

Digitising a Card Game for Teaching Pragmatic Markers

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Abstract: Most language learning applications focus on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of a language. However, learning the pragmatics enables learners to interpret contextual meanings of specific words uttered by native speakers during conversations. An educational card game called *Mind You!* was developed for non-native English-speaking international students in Australia to help them learn English pragmatic markers. The card game was designed to encourage social constructivism and situated learning, where learners construct their own sentences based on their combined interpretations of pragmatic markers, images and scenarios displayed on cards to answer hypothetical questions. A mobile application of the card game is being developed as a supplementary resource when face-to-face or in-person learning is neither possible nor practical. Learners can listen to audios of pragmatic markers in sentences and type or record their own sentences based on their interpretations of the cards and share them online with other learners. This provides a platform for distance collaborative learning between other language learners where they share sentences based on different interpretations of different card combinations. The objective of the mobile application is to train learners in using pragmatic markers for English conversations outside the game. This work-in-progress manuscript outlines how the card game can be digitised into a mobile application.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Card Game, Mobile Application, Language Learning, Constructivism, Situated Learning

1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence is the ability to understand the meaning of an utterance within certain contexts where its meanings can change based on the culture, tendencies, and behaviours of native speakers (Ishihara & Cohen, 2021). A non-digital card game called *Mind You!* by Marquez et al (2019) was developed based on situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and social constructivism (Piaget & Cook, 1952), where learners form sentences with pragmatic markers based on their interpretations of scenarios. Examples of pragmatic markers include *well*, *right*, *actually*, and *mind you*.

A previous study explored how international nursing students played *Mind You!* to practise using pragmatic markers in conversations before their mandatory medical placements (Marquez & Penman, 2021; Marquez & Penman, 2023). They reported gaining awareness of the functions of pragmatic markers in improving their linguistic and interpersonal skills and building rapport with peers.

This work-in-progress manuscript outlines how the card game can be digitised into a mobile application, which can act as a supplementary resource when face-to-face learning is not possible. Collaborative mobile learning of pragmatic markers can be facilitated when learners listen to audios of pragmatic markers, type, record, and share their sentences online with others for feedback. Learners can then implement their new knowledge from the mobile application into English language conversations outside the game.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What are Pragmatic Markers?

Pragmatic markers, or *discourse markers*, is a study in pragmatics related to specific words or phrases uttered by speakers to direct listeners to the 'features of the context' within a conversation (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenberg, 2011). Brinton (2017) listed the most common characteristics of pragmatic markers. Most pragmatics markers such as *right*, *well*, and *so* have either one or two syllables while others have more than two syllables including *actually*, *anyway*, or *admittedly*. Many pragmatic markers are adverbs, conjunctions, or interjections, but their only function is to emphasise the meaning of the speaker without modifying the grammar. Pragmatic markers are used to evaluate, judge, share information, and confirm shared knowledge or understanding.

Eslami and Mirzaei (2012) acknowledged that appropriate use of pragmatics is based on tendencies by native speakers. Mahfoodh (2024) emphasised that language learners can achieve pragmatic competence akin to native speakers of the language if they gain enough exposure to the different uses of the language in different situations.

2.2 Mobile Learning

The advantages of non-digital games like cards include facilitating social interaction when players sit physically close to each other, allowing the players to personalise and rearrange their cards. The rules of card games can be modified to suit different situations and players (Rauch, 2017). However, non-digital games may not be ideal for learning when face-to-face learning is not feasible. Learning on mobile devices has demonstrated many advantages as listed by Rizoqulovna (2023).

2.2.1 Interactive and Immersive Practise

Mobile games can allow learners to interact and participate in activities and simulations where audio, visual or audiovisual elements, such as videos, photos, music, and animations make the learning more engaging (Rizoqulovna, Nosirova Dilnoza, 2023). The ability to provide audiovisual aesthetics allows digital applications to provide lifelike scenarios for language learners to immerse themselves in and to practise the target language (Rizoqulovna, Nosirova Dilnoza, 2023).

2.2.2 Accessibility and Flexibility

Mobile learning is cost-effective, portable, convenient, and accessible to a wide range of learners (Garzón, Lampropoulos, & Burgos, 2023). Learners can study at their own pace and have access to learning materials from anywhere at any time (Rizoqulovna, Nosirova Dilnoza, 2023).

2.2.3 Personalised Learning and Immediate Feedback

Learners can learn autonomously at their own pace and develop their own learning strategy to meet their own needs and receive immediate feedback (Kazu & Kuvvetli, 2023). The portability and personalisation of mobile devices can allow learners to practice their skills anywhere at any time and gain instant feedback so they can learn from mistakes, gain self-awareness, identify areas for improvement, set goals and monitor improvements and performances (Garzón, Lampropoulos, & Burgos, 2023).

2.2.1 Community and Collaboration

Mobile devices provide easy access to online communities for learners to practice their language skills with other learners, where they can receive support, learn more about the target language and culture, and feel a sense of belonging (Rizoqulovna, Nosirova Dilnoza, 2023; Garzón, Lampropoulos, & Burgos, 2023). Kukulka-Hulme & Viberg (2018) described how mobile technology can support collaborative language learning by encouraging social constructivism (Piaget & Cook, 1952).

A mobile application would be beneficial for learning pragmatic markers. It can be a platform for language learners to learn collaboratively online by sharing with each other their knowledge on pragmatic markers. They also can practise speaking and/or writing pragmatic markers autonomously outside the language classroom.

3. Proposed Design Process

3.1 About the Game

The card game of Mind You! contains three categories:

3.1.1 Pragmatic Markers Cards



Figure 1: Sample pragmatic marker cards.

Each *pragmatic marker* card (Figure 1) displays one pragmatic marker, which were based on a list of common English pragmatic markers (1996, p. 32). Upon receiving the cards, students immediately identify the individual marker in its full spelling. To demonstrate the different functions of pragmatics by native speakers (Mahfoodh, 2024), each card includes two example sentences with the pragmatic marker for learners to use as guidance when they construct sentences.

3.1.2 Topic Cards

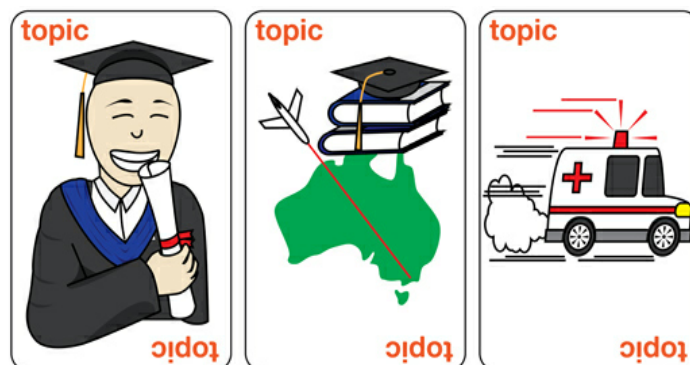


Figure 2: Sample topic cards.

The *topic* cards (Figure 2) portray scenarios using imagery only and no text. The game was originally designed for international students studying in Australia. Learners construct sentences based on their own interpretation of scenarios related to Australian culture, cuisine, sports, and fauna. The card deck also contains situations based on fantasy to make the learning engaging.

3.1.3 Situation Cards

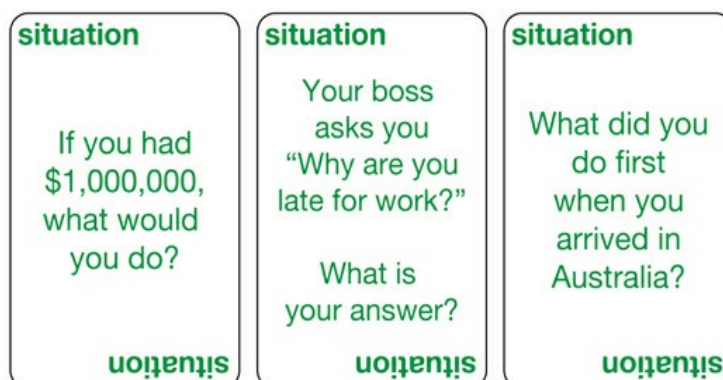


Figure 3: Sample situation cards.

The *situation* card deck (Figure 3) contains hypothetical situations based on both fantasy and life in Australia. At every round of the game, learners must answer the question using their pragmatic marker and topic cards.

3.1.4 Rules

1. Each player is dealt two pragmatic marker cards and two topic cards.
2. At each round, one situation card is drawn from the deck and a hypothetical question is revealed.
3. All players must answer the question by saying one sentence related to one pragmatic marker card and one topic card.
4. After all players have stated their sentences, they must select and vote for one of the other learners' sentences as their favourite. Players cannot vote for their own sentences.
5. The player whose sentence receives the most votes, will receive a score of one point and then a new round of the game commences. The first player to receive 5 points wins.

3.2 From Non-digital to Digital

For the mobile application Mind You!, this manuscript proposes two game modes: *Competitive Game* and *Solo Learning*.

3.2.1 Competitive Game

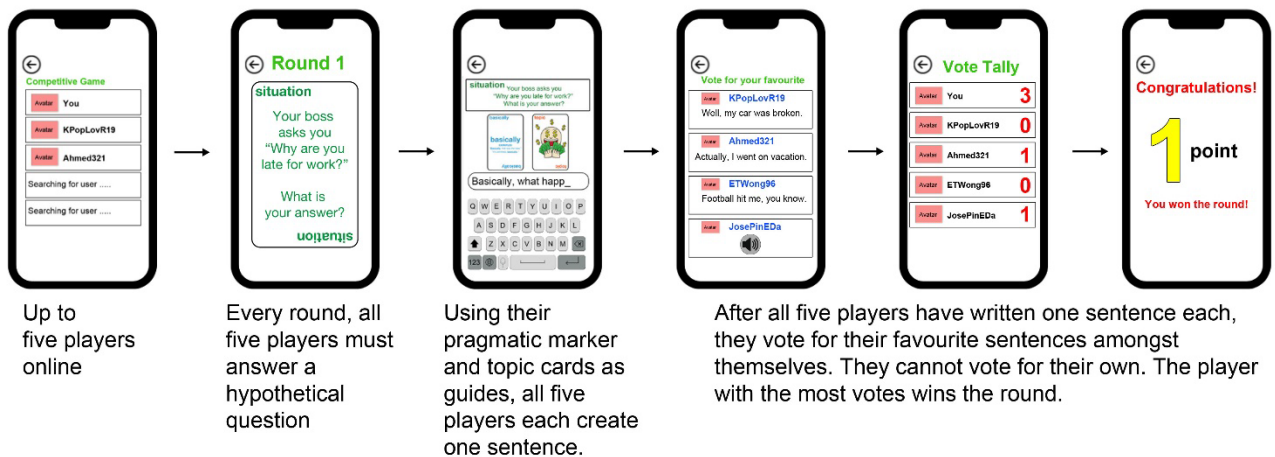


Figure 4: Example gameplay in Competitive Game mode.

Competitive Game closely resembles the game rules of the card game where a maximum of five players can compete against each other online. Figure 4 shows how learners compete online rather than face-to-face by either typing their sentences or recording themselves while stating them.

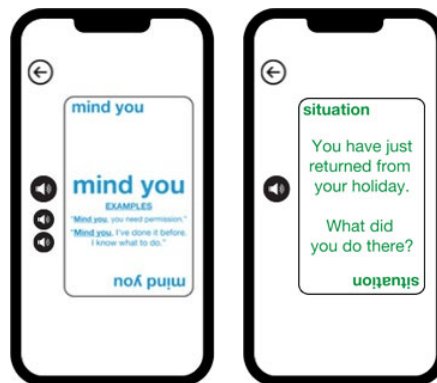


Figure 5: Pragmatic marker cards and situation cards with buttons to play the pronunciations of the pragmatic markers and example sentences.

The application will offer the ability to play audios of pragmatic markers and their example sentences including their pronunciations, tones, and their functions in the example sentences and then repeating them (Figure 5). The situation cards will also allow learners to listen to audio recordings of the hypothetical questions.

3.2.2 Solo Learning



Figure 6: Learners can type or record their sentences before uploading online.

Solo Learning is a game mode where learners practise forming sentences with pragmatic markers using different card combinations autonomously without the pressure of competition. Learners can formulate sentences using one pragmatic marker card, one topic card and a situation card and submit them online (Figure 6).

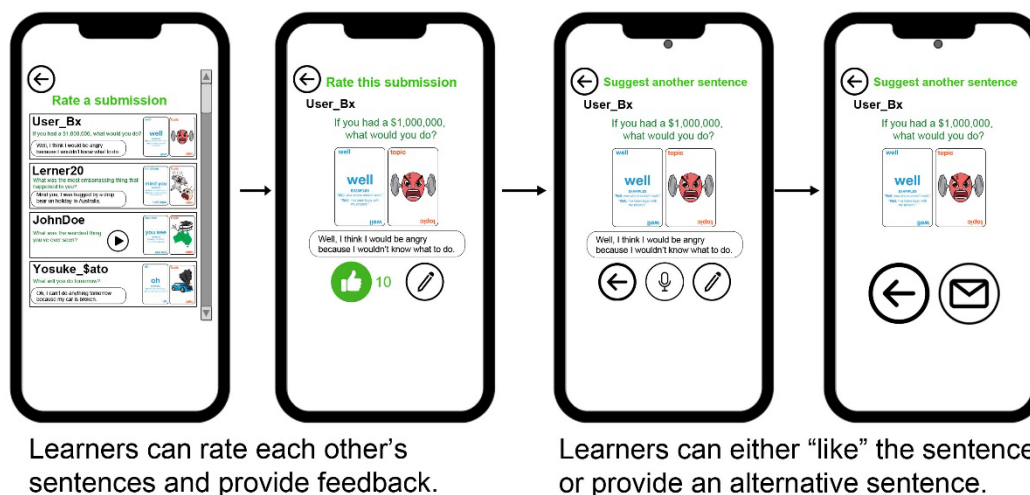


Figure 7: Example of collaborative learning in the application.

Solo Learning will also offer online collaborative learning where learners can provide feedback on each other's sentences (Figure 7). Learners can upload their own sentences and give feedback on other learners' sentences by providing comments or by typing or recording alternative sentences. Not only can grammar and vocabulary be learnt from other learners, but also the different ways pragmatic markers can be used in sentences. When learners record themselves saying their sentences, others can also practise listening to the pronunciations.

4. Future Studies

A non-digital educational card game is effective in encouraging face-to-face interaction among language learners and with native speakers. However, a mobile application of Mind You! can be more accessible by allowing online learning with other learners anywhere and at any time when face-to-face interaction is not possible or practical.

The next step is to develop the Solo Learning mode first before the Competitive Game by using an iterative design process to formulate the base game mechanics for the application. To encourage ongoing use of the application, a reward system including experience points and leader boards will be conceptualised. It is also possible for uploaded sentences to be unanswered or for learners to learn incorrect ways of using pragmatic markers. To reiterate, appropriate use of pragmatics is based on tendencies of native speakers. However, various methods will be further explored to address these situations.

A future study will involve playtesting a fully functioning prototype with current English language learners. The participants will also be interviewed or surveyed on their experience with the developed digital game. They will also be assessed to gauge improvement in their language skills and awareness of the functions of pragmatic markers in communication. The evaluation from these future studies will also be used to further improve the mobile application.

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