuracy or complexity. This suggests that the degree of structure of a task is an important variable to consider in future task-based research.

More recent task-based research has confirmed the relationship between fluency and task structure. Tavakoli and Foster (2008) and Foster and Tavakoli (2009) explored how different features of narrative tasks affected the oral production of non-native and native speakers, respectively. They examined how fluency, complexity, and lexical diversity varied in the performance of two narrative tasks that differed in their amount of background information and level of structure. Tavakoli and Foster (2008) found that a task with tighter narrative structure led to greater fluency in the oral production of non-native speakers. But Tavakoli and Foster (2009) found that the degree of narrative structure did not affect the fluency of the native speakers' task performance. They call for the inclusion of more native speaker baselines in studies of the effects of task type.

While interaction between task types and fluency, accuracy, and complexity is well established, the effect that task type variations might have on other aspects of learner language production has not been thoroughly investigated. Specifically, it is unclear how the use of pragmatic markers might be affected by task-type. In order to explore this question, we must first ask with which of the three constructs – complexity, accuracy, or fluency – pragmatic markers are likely to be related, if at all. Although at first they might seem to be unrelated to any of these constructs, a review of existing research suggests that they may have a relationship with the development and appearance of second language fluency. There is a theoretical justification for this connection as well as some empirical evidence that supports this possibility. However, existing research on pragmatic markers and fluency has not considered the variable of task type, which I address in this paper.

Pragmatic Markers

The importance of mastering the use of pragmatic markers in learning a language is widely acknowledged (Aijmer, 2002; Hasselgreen, 2004; Müller, 2005), but their categorization, definition, and function is just as widely disputed. There is a serious lack of agreement on both the terminology and function of pragmatic markers (see Schourup, 1999 for a review of this issue). Various terms are used for investigating the same types of words or multi-word expressions, including discourse markers, discourse particles, discourse connectives, etc. In terms of the identification of these words or multi-word units, it appears that like snowflakes, no two lists of pragmatic markers are alike. Schourup (1999) points out that not one of the 11 discourse markers that Schiffrin (1987) identified in her influential study has received universal acceptance in subsequent studies.

The definition of pragmatic markers has been at least as varied as their terminology and identification. Discourse markers have been variously described as "sequentially dependent elements that bracket units of talk" (Schiffrin, 1987, p. 31) or "linguistically encoded clues which signal the speaker's potential communicative intention" (Fraser, 1999, p. 68). Under the name "discourse particles", they have been identified as particles that "are placed with great precision at different places in the discourse and give important clues to how discourse is segmented and processed" (Aijmer, 2002, p. 1). These variations in terminology

sometimes obscure the fact that there is a great deal of overlap both in the identification of the expressions being investigated and their functions.

These various terms and definitions are offered here to give some idea of the variety of approaches to these expressions. I will use the term *pragmatic marker* in this study, following the definition of Carter and McCarthy (2006): pragmatic markers are "a class of items which operate outside the structural limits of the clause and encode speakers' intentions and interpersonal meanings" (p. 208). Carter and McCarthy subdivide pragmatic markers into discourse markers, stance markers, hedges, and interjections.[1] Short definitions of these subcategories and examples can be found in the table below.

Table 1: Types of pragmatic markers (adapted from Carter & McCarthy, 2006, p. 208)

Name	**Definition**	**Examples**
discourse markers	indicate the speaker's intentions with regard to organizing, structuring, and monitoring the discourse	you know so well I mean
stance markers	indicate the speaker's stance vis-à-vis the message	actually of course hopefully
hedges	enable speakers to be less assertive in formulating their message	I think just kind of
interjections	indicate affective responses and reactions to the discourse	gosh wow ouch

Carter and McCarthy's (2006) definition was chosen for use in this study because it is derived from a corpus-based investigation of actual language use. As such it is particularly appropriate for this study, which likewise investigates a corpus of native and non-native speech.

Pragmatic Markers, Formulaic Language, and Second Language Fluency

In second language acquisition research on interlanguage pragmatics, there are both theoretical and empirical indications of a potential relationship between the use of pragmatic markers and the development of fluent speech. Previous research on pragmatic markers within the area of second language acquisition has generally looked at them as part of the larger category of formulaic language (see Wray & Perkins, 2000, for an overview), sometimes referring to them as "deictic locutions" (Becker, 1975, p. 61) or "discourse devices" (Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992, p. 64).

If pragmatic markers are indeed a type of formulaic language, understanding their relationship to fluency may be facilitated by considering existing research on the relationship between formulaic language and fluency. The use of formulaic language could impact the

[1] Further discussion or investigation of these subcategories is beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses on the overall use and acquisition of pragmatic markers and their interaction with tasks. This could however, be a promising area for future research.

development of second language fluency in two different ways. The first is based upon the connection between formulaic language and theories about how speech production becomes automatic. Those researchers who follow Levelt's (1989) model of speech production, or other models that build on Levelt, such as Anderson's (1983) ACT* (see Schmidt, 1992 for a discussion of various models) posit that the automatization of language production is the key to increased fluency. Some have therefore argued that if learners are able to draw on *chunks* of ready-made language, this easy access buys them time in order to produce the rest of what they want to say. According to these models, an increase in the use of formulaic language should result in an improvement in those temporal variables that are associated with fluency, such as mean length run, pause time, etc. These researchers therefore use the term fluency primarily to denote flowing or smooth speech.

Towell, Hawkins, and Bazergui (1996), for example, found that English learners of French increased their mean length run after a period of residence in France. They then argue that this increase can be attributed to the increased use of formulaic language by the subjects:

> …This increase in fluency is not the result of a quantitative reduction in the amount of pausing that subjects do, nor in the increase in the speed with which they articulate what they say. Rather, there is an increase in the length and complexity of the linguistic units which are uttered between pauses. This suggests that what has changed is the rapidity with which syntactic and discourse knowledge can be accessed for on-line speech production. (pp. 112-113)

Towell et al. (1996) use Anderson's (1983) ACT* model to explain exactly how this change took place. They hypothesize that their subjects had increased their store of proceduralized knowledge at the formulator stage; that is, they had a greater number of formulaic expressions to draw on when they formulated what they wanted to say. They no longer had to construct as many formulations from scratch, which increased the amount of speech that they could produce before pausing. Similarly, Wood (2006) found an increase in fluency (measured as mean length of run) that correlated with the use of formulaic sequences in the speech of learners of English over a six-month period.

Hasselgreen (2004) argues that pragmatic markers, which she refers to as *smallwords,*[2] fulfill the skills that Bygate (1987) identified as necessary for speaking. Hasselgreen (2004) concludes that pragmatic markers "facilitate not only the interpretation of speech but also its production" (p. 156). She also found interesting indications that greater use of smallwords was associated with various markers of greater fluency (disruptive pausing and mean length of turn) as well as a reduction in filled pauses.

The Relationship between Pragmatic Markers and Task Structure

The two previous strands of research discussed above indicate that the performance of structured tasks correlates with increased fluency, and that fluency, in turn, also correlates

[2] Hasselgreen (2004) defines smallwords as "small words and phrases…that help to keep our speech flowing, yet do not contribute essentially to the message itself" (p. 162). The category of smallwords is not identical to that of pragmatic markers. Hasselgreen (2004) identifies 19 smallwords, 14 of which are included in Carter and McCarthy's (2006) list of pragmatic markers. Hasselgreen's smallwords are therefore generally a subset of the expressions classed as pragmatic markers.

with the use of formulaic language. This suggests the possibility that the performance of structured tasks might also correlate positively with the use of formulaic language, and with pragmatic markers (as a subset of formulaic language). Although the relationship between formulaic language and fluency is well established, the potential relationship between pragmatic markers and fluency, let alone task structure, is less clear. Although the expressions classified in this study as pragmatic markers are generally included in the larger category of formulaic language in the studies referred to above, it is not certain if pragmatic markers, as a sub-class of formulaic language, have the same impact as the larger and more varied category of formulaic language on the production of fluent discourse. It is therefore important to consider the possible relationship between pragmatic markers and task structure in more detail.

There are three logical possibilities for the relationship between pragmatic markers and task structure. The first is that pragmatic markers, as a subset of formulaic language, function primarily to increase fluency. If this is the case, then pragmatic marker use should increase on more structured tasks since fluency has been shown to increase on more structured tasks (Skehan & Foster 1999). The second possibility is that pragmatic markers facilitate fluency, but that this is only one of several functions. For example, pragmatic markers might also be used on the level of discourse to encode connections between utterances and communicate pragmatic meaning. In this case, we might expect a weaker relationship between pragmatic markers and task structure, since fluency would not be the primary variable affecting their use. The third possibility is that pragmatic markers do not play any significant role in fluent speech production. In this case, this current study would not be able to predict the relationship between pragmatic markers and task structure. The two constructs might still be related in some way due to other factors.

Previous research on the relationship between tasks and L2 pragmatic marker use is limited and does not support any of the above possibilities decisively. In the few studies that investigate this relationship, there is little consensus. Németh and Kormos (2001) analyzed 24 Hungarian learners of English over a two-year period. They focused on four different argumentation tasks in English and one in Hungarian, analyzing the rate of pragmatic marker use and the frequency of argumentative moves (claims, counterclaims, supports) on each task. They found that the use of pragmatic markers was significantly higher on tasks performed in the L1 than on those in English but that there was no significant difference in the frequency of these expressions across the four L2 tasks. It should be noted that Németh and Kormos focused on repetition of the same type of task rather than task structure as an influence on the frequency of pragmatic markers.

More recently, Wei (2009, 2011) compared the performance of college-level intermediate Chinese learners of English in China with advanced speakers on four tasks (narration, description, comparison, and apology) that were completed with a Video Oral Communication Instrument that uses the ACTFL rating scale. Although he found no difference between the two groups in terms of overall frequency of pragmatic markers on any of the tasks, he did find that certain tasks elicited a higher frequency of certain pragmatic markers and that learners at both levels used these expressions differently. For instance, for the narration task, intermediate speakers used temporal markers (*and*, *then, finally*) to organize their narration sequentially while advanced speakers tended to use other markers in narration (*and, but*) to highlight logical connections between events and to create smoother transitions between discourse units. Moreover, in other instances such as during the task of apology, Wei (2011) found that advanced speakers used more sophisticated pragmatic markers

(*particularly, whenever)* more frequently than intermediate speakers to highlight impending information (p. 689). In other words, Wei found that the frequency of certain pragmatic markers was affected by the type of task that was being performed although the overall frequency of pragmatic markers as a whole did not differ by task or by proficiency level. It is important to note that Wei's (2009, 2011) studies do not differentiate between sub-levels of Intermediate and Advanced proficiency nor do they compare pragmatic marker use by learners with that of native speakers.

Previous Research on Pragmatic Marker Use among Second Language Learners

Despite their importance for both second language fluency and proficiency, as well as their high frequency in spoken language, pragmatic markers have received relatively little attention in second language acquisition research (Müller 2005).

Previous research on the use of pragmatic markers by non-native speakers of English has generally focused on only a small subset of pragmatic markers. Hellerman & Vergun (2007), Müller (2005), Fuller (2003), and Romero Trillo (2002) looked at three, four, five, and six individual pragmatic markers, respectively. Looking at relatively few pragmatic markers allows for a detailed analysis of specific pragmatic markers and exploration of how they are used by non-native speakers. However, looking at few pragmatic markers in detail has not provided sufficient information about the overall rates of use of pragmatic markers among learners.

Fung and Carter (2003) and Hasselgreen (2004) looked at a larger number of pragmatic markers. Fung and Carter (2003) identified 23 pragmatic markers among the 100 most common English words. Hasselgreen (2004) looked at a total of 19 pragmatic markers (which she refers to as smallwords). These larger studies also found that learners generally underused pragmatic markers in comparison to native speakers. Fung and Carter (2003) found that 52% of the 23 pragmatic markers they investigated were used less than by the native speakers. Hasselgreen (2004) found statistically significant differences among native speakers and non-native speakers at two different proficiency levels, with the native speakers using the most pragmatic markers, and the lower proficiency group using the fewest.

Previous research indicates that non-native speakers use pragmatic markers at a lower rate than native speakers. The current study expands upon this research in several ways, looking at subjects at a wider range of proficiency levels (4 non-native speaker groups) and exploring the possible effect of task type on pragmatic marker use.

Research Questions

The research questions posed in this study consider how the use of pragmatic markers varies among native and non-native speakers according to the task being performed.

1. How do learners of English and native speakers of English compare with regard to the use of pragmatic markers across different tasks?

2. How do learners at different proficiency levels compare with regard to the use of pragmatic markers across tasks?

3. How does degree of task structure affect the rate of pragmatic marker use by non-natives?

4. How does degree of task structure affect the rate of pragmatic marker use by natives?

Research question one investigates whether native speakers use pragmatic markers at a higher rate than learners across different tasks. It is expected that learners use fewer pragmatic markers than native speakers, as has been indicated by previous research (Fung & Carter, 2003; Hasselgreen, 2004).

Research question two explores how the use of pragmatic markers varies across tasks by proficiency level. It is probable that learners at higher proficiency levels use more pragmatic markers than learners at lower proficiency levels. Learners with greater proficiency should generally be more fluent either due to their greater ability to manage the demands of on-line language production or their more developed pragmatic competence.

Research questions three and four focus on whether the degree of structure inherent in a task affects the rate of pragmatic marker use. We anticipated that learners would use more pragmatic markers on more structured tasks based on the relationship between formulaic language (and perhaps pragmatic makers) and fluency. As discussed above, previous research (Towell et al., 1996, Wood 2006) has claimed a relationship between formulaic language and fluency on the basis that learners who can draw on memorized chunks of language have more time for planning. We further expected that native speakers would not be affected by the degree of structure in a task in the same way as learners. This assumption is based on results presented in Tavakoli and Foster (2008) and Foster and Tavakoli (2009), which suggested that native speakers did not respond to task structure in the same way as non-native speakers where fluency was concerned.

METHODOLOGY

Setting and Procedures: The Oral Proficiency Test

The Oral Proficiency Test (OPT) is a semi-direct test of oral English proficiency that is administered to prospective international teaching assistants at an American university. The current study makes use of a pre-existing data set that was collected as part of the regular administration of the OPT. The test is conducted as follows. The examinees record their oral responses to 10 test items on a computer. The prompts include written, video, and audio input.[3] The examinees have three minutes of planning time for each item and are allowed to take notes in order to plan what they are going to say. They cannot see or hear the prompt with the information while they are answering, but they can view the instructions about what they are expected to do in the task. Each response is limited to two minutes; that is, the tape cuts the examinee off after two minutes.

[3] The exact text of the prompts is secure and consequently not available for publication in this study.

There are ten tasks on the OPT.[4] For this study, four of the ten tasks were selected for transcription and coding. Following Skehan and Foster (1999), which suggested that the degree of task structure might be a distinctive feature of tasks that affects learner output, two tasks with more structure and two with less structure were chosen. The two tasks with more structure were the passing information task and the telephone task. The two tasks with less structure were the news task and the personal task. In the news task, the examinees are asked to give their opinion about a news item they have read. In the personal task, the examinees give a response to an open-ended audio question about their personal experience, such as how they learned English, or who their favorite teacher is. In the passing information task, the examinees relay some information that they have read to someone who has no knowledge of it, such as describing a job notice to someone they think might like to apply for the job. In the telephone task, the examinees leave a short message for one of their office mates on that person's voice mail.

Skehan and Foster (1999) classified a task in which speakers were required to explain to someone how to get to their home and turn off their oven as a highly structured task because the information that the speakers need to relay is pre-determined and sequential (directions to home and operation of oven knobs). Similarly, in the current study, the information that the speakers must relay in the passing information and telephone tasks is pre-determined and provided for the examinees. It is also necessary to deliver the information in sequence with little variation, or it will not make sense to the listener. In contrast, giving an opinion on a news item and telling a personal anecdote are more open-ended. The speakers are free to structure their discourse in many possible ways and to communicate different types of information. It should be noted that a personal anecdote might have a pre-existing structure in the mind of the speaker, so that the narrative task might have more structure than the news task. What is material for this study, however, is that the opinion and narrative tasks have a less rigid structure than the other two tasks.

The tasks were also chosen because they offer a balance of written and oral prompts. The prompts for the news and passing information tasks are written, and the prompts for the personal and telephone tasks are oral, with a recording providing the information. The order in which the subjects completed the tasks was counterbalanced.

Two trained raters, who are also instructors in the university's English program, rated the exams. When the two raters disagreed, the exam was sent to a third rater to settle the dispute. The exams were given scores from 2-6. A set of descriptors for each level can be found in Appendix A. For the purposes of the program, a score of 5 or 6 is considered sufficient for the examinee to be certified to teach undergraduates as a teaching assistant. If an examinee receives a score of 3 or 4, they must enroll in a course in oral English for teaching assistants. Scores of 2 or 6 are relatively rare. Twos are generally given only when the examinee is clearly overwhelmed by the demands of the task and gives little or no response; no data from examinees from this level are included in the current study. Sixes are given primarily to examinees whose second language proficiency approaches native or near-native competence.

Participants

[4] The particular questions used in the different tasks from the OPT were not identical; rather, they came from several different forms of the test that are given regularly. The comparable difficulty of the different questions used has been established by Yang (2009).

Data from 47 subjects at different proficiency levels were analyzed. The examinees had all taken the test as part of being certified to teach at the university; that is, they were not tested for the purposes of the current study. The non-native speaker examinees were all graduate students and prospective teaching assistants at an American university. There were ten subjects from Level 3, ten from Level 4, ten from Level 5, seven from Level 6, and ten native speakers. All of the non-native speaker examinees came from either a Chinese or Korean language background. Level 6 has only seven examinees because that number was the total available in the testing records. An additional limitation was that there were only six responses on the personal item for the native speaker group; the earlier version of the exam lacked this question.

The data for each level was evenly split between examinees with a Chinese or Korean L1 background; that is, there were five examinees with L1 Chinese and five examinees with L1 Korean in each group of ten. The group of seven examinees at Level 6 was made up of three native Chinese speakers and four native Korean speakers. This mixture of L1 backgrounds was chosen in order to balance the data against transfer effects from any particular first language background.

Data Preparation and Coding

The oral exam responses were transcribed by the author. The responses were then coded for pragmatic markers by the author and a colleague, who is also a native speaker of English. The identification of discourse markers was guided by the definition and lists from Carter & McCarthy (2006) discussed above. Interrater reliability was .94. In the case of a discrepancy in the identification of the pragmatic markers, the two coders discussed the example in question and came to an agreement.

The two coders analyzed the transcripts word-by-word for pragmatic markers. This methodology allowed for the identification of pragmatic marker vs. non-pragmatic marker use of particular words, such as *well* as an adverb versus *well* as a pragmatic marker. A further advantage of this methodology was that it was possible to allow for some variation in the list of expressions.[5]

In general, the coders followed the list of pragmatic markers found in Carter and McCarthy (2006). However, they did also count other expressions that were not included in the lists but which had a similar function. For example, Carter and McCarthy (2006) list *to sum up* and *in the end* as pragmatic markers, but they do not include *in sum* or *all in all*. Since the coders were reading through all of the data rather than electronically searching for expressions, it was possible to identify such variations in wording. Pragmatic marker appears to be a highly idiosyncratic phenomenon in some cases, and this research methodology takes such individual variation into account.

[5] It should be noted that although Carter and McCarthy (2006) provide a full list of expressions that they classed as pragmatic markers, the current study does not. Carter and McCarthy's purpose in providing a list was to make it more clear what kind of expressions they were describing with the designation *pragmatic markers*. The current study involved word-by-word identification of pragmatic markers, but does not provide a full list since the identification of pragmatic markers is generally highly context-dependent. It could be argued that this methodology introduces too much variability into this study; however, this objection is mitigated by the high rate of interrater reliability.

After the pragmatic markers were identified and counted, the total number of words used by each examinee was calculated. Non-lexical filled pauses such as *um, ah*, or *uh* were removed from the transcripts and not included in the total word count.

The total number of words and the number of pragmatic markers used by each subject on each task were then entered into spreadsheets. The number of pragmatic markers was divided by the total number of words to calculate the percentage of pragmatic markers that were used by each subject. The resulting percentages were then averaged to give the average percentage of pragmatic marker use for all of the responses at each level and for each task.

RESULTS

Results are presented in this section in the order of the four research questions posed at the beginning of the study. For each question, the data are followed by any relevant statistical analysis and a brief summary of the results. Interpretations of these findings are presented in subsequent parts of the discussion section.

Recall that the first research question asked how native speakers and non-native speakers compare in their use of pragmatic markers. In order to determine the rate of use for these two general groups, the number of pragmatic markers was divided by the total number of words used by each speaker; these rates were then averaged for Levels 3-6 and compared to the rate used by native speakers. The results are provided in Figure 1.

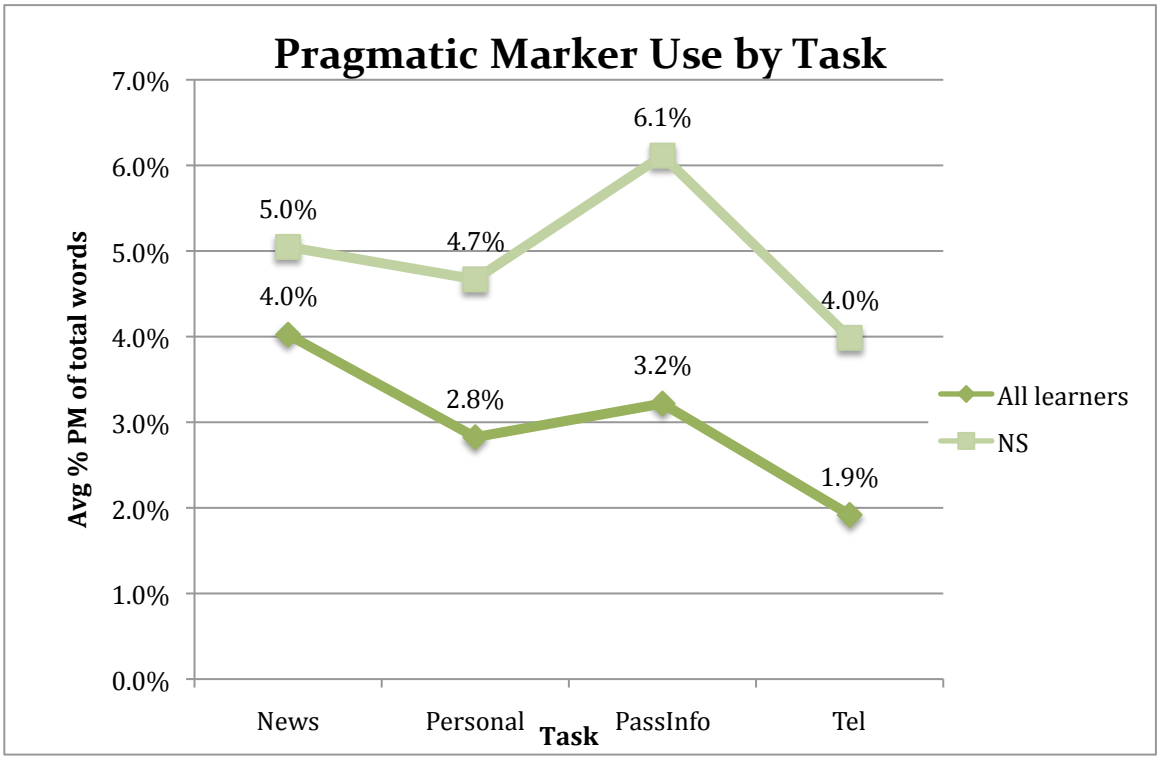


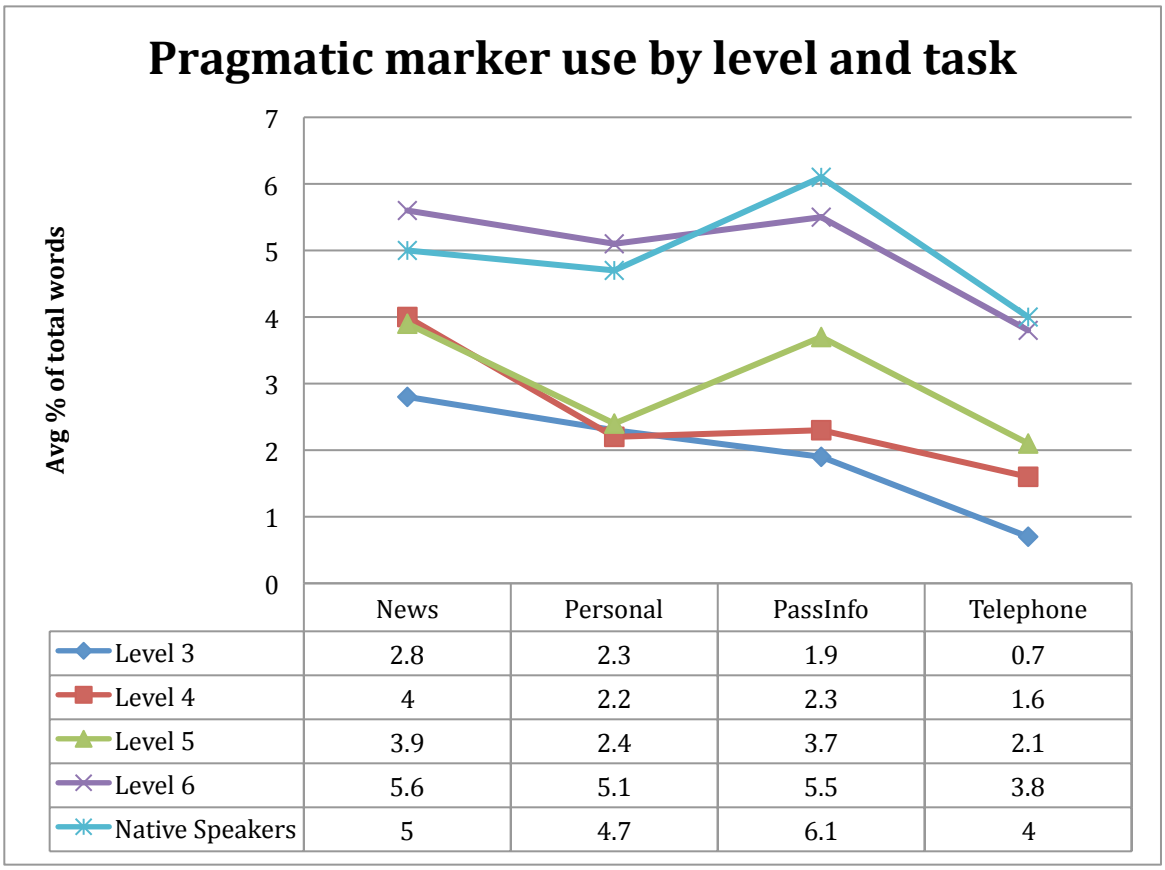
Figure 1: Pragmatic marker use by task

The average rate of pragmatic marker use for the native speakers was between 4.0% and 6.1%, depending on the task. The average rate of pragmatic marker use for non-native

speakers ranged from 1.9% to 4.0%. On each of the tasks, the rate of use for non-native speakers was lower than that for native speakers.

The results of an ANOVA showed that task was a significant factor for pragmatic marker use ($F(3,123) = 10.44$, $p < .0001$). The results of Tukey-Kramer pairwise comparisons indicated that the Telephone task was significantly different from the News and Passing Information tasks at the .05 level, with effect sizes of .81 and .60, respectively.

Research question two concerned the comparison of pragmatic marker use by learners at different proficiency levels. Figure 2, below, shows the percentage of pragmatic markers used at all five proficiency levels and on four different tasks.



	News	Personal	PassInfo	Telephone
Level 3	2.8	2.3	1.9	0.7
Level 4	4	2.2	2.3	1.6
Level 5	3.9	2.4	3.7	2.1
Level 6	5.6	5.1	5.5	3.8
Native Speakers	5	4.7	6.1	4

Figure 2: Pragmatic marker use by proficiency level and task

Results indicate that Levels 3-5 had a lower rate of use than Level 6 and the native speakers on all tasks. For some tasks, such as the Telephone and Passing Information tasks, the rate of use went up with each proficiency level. The pattern is not as straightforward for the News and Personal tasks, since the rates for the three lowest proficiency groups clustered together. Moreover, the rate on these two tasks was also slightly higher for Level 6 learners than it is for native speakers. However, the general pattern indicates that lower proficiency groups (Level 3-5) used pragmatic markers at a lower rate than Level 6 and native speakers on most tasks.

As reported above, the results of an ANOVA indicate that task was a significant factor for pragmatic marker use. The interaction of proficiency level and task, however, was not significant.

The third research question inquired whether the degree of structure in a task would affect pragmatic marker use by learners. Recall that the News task was the least structured of the four tasks, followed by Personal and Passing Information tasks, with the Telephone task as the most structured of all four. As seen in Figure 1 above, when the learners are grouped together, we see that learners used the most pragmatic markers on the News task (4.0%) and the fewest on the Telephone task (1.9%). The Passing Information task showed a high rate of pragmatic marker use (3.2%) while the Personal task showed a rate (2.8%) that was lower than the News task and higher than the Telephone task. As indicated by Figure 2, however, when learners were divided into separate proficiency levels, we see that Level 6 learners exhibit patterns of use that more resemble those of the native speakers than those of learners at lower proficiency levels. Thus the results do not show a consistent relationship between proficiency level and task structure.

Lastly, research question four asked whether native speakers would be affected by the degree of structure in a task. As Figure 2 above indicates, the native speakers used pragmatic markers at the second highest rate of 5% on the News task, which was classified as the least structured task. In contrast, they used pragmatic markers at the lowest rate on the Telephone task, which was classified as the most structured task. And the Personal task, which was classified as having less structure than the Telephone task but more than the News task, showed a pragmatic marker rate in between these two extremes. But where the prediction did not hold was on the Passing Information task. For the native speaker group, this task showed a rate of 6.1%, which is higher than the rate for all other tasks. The results therefore show that pragmatic use by native speakers does not show a consistent relationship with task structure.

DISCUSSION

Pragmatic Marker Rates for Native and Non-native Speakers

According to the results presented above, the data indicate that non-native speakers (taken as a group) use pragmatic markers at lower rates in comparison to native speakers. When the non-native speakers are subdivided by proficiency level, pragmatic marker use rises with proficiency level. That is, each proficiency level uses pragmatic markers at a higher rate than the groups below it. The highest proficiency group, Level 6, uses pragmatic markers at similar rates to the native speaker group. These data further support the findings of previous research by Romero Trillo (2002) and Hasselgreen (2004).

The Effect of Task Structure

The expected positive relationship between pragmatic marker use and task structure was not found. It was expected that pragmatic marker use would increase on more structured tasks, following the previously observed positive relationship between fluency and task structure (Foster & Skehan, 1999).

The results for native speakers and for learners in general did not support any consistent relationship between task structure and pragmatic marker use, with the highest rates on one structured and one unstructured task. This would seem to indicate that task structure is not a significant factor in pragmatic marker use. However, the results for pragmatic marker use and task structure differed by proficiency level. While the higher proficiency groups (Levels 5 and 6), like the native speaker group, did not show any consistent relationship to task structure, the two lower proficiency groups (Levels 3 and 4) did seem to be affected by task structure, although not in the way expected. The Level 3 and 4 groups used fewer pragmatic markers on the more structured tasks, rather than more.

In the review of the literature on pragmatic markers and task, three possible relationships between pragmatic marker use and task structure were described. The results do not support the first possibility that pragmatic marker use would increase on the most structured tasks. This possibility was based on a proposed relationship between pragmatic marker use and fluency, and therefore seems to indicate that pragmatic markers do not correlate straightforwardly with fluency. On the contrary, at some of the levels examined, fewer pragmatic markers were used on more structured tasks. The second possibility was that pragmatic marker use would show some relationship to task structure, but that this relationship would be weak because pragmatic markers would have some additional discourse function. This is also not supported by the findings here, since none of the levels showed a consistent relationship to task structure.

The results offer the most support for the third possibility, that pragmatic marker use has some other primary function in oral discourse. Pragmatic marker use may function primarily to show connections between utterances in order to facilitate the listener's understanding and to indicate the speaker's attitude towards the message. In this case, pragmatic marker use would be more sensitive to other aspects of task content rather than task structure. This possibility is discussed further below.

Different Proficiency Levels and the Development of Pragmatic Marker Use

The unexpected results on task structure and pragmatic marker use highlight the importance of examining multiple proficiency levels. As Skehan (2003) points out, most research on task type has been done using learners at the intermediate level. And it was this group of learners in the current study who showed the most straightforward relationship between task structure and pragmatic marker use. If this study had only included the learners at Levels 3 and 4, the results would have been substantially different.

As noted above, when the learners are separated into different proficiency levels, it becomes apparent that the pattern of pragmatic marker use is not the same for every group as it is for all of the groups together. Only Levels 5 and 6 show the same pattern as the learner group in general (compare Figures 1 and 2 above).

Speakers at all proficiency levels used the fewest pragmatic markers on the Telephone task. But they were not so united when we consider which task produced the highest rates of pragmatic marker use. The native speakers used the most pragmatic markers on the Passing Information Task. For Level 6, the Passing Information task and the News were the two highest. For the lowest two proficiency levels, 3 and 4, the News item produced noticeably more pragmatic markers.

The use of multiple proficiency levels also reveals something about the comparison between learners and native speakers. The two higher proficiency levels, 5 and 6, patterned similarly to the native speakers and different from the lower proficiency groups on the different tasks. This suggests that it is not a simple distinction between native and non-native speakers that it is decisive when conducting this type of research, but rather the proficiency level of the speakers. The findings here demonstrate that the category of 'learners' is not monolithic and that learners at different proficiency levels might behave in very different ways. This variable has also been overlooked in much second language acquisition research, which often focuses on intermediate-level learners.

These results also suggest that there is some kind of threshold in the use of pragmatic markers where the behavior of learners begins to resemble that of native speakers more strongly. The highest proficiency group, Level 6, is almost indistinguishable from the native speakers. The use of pragmatic markers here is intriguing because of what appears to be a dramatic change in their frequency between proficiency levels 5 and 6. The use of pragmatic markers by learners at Level 6 is markedly more similar to that of native speakers than that of Level 5.In their use of pragmatic markers, learners at Level 6 are markedly more like native speakers than like other learners.

One way of conceptualizing this change can be found in complex systems theory. Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) describe the way that complex systems change in terms of a horse moving from a walk to a trot, canter, and then gallop. They note that these "different ways of moving are not just faster versions of walking, but are distinctly different from one another, with a change in how the pairs of back and front legs move relative to each shift in gait" (p. 45) Similarly, the different ways in which learners and native speakers have been shown to interact with tasks in this study could suggest that language learners experience such a change in state as they become more proficient. High proficiency learners would not just have more knowledge and be able to process it faster than lower proficiency learners; their interlanguage systems would also differ qualitatively, like a horse changing from a walk to a gallop.

A Comparison of Two Speakers: Other Possible Factors Affecting Pragmatic Marker Use

If task structure is not a determining factor in pragmatic marker use, what could this factor be? Some indications may be found by examining the Passing Information task. This task, in which the examinees had to relay some information that they thought would be relevant to their interlocutor, elicited the greatest differences in the results; it ranked third in pragmatic marker use for the lower level groups but first for the Level 6 and native speaker groups.

The different patterns between the levels are important because they appear so neatly between the lower and upper proficiency groups and because of the fact that the higher proficiency groups pattern so closely to the native speakers. This fact seems to indicate that instead of a random occurrence or an artifact of splitting the learners into groups, there is a real difference in how lower- and higher-proficiency learners use pragmatic markers and approach these pragmatic tasks. There is something in the nature of the Passing Information task that demanded greater pragmatic marker use from the higher proficiency groups which the low proficiency groups were either not sensitive to or were unable to perform due to their more limited proficiency.

One possibility is that this task made people feel that they had to justify why they were passing on the information in question, explaining why they deemed it relevant to the listener. If they were engaged in this type of justification and explanation, then this task type might be similar to that of an apology. Previous research has shown that speakers use a more sophisticated variety of pragmatic markers on apologies (Wei, 2011). It might be that the more advanced learners and native speakers have access to the types of pragmatic markers they needed for an act of justification, but that lower-level learners do not. The higher-level learners would therefore use more pragmatic markers on this type of task.

A closer look at two individual responses to the Pass Info task seem to support the possibility that more proficient speakers used pragmatic markers to justify why they were communicating the information on this task. A comparison of how two speakers, one at Level 6 and one at Level 3, introduced the information in this task is shown in Table 2. The entire response to the prompt for this task can be found in Appendix B. Please note that not all of the phrases used were counted as pragmatic markers for the purposes of this study; only the italicized words were counted as pragmatic markers.

Table 2. Wording used by two examinees on the Passing Information task

	Information relayed	**Wording used by Level 6 examinee to introduce or nuance information**	**Wording used by Level 3 examinee to introduce or nuance the information**
1.	I received a notice from the Graduate Student Association in my mailbox.	*Hey*	---
2.	There's a picnic for the English department.	It's about	---
3.	It's on Sunday from noon to 4pm.	---	---
4.	The deadline to register is Friday.	*So*	---
5.	It is held to welcome students and meet faculty members.	They say	and
6.	You can sign up to volunteer to help with the picnic.	*Actually, like, like*	and
7.	You have to pay 3 dollars.	The thing is	and
8.	You have to bring a dish to share.	They say	and

As can be seen in the table above, the Level 6 examinee uses pragmatic markers when communicating the information in the prompt, while the Level 3 examinee does not. The Level 6 examinee particularly uses additional wording at the beginning of the passage when introducing the topic of the picnic and towards the end when enumerating the requirements for participating. Since these requirements might serve to discourage someone from coming to the picnic, the Level 6 speaker uses several pragmatic markers or other expressions to introduce this information. This would tend to support the idea that the speaker feels some pressure to justify passing on this information. The Level 3 examinee does not use any additional wording in the introductory part of the topic and uses only the conjunction *and* to convey the requirements for the picnic. This use of *and* at the same points where the Level 6

speaker does some hedging suggests that perhaps the Level 3 speaker also feels some communicative need to soften the effect of the requirements or to acknowledge that they might prevent a person from wanting to participate. However, the Level 3 speaker lacks the pragmatic tools to accomplish this skillfully and must rely only on the most basic connector, *and*. Using only these data, however, these conclusions remain purely speculative. Nevertheless, the comparison of these two speakers indicates that that the frequency of pragmatic marker use by learners is a complex phenomenon that is dependent to varying degrees on the type of task that is being performed and on the proficiency level of the speaker.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The results of this study indicate that pragmatic marker use by non-native speakers is lower than that of native speakers. On all four tasks in this study, (News, Personal, Passing Information and Telephone), native speakers used more pragmatic markers than non-native speakers.

The frequency of pragmatic marker use is affected by the proficiency level of the speakers and the type of task they are asked to perform. Task type was determined to be a significant variable for rates of pragmatic marker use. Learners at all levels used pragmatic markers at the highest rates on the News task, while the Telephone task showed the lowest rate. For native speakers the Passing Information task showed the highest rate of use. It should be noted, however, that the Level 5 and 6 groups had high rates of pragmatic marker use on both the News and Passing Information tasks; these two groups had a similar pattern to the native speaker group. This was not the case for the two lower proficiency groups.

It was determined that the inherent structure of a task did not relate to the overall frequency of pragmatic markers in the way that was originally postulated. Both the learner and native speaker groups used the fewest pragmatic markers on the most structured task (Telephone). Learners used pragmatic markers at the highest rates on the least structured task (News), while native speakers used the most pragmatic markers on another unstructured task (Pass Info).

Pedagogical Implications

The results reveal the importance for teachers to consider not only the differences between native and non-native speakers in pragmatic marker use, but also the importance that proficiency level has in shaping pragmatic marker use during the development of interlanguage pragmatics. It is possible that there is a lack of emphasis on pragmatic markers in classroom teaching and textbook materials, but this conclusion would require further investigation. The results here imply that pragmatic markers could be emphasized more at lower levels of proficiency than they currently are. This is speculative, however, as pragmatic marker use might also be primarily affected by the different fluency levels of the participants. In either case, further research is needed on the relationship between pragmatic marker use, fluency, and proficiency level. Such research might reveal that more explicit instruction at lower levels of proficiency would have a significant effect on learner awareness of pragmatic

markers in early stages of development through the use of appropriate classroom materials. In particular, a longitudinal study on the impact of these materials could prove beneficial to determining what particular pragmatic markers are more and less frequently, and why.

Limitations

This study has several important limitations. The data in this study come from a semi-direct test of oral proficiency. The tasks are therefore monologic and the data were gathered in a testing environment. As has been shown by previous research, these conditions can have non-trivial effects on features of the language produced. Shohamy (1994) and O'Loughlin (2001) have found that some discourse features vary when learners perform monologic versus dialogic tasks. Iwashita, MacNamara, and Elder (2001) attributed differences in their results to the testing context of their data.

Although this study subdivided learners into proficiency levels on the basis of an established language test, which should aid in its reliability and generalizability, not much further information about the examinees was available aside from their L1 background. Especially given the differences in pragmatic marker use at different levels, it would be helpful to know more about the participants, especially the extent of their contact with native speakers and study abroad experience, which might affect their acquisition of pragmatic markers.

A final limitation relates to the changes in pragmatic marker use that were observed at different levels. This study makes use of cross-sectional data to compare different proficiency levels. This type of data tells us more about the general trends among speakers at a particular level, but not about how the acquisition of pragmatic markers develops among individual speakers. It would be instructive to obtain longitudinal data and perhaps adopt a more qualitative approach to look at how pragmatic marker use varies by task type in the speech of an individual learner. It would also be informative to find out what the learner's awareness of the use of pragmatic markers is and how they understood the task they were asked to complete. This information could be obtained through the use of an interview or diary.

Suggestions for Future Research

The results of this study did not find the expected increase in pragmatic marker use on more structured tasks. On the contrary, the opposite was the case for some proficiency groups. This outcome suggests that the relationship between pragmatic marker use and fluency is not a simple one, and that the use of pragmatic markers does not aid in fluency in the way initially proposed in this study. How or if pragmatic markers do assist fluent speech is an area for further investigation, which could compare pragmatic marker use with temporal markers of fluency.

This study did not find a direct relationship between task structure and pragmatic marker use, but it did find that task was a significant factor in rates of pragmatic marker use. This means that task type is an important variable for pragmatic marker use, but that the degree of structure in the task is not. The results for the telephone task in this study were significantly different from the results of the other tasks. Future research should therefore consider what variables make this task different from the others in this study. The

substantially different rates of pragmatic marker use between the lower and higher proficiency groups on the Passing Information task also suggest a possible area for future study.

As mentioned above, the context in which the data in this study were gathered may affect the results. Future research could examine pragmatic marker use comparing classroom data with testing data, dialogic tasks with monologic tasks, and longitudinal with cross-sectional data.

This study contributes to the still growing body of research on the effects of task type variation on learner production. This type of research as a whole makes an important contribution to second language acquisition research in general in that it shows that the type of task learners perform has non-trivial effects on aspects of the language they produce. Studies that are not particularly concerned with task type should nevertheless note the types of tasks from which their data are drawn and should also note that task type may limit the generalizability of their results beyond such more commonly discussed issues as age or foreign/second language environment.

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APPENDIX A: Descriptors for Levels of Oral Proficiency Test

Level 6	
Content	**Delivery**
Wide range of vocabulary Complexity of sentence structure Interpretative/summary statements Some non-native usage Meaning clearly expressed Provision of a frame Economy of expression	Smooth delivery Almost no pauses/ hesitations/ choppiness Thought expressed in one utterance No problems with articulation Use of varied intonation and tone

Level 5	
Content	**Delivery**
Somewhat unconventional words Listener effort needed at times Simple sentence construction Well organized and coherent Meaning clear	Clearly non-native like delivery Some pauses and choppiness, but comprehension unobstructed Some sound substitutions Listener effort required at points

Level 4	
Content	**Delivery**
Dependence on the prompt Ineffective/ abrupt transitions Omission of function words Systematic problems with bound morphology Topic shifts Lack of coherence Weak organization Repetition interferes with coherence Intended meaning unclear Lack of elaboration	Ineffective repetition of words/ phrases Pauses/ hesitations are more frequent Flat intonation Many identifiable articulation/ pronunciation/ stress problems Pace interferes with comprehension Close listener attention required

Level 3	
Content	**Delivery**
Misuse of particular words Problems with bound morphology Frequent attempts to re-start/ re-phrase without clarification Unintended meaning Misunderstands prompt	Deliberate/ ineffective delivery Frequent pauses/ hesitations within phrasal boundaries Ineffective attempts of interpretative statements limitation of vocabulary

APPENDIX B: Two responses from the Passing Information Task

Level 3 Examinee Passing Information

Hi. I have just received the uh notice from the Graduate Student Association. That you may be interested in. It is a English department welcome picnic, which is to be held this Sunday from noon to 4pm ina Squirrel Park…An this is held to welcome students and faculty to have some fun. If you would like to come, you have to sign up by next Friday. The English department office to volunteer for setting up before the picnic. An cleaning up after the picnic or helping with the carpooling. And you also have to pay in advance. It i-is, 3 dollars for individuals or 7 dollars for families. And, you should also bring a potluck dish tha serve at least four people. If you want to bring any salad, side dish, or snack, or dessert, you will also have to sign up with Becky in the main office. Remember, the deadline is, next Friday in the English department. Office. Bye.

Level 6 Examinee Passing Information

Ah, hey umm, I just got this, ah I just, ah happened to ah get this notice from ah ah ah graduate student association 'nmy mailbox. And this is about ah some picnic in our department, ah this is on ah Sunday at 4pm at Squirrel Park. Ah, they say it's ah gr--, it's gonna be a great opportunity to ah welcome new, new graduate students and ah ah also ah meet new, all these faculty members. I ah, so it says next Friday is the deadline to ah register. Ah, you can register at English department office. Ahm i--, you can actually ah help them ah have this picnic, ah in ah many different ways, like, you can like come earlier and set up this ah picnic, or you can also help the—help them by ah cleaning up, ah after the picnic, or ah if you have a car, you can ah do carpooling. The thing is, ah that there is a small fee which is ah 3 dollars for individuals and 7 dollars for the ah family. But I think it is not much considering that all these ah ah money fees are used to cover the cost of the the entire picnic, ah if you're gonna come, ah they say it's encouraged to bring a potluck dish for ah 4 people. Ah, I-I think it's a y--great opportunity to, to meet new people and ah ah have fun, ah, the weather's, weather's really good, so ah I hope that you, you can come. Ah, I-I-I'm thinking about goin' there, so if you're gonna ah, if you're thinking about going, ah give me a call, and let's ah get together and and and register together. Okay.