

# **Comparison of Agreement and Disagreement Expressions between Malaysian and *New Headway* Course Books**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Agreement and disagreement are common speech acts that many ESL/EFL learners have to perform when conversing or discussing their views with others. Studies have shown that language learners, especially non-native speakers find it difficult to carry out these speech acts and may therefore employ them inappropriately. Since course books are important tools to aid the acquisition of these speech acts, there is a need to investigate how agreement and disagreement speech acts are presented in ESL course books. This paper will, therefore, present a study that was conducted to determine to what extent the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books aid students in developing the pragmatics of agreement and disagreement by analysing how they are presented in these course books. Dialogues from reading texts and listening transcripts of the course books were analyzed and discussed. The findings revealed that there were some differences in how the agreement and disagreement types were presented in both Malaysian and *New Headway* course books.

**KEYWORDS:** English course books, agreement, disagreement, pragmatics, speech acts

## Introduction

Course books or textbooks play a crucial role in English language teaching and learning as they are sources of information and references for language learners and teachers in the classroom. In recent years, there have been substantial studies on course book evaluation, particularly focusing on pragmatic competence, and how speech acts are presented in course books (Pearson, 1983; Seto, 2009). The reason for this rising attention may be due to the emphasis put forward in the communicative language teaching method (Savignon, 2007), and the importance of pragmatic competence which explores the ability of language users to match utterances with contexts in which they are appropriate (Levinson, 1983). Many second language learners often fail to perform speech acts in the target language appropriately because they have insufficient knowledge of pragmatics for a particular speech act (Bouton, 1992). Therefore, the role of the course books in portraying relevant speech situations and speech acts for learners is very important. Malaysian English course books have also been widely scrutinized and examined for their presentation of language components. These include the distribution of articles (Mukundan, Leong & Nimehchisalem, 2012), modal verb phrase structures (Khojasteh & Kafipour, 2012), and distribution of high frequency words (Mukundan & Anealka, 2009). However, there is relatively little research on the use of pragmatics and speech acts in Malaysian English course books. In fact, there is none which looks into the use of expressions of agreement and disagreement in Malaysian course books. Agreements and disagreements are very common speech acts. For example, ESL/EFL learners have to perform them when conversing or discussing their views with others. Language learners have been found to employ these speech acts inappropriately, which causes them to appear more direct and blunt, sometimes even rude when disagreeing with others (Kreutel, 2007; Wu, 2006). This suggests that ESL learners have yet to grasp the speech acts of agreement and disagreement, and may lack the appropriate skills to perform these speech acts. This situation might worsen when they enter into higher education and their workplace as it may impede the language learners' social skills when conversing with other people or providing their views. Since course books are important tools to aid the acquisition of these speech acts, there is a need to investigate how agreement and disagreement speech acts are presented in Malaysian English course books in comparison with the *New Headway* course books which are frequently used in language schools internationally.

## Research questions

This study attempts to determine to what extent Malaysian and *New Headway* course books aid students in developing the pragmatics of agreement and disagreement by addressing the following research questions:

1. How do the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books vary in the frequency and range of expressions for agreement and disagreement presented?
2. How do the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books vary in the presentation of expressions for agreement and disagreement across different levels (intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced)?

## Literature review

### *Definition and turn sequence of agreement and disagreement*

Agreement and disagreement speech acts are connected closely with the Politeness Theory proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) which states that most people want their actions to be unimpeded and want their ‘wants to be desirable to at least some others’ (Brown & Levinson 1987, p. 62). This points out that most people want to voice out their opinions, values, and choices in hope that these will be approved by others. It is during these kinds of interactions and opinions exchange that will normally lead to agreements and disagreements between a speaker and listener. According to Wu (2006), agreement is a speech act of explicitly or implicitly expressing similar opinion as an initiator. It is also defined as the willingness to accept the proposal and propositions of others (Eggins & Diana, 1997). Similarly, in Stenstrom’s (1994) study, agreement is seen as an approval to a speaker’s opinions. These definitions suggest that agreement occurs when we accept another person’s view and express our approval of it.

In contrast, disagreement is a speech act of explicitly or implicitly expressing opposition to that of an initiator (Wu, 2006, p. 56). Malamed (2010, p. 200) also expresses a similar definition, and reinstates that disagreement is “a conflicting view offered as a response to an expressed view of a previous speaker” (Malamed, 2010, p. 200). Therefore, it is widely acknowledged that a speaker expresses disagreement when he or she does not come to terms with the opinion or proposition uttered by an addressee. However, it is important to not confuse disagreement with criticism and argument as they are different (Malamed, 2010). Disagreement occurs in more informal settings and is normally used to express personal preferences as opposed to argument which requires some serious commitment (Jacobs & Jackson, 1981). These definitions concerning agreement and disagreement suggest that agreement and disagreement is not an initial move but a reaction or response to a previous proposition or proposal.

However, the most acclaimed literature on agreements and disagreements can be found in Pomerantz’s (1984) study, in which she conducted conversational analyses, looking into agreeing and disagreeing with assessments as a common conversational interaction. According to Pomerantz, the turn sequence for agreement and disagreement normally starts with an assessment. Assessments may be an evaluative comment, a praise, proposal, complaint, compliment, bragging and self-deprecation (Locastro, 1986). An example of assessment taken from Pomerantz’s paper is as follows (Pomerantz, 1984, p. 57):

J: Let’s feel the water. Oh, it... (invitation for assessment)

R: It’s wonderful, it’s just right. It’s like bathtub water. (assessment)

In this example, J is inviting R to test the water and R does so. R then makes an assessment of the water. J will then either resume talking, make a second assessment by agreeing or disagreeing with R or refuse to make an assessment. According to Pomerantz, agreement and disagreement normally occur during or after the second assessment. The following is another example taken from Pomerantz’s (1984, p. 60) study to illustrate this point.

J: It’s a clear lake isn’t it? (first assessment)

R: It’s wonderful. (second assessment)

In this example, J is making an assessment about the condition of the lake. R then gives a second assessment to agree with what J had said. Pomerantz (1984) therefore proposed the following turn sequence which leads to agreement and disagreement:

1. suggestion for assessment (or first assessment)
2. second assessment or declination of making one
3. if a second assessment is made, agreement or disagreement may follow.

In most cases, the preferred social act which follows after assessment is agreement while the dispreferred act will be disagreement (Pomerantz, 1984).

### ***Types of agreement and disagreement***

Based on Pomerantz's (1984) study, the categories for agreement expressions are "upgraded" (strong agreement), "same level" or "downgraded" (weak agreement). In an "upgraded" agreement, either a stronger evaluative term than the prior term is used or an intensifier may be added to modify the prior evaluative term (Pomerantz, 1984, p. 65). In a "same level" agreement, the same or similar evaluative term used previously may be repeated, often including the word "too" (ibid., p. 67). As for "downgraded" agreement, a weaker evaluative term than the previous is used and can be followed by a disagreement.

Disagreements can be divided to disagreement without mitigation or with mitigation, which are accompanied by different mitigation strategies. Disagreement without mitigation happens when a speaker perform the speech act baldly without using any strategies or redressive action. However, a speaker generally tries to minimise the risks of the loss of face by using mitigation strategies so as to reassure the hearer that "no such face threat is intended or desired" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 69-70). One of the most commonly used mitigation strategies is "partial agreement" or 'token agreement'. "Partial agreement" is an act in which one appears to agree in part to hide disagreement rather than putting forward a direct disagreement (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 113-114), e.g. "yes, but...". Apart from partial agreement, hedges, requests for clarifications, repetition of previous speaker's words, explanations, expressions of regrets, positive remarks, hesitations, pauses, and fillers (Kreutel, 2007; Locher, 2004; Pomerantz, 1984) are also used. Joking is also a strategy which avoids the direct statement of disagreement (Malamed, 2010, p. 204).

### ***Past research on agreement and disagreement***

Few research have analysed the agreement and disagreement expressions in English course books. One of these is Pearson (1983) who conducted a study on agreement and disagreement found in ESL/EFL materials. She also recorded native speakers discourse, and compared the agreement and disagreement speech acts within the discourse with the ones found in the ESL/EFL course books. The comparison showed that the use of the speech acts in the course books did not concur with the conversational data collected. The course books in her study presented more disagreement than agreement but this was not the case in the natural discourse data. The results of her study indicated that more empirical research is needed to investigate how native English speakers really use the speech acts, and that native speaker intuition is inadequate for the preparation of EFL/ESL materials. Seto (2009) also investigated the use of agreements in five Hong Kong English course books and compared them with Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English. Similar to Pearson's study,

the findings of his study revealed that there were also significant differences between English course books and naturally occurring spoken English in expressing agreement. Many expressions of agreement used in the course books were not found in the corpus data. The study also suggested that many course books writers rely on intuition instead of data from natural spoken corpus when designing course books materials.

## Methodology

### *Materials*

The materials used in this study were three Malaysian secondary school English course books (Forms 3, 4, 5) and three *New Headway* English course books that represent three English proficiency levels: intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced level. The Malaysian English course books were selected because they are used as the main text reference for English instruction in the Malaysian public schools while *New Headway* course books are used widely in language schools internationally for ESL instruction. Comparisons were made between Malaysian English course books and *New Headway* course books as they are similar in terms of the context that they are being used for (to teach English to speakers of other languages), the level or age group of target users (secondary school students/young adults), and both of these course books employ the use of general English and teaches the four skills. Another reason for the comparison was because they represent course books written by non-native and native speakers of English. It is therefore interesting to see how both of these course books vary in presenting agreement and disagreement expressions.

Data were obtained from the dialogues of the reading texts and the listening transcripts of the course books as they were textbook representations of natural speech discourse for teaching students about pragmatics of agreement and disagreement.

### *Data analysis procedures*

Once the selected texts were collected, the first step was to identify the expressions of agreement and disagreement in the dialogues based on Pomerantz's (1984) turn sequence for agreement and disagreement so as not to confuse them with other speech acts such as assertion and criticism. After identifying the expressions for agreement and disagreement, they were transferred to a table similar to Table 1, together with the assessment or proposal statement before them.

Table 1. Agreement and disagreement expressions with participants and contexts

Listening/ Reading Dialogue	Participants	Context	Agreement/ Disagreement Expression	Types of agreement/ Disagreement
Listening Dialogue 2, pp. 217-218	Friends	Dialogue	Benny: It must have been a very complicated operation. Hasnah: <b>Yes, it was.</b>	Agreement-same level

The agreement expressions were classified based on the types mentioned by Pomerantz (1984), which were: upgraded, same level and downgraded agreement. As for the expressions of disagreement, they were categorised according to disagreement with or without mitigation strategies. The frequency of occurrences for the various types of agreement and disagreement expression were calculated manually and recorded to address the first research question. Any repetition of the same agreement or disagreement expression was also calculated. To investigate the range of agreement and disagreement in the course books, various expressions used for each type of agreement and disagreement were listed in another table such as Table 2, and a comparison was made between Malaysian and *New Headway* course books.

Table 2. Expressions of downgraded agreements in both course books

Course books	Expressions of Downgraded Agreement
Malaysian Course books	1. Right. (fact) 2. Oh well, all right. (opinion)
<i>New Headway</i> Course books	1. Yeah, I guess so. (opinion) 2. Well, it wasn't the most fun I've had.

The frequency for each type was also calculated. Comparisons were then made between the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books to determine whether there are any similarities or differences in the expressions used. The authenticity for certain agreement and disagreement expressions which were found only in the Malaysian course books but not in *New Headway* ones or vice versa were examined by comparing them with the spoken corpus of the British National Corpus (BNC) to confirm the findings as the BNC is considered as one of the representations of native speaker discourse.

To address the second research question, it was also analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. The occurrences of agreement (downgraded, same level and upgraded) and disagreement (with and without mitigation) expressions in intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced levels of both the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books were calculated. The analysis was used to determine whether the agreement and disagreement types were presented in an organized manner or randomly at different levels. This was to examine whether there is any extra or less emphasis placed in terms of the types of agreement and disagreement used, as well as the difficulty levels of these expressions when moving across the intermediate to the advanced levels. For example, disagreement with mitigation might be considered as a little more complex than direct disagreement by course book writers and certain course books may only present them in the advanced or upper intermediate level instead of the lower levels. It is therefore interesting to see if there is any consideration given based on the complexity.

## Findings and discussion

### *The variations in frequency and range of expressions for agreement and disagreement found in Malaysian and New Headway course books*

As can be seen from Tables 3 and 4, Malaysian course books had a total of 42 agreements and 23 disagreements while the *New Headway* course books had a total of 94 agreements and 34 disagreements. The frequency of agreement expressions in *New Headway* exceeded Malaysian

course books by 55.3%, and the disagreement expressions by 32.4%. Therefore, Malaysian course books contained less expressions in terms of number in the presentation of agreement and disagreement expressions. This might be caused by the different contexts presented in the Malaysian course books that do not permit the occurrences of more agreement and disagreement expressions. From the two tables, it can be seen that both the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books presented more expressions of agreement than those of disagreement, and the frequency of disagreement with mitigation in the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books exceeded disagreement without mitigation. In fact, these results supports Leech's agreement maxim (1983) and also Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory that agreements tend to occur more often than disagreements, and that mitigations can help to minimise the risks of losing face when disagreeing.

Table 3. Frequency of agreements and disagreement expressions

Course books	Frequency of Agreements	Frequency of Disagreements
Malaysian	42	23
<i>New Headway</i>	94	34

Table 4. Frequency of Disagreement Expressions with or without Mitigation

Course books	Frequency of Disagreement with mitigation	Frequency of Disagreement without mitigation
Malaysian	16	8
<i>New Headway</i>	26	8

### ***Same level agreements***

Table 5 displays various same level agreement expressions found in both course books and it was found that *I agree with...*, with 13 occurrences, was one of the most common same level agreements presented in the Malaysian course books. Yet, this expression was not found anywhere in the *New Headway* course books. When the context for the occurrences of this expression was examined in the Malaysian course books, it was found that the expressions were normally used in reply to a factual topic (e.g. Teenagers Spending Time on the Internet) and occurred within a formal context (e.g. classroom discussion). In contrast, most same level agreements in *New Headway*, for example, *Yeah*, occurred within less formal contexts such as during a conversation between two friends. When these expressions of *I agree with* and *Yeah* were examined and compared to the spoken corpus of the BNC, the expression *Yeah* was found to occur more frequently (7840 instances per million words) than *I agree with* (19.6 instances per million words). The phrase, *I agree with ...*, was also predominantly found in meetings and conferences in the BNC. Therefore, these results might suggest that the topics or themes used might affect the way certain agreement expressions were presented in the course books.

Table 5. Same level agreements

Course books	Expressions of Agreement
Malaysian Course books	<p>“Yes” (10 occurrences)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes.</li> <li>2. Yup.</li> </ol> <p>“I agree with...” (13 occurrences)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. I agree.</li> <li>4. I agree with you.</li> <li>5. Yes, I agree with you.</li> </ol> <p>“...right/true” (6 occurrences)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. You’re right.</li> <li>7. That’s right.</li> <li>8. That’s true.</li> </ol>
<i>New Headway</i> Course books	<p>“Yes/Yeah” (24 occurrences)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Yes.</li> <li>2. Yeah.</li> </ol> <p>“I know” (11 occurrences)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. I know.</li> </ol>

### ***Upgraded agreements***

As for upgraded agreements, it can be seen from Table 6 that Malaysian course books had fewer types of upgraded agreements compared to *New Headway* course books. The frequency of occurrences for upgraded agreements in Malaysian course books was also found to be fewer than in *New Headway*. There were only four compared to twenty nine occurrences found in *New Headway*. This might indicate that Malaysian course books lack examples for upgraded agreements. In terms of similarity for the expressions used, both the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books contain expressions such as the adverbs *definitely* and *of course*. However, the obvious difference was that the intensifier *absolutely* which was found to occur frequently in *New Headway* was not presented at all in Malaysian course books.



Table 6. Upgraded agreements

Course books	Expressions of Upgraded Agreements
Malaysian Course books	<p>“...of course” ( 1 occurrence)</p> <p>1. Yes, of course.</p> <p>“...certainly...” ( 1 occurrence)</p> <p>2. Yes, it certainly is.</p> <p>“...definitely...” ( 1 occurrence)</p> <p>3. I definitely support the proposal.</p> <p>Others ( 1 occurrence)</p> <p>4. Now, that is a problem...</p>
<i>New Headway</i> Course books	<p>“...of course”(2 occurrences)</p> <p>1. Of course...</p> <p>“...definitely...” (1 occurrence)</p> <p>2. Definitely.</p> <p>“...absolutely...” ( 7 occurrences)</p> <p>3. Absolutely.</p> <p>4. That’s absolutely true.</p> <p>Others (9 occurrences)</p> <p>5. You’re not kidding.</p> <p>6. Too right.</p> <p>7. Yeah, that’s very true.</p> <p>8. You can say that again!</p> <p>9. Great idea.</p> <p>Exaggeration/Continual Upgrading (10 occurrences)</p> <p>10. Happy? She was absolutely thrilled!</p> <p>11. Silly? She looked absolutely ridiculous!</p>

According to Tao (2007, p. 6), *absolutely* is normally used as an adverb syntactically “to modify a single verb or adjective or used as an adverbial affecting the whole adjectival or verbal phrase”. An example for this is *That’s absolutely true* (Example 4), in which *absolutely* is used to modify the adjective *true*. Other relevant examples for this can be found in examples 10 and 11 in Table 6. The word *absolutely* here also fits the category of maximizers, or intensifiers (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Jan, 1985). Apart from that, *absolutely* can also be used on its own such as the one found in Example 3, where it is not followed by any adjectival or verbal predicate. When it is used this way, it can also be called “disjunct” (Tao, 2007, p. 7). Quirk et al. (1985, p. 628) noted that not only can disjuncts stand alone, they “can be responses to questions or can be used as a comment on a previous utterance”, usually accompanied by “yes” or “no”. This kind of *absolutely* normally occurs during the initial part of the sentence, as shown in Example 3 to display strong agreement. The inclusion of this word in *New Headway* as an expression of upgraded agreement is relevant as it occurs quite frequently in natural spoken data. In fact, in McCarthy’s (2003, p. 48) study, the word *absolutely* ranks at number 6 while *definitely* and *certainly* rank at number 8 and number 17 respectively among his data of top eighteen lexical response items

commonly used in conversations to signify agreement in American and British English. The non-inclusion of the expression “absolutely” in Malaysian English course books might reflect that the word is not used commonly in Malaysian spoken English. However, “absolutely” can be considered to be included in order to expose students to the British variation of agreement expressions.

Analysis also revealed that *New Headway* contains less formal topics which possibly permit the occurrences of *absolutely*, compared to Malaysian course books that present more formal topics. To illustrate this, the following samples are some excerpts of conversations taken from the listening and reading dialogues of Malaysian course books.

#### Sample 1

Vimala: ....Everybody was more concerned about their children’s safety.

Reporter: *Yes, of course*. The children’s safety is most important.

#### Sample 2

John: Imagine that! My little car pollutes the air.

Dr H: Yes, in fact cars are the worst source of air pollution because there are so many of them.

John: Air pollution sounds like a serious problem.

Dr H: *Yes, it certainly is*.

As seen in the samples, the topics of conversation were about children’s safety and air pollution which were quite formal and factual. Upgraded agreement expressions *Yes, of course* and *Yes, it certainly is* were used as the speaker’s responses. This is consistent with Simon-Vandenberg’s (2008) study whereby *certainly* is found to typically occur in formal settings among the genres of spoken language in the BNC. The use of factual topics was distinctly noticeable as three out of four instances of strong agreements found in the Malaysian course books were based on factual topics. In contrast, *New Headway* course books introduced more informal conversational topics. This is illustrated in sample 3.

#### Sample 3

Carl: ...All in all I suppose that it was a pretty good two weeks, wasn’t it?

Andy: *Absolutely*. It was a great holiday.

From sample 3, we can see that the conversation topic is about a holiday, which is a non-factual and an opinion-based topic that allows the use of “absolutely”. Besides this, there were also a lot of instances of continual upgrading and exaggeration among the expressions found in *New Headway*. The word *absolutely* was used quite often as adverbs of degree in the expressions to intensify the agreement and emphasize what had been said earlier. An example of a dialogue with continual upgrading is given in Sample 4.

#### Sample 4

A: I thought she looked rather silly in that flowery hat, didn’t you?

B: Silly! She looked *absolutely ridiculous!*

From the example, we can notice that together with the use of *absolutely*, the adjective *silly* was also upgraded to *ridiculous* to emphasize how speaker B agrees strongly with the statement made by speaker A. More examples of continual upgrading can be seen from examples 10 and 11 in Table 6. These types of expressions occurred frequently in *New Headway* but were not found in the Malaysian course books. On the other hand, the *New Headway* course books may have focused too heavily on *absolutely*, and did not include enough examples of other expressions such as *definitely* and *certainly*. In fact, *certainly* is not present at all in *New Headway* even though these two expressions are found to occur quite often in natural discourse as shown in studies (McCarthy, 2003; Simon-Vandenberg, 2008).

### ***Disagreements with mitigation***

In terms of disagreement expressions, there were similarities and differences in the way the disagreement with mitigation expressions were presented in both the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books. The main difference was that *New Headway* included mitigation strategies such as hesitations and pauses that were not found in the Malaysian course books. The Malaysian course books also varied from *New Headway* in the use of expressions of regret as a mitigation strategy as shown in Table 7. This mitigation strategy, however, was not included in the *New Headway* books. The Malaysian course books may, therefore, need to consider whether this mitigation strategy should be included given Kreutel (2007) states that the use of the expression of regret may not be appropriate when expressing disagreement. This is because a speaker does not need to apologise for the difference of opinions with another speaker and this act may also lead to the disagreement not being taken seriously by the other speaker.

Table 7. Disagreements with mitigation

Course books	Expressions of Disagreements with Mitigation
Malaysian Course books	Partial /Token Agreement (10 occurrences) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Okay, I believe...but...I still...</li> <li>2. I understand what you are trying to say but this is different...</li> <li>3. Yes, but...</li> </ol> Hedges (4 occurrences) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I don't think I agree with you...</li> </ol> Expression of regret (2 occurrences) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I am sorry but I do not agree with you</li> <li>2. I'm sorry, Ugoh. I don't think your choice of destination is suitable.</li> </ol>
<i>New Headway</i> Course books	Partial/Token Agreement (10 occurrences) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. OK, OK that's good, but</li> <li>2. Yeah, but</li> <li>3. Yes. But</li> </ol> Hedges (13 occurrences) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Not really....</li> <li>2. Mmm, I'd rather</li> <li>3. Actually, I don't think</li> </ol> Hesitations/ Pauses: (3 occurrences) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Er well right so...</li> <li>2. Hmm...well, I think so, but</li> <li>3. Mm...maybe..</li> </ol>

### ***Disagreements without mitigation***

An interesting finding for disagreement without mitigation was that “*I don't agree*” appeared only in Malaysian course books and not in *New Headway*. The following is an excerpt from the Malaysian course book that uses direct disagreement:

#### **Sample 5**

(A car accident occurred and a police report is being lodged at the police station)

Police: How fast were you going before you stopped?

Puan Zarina: ....About 60km per hour.

Mr. Chee: *That's not true! I don't agree.* You were going much faster than that.

Puan Zarina: *No, I wasn't!*

In the example, a car accident had taken place and the two citizens involved are lodging a police report at the police station. It can be seen that there was an argument about the driving speed of Puan Zarina whereby the disagreement expression *I don't agree* was used by Mr. Chee. This example may explain why *I don't agree* only occurred in the Malaysian course books and not in *New Headway* as the latter did not have this kind of serious dispute as their context for conversation, and native speakers rarely use the expression *I disagree* or *I don't agree* when participating in friendly conversations not aimed at dispute (Beebe & Takahashi, 1989; Burdine, 2001).

From Table 8, we also found that sarcasm was presented in the *New Headway* books but not in the Malaysian course books. An example of sarcasm from *New Headway* is shown in Sample 6:

### Sample 6

Vinnie: JK Rowling's a really good writer. Lots of adults read her books, they're not just for kids.

Will: *Sure Vinnie. You believe that if you want.*

In the example, it can be seen that Will does not really agree with Vinnie that JK Rowling's books are also read by adults. Therefore, he uses sarcasm to express his disagreement. However, if the expression is not further interpreted and is only viewed on the surface, Will seems to have agreed with Vinnie when he says *sure Vinnie*. This shows that if a student, especially a non-native student who does not have enough pragmatic knowledge analyses the expression literally, he or she will not be able to interpret that it is actually a disagreement in the form of sarcasm. To comprehend figurative utterances such as sarcasm, a listener must both judge the literal meaning of the statement and infer the speaker's intended meaning (Amodio and Frith, 2006). Therefore, sarcasm can be quite complex for non-native ESL learners to grasp as the intent of the message can be quite subjective and it is also dependent on the listener's pragmatic skills.

Table 8. Disagreements without mitigation

Course books	Expressions of Disagreement without Mitigation
Malaysian Course books	"I don't agree"(3 occurrences) 1. I don't agree. "No..."(3 occurrences) 2. No,... 3. No, I don't 4. No, I wasn't!
<i>New Headway</i> Course books	"No..."(4 occurrences) 1. No 2. No I don't. Sarcasm (4 occurrences) 3. In your dreams. Fat chance... 4. Sure Vinnie. You believe that if you want.

### ***Differences between Malaysian and New Headway course books in the presentation of expressions for agreement and disagreement according to different levels***

Tables 9 and 10 show the presentation of agreement and disagreement expressions according to the different levels in *New Headway*. It can be seen that there was more focus on the upgraded and downgraded agreements in *New Headway* from the intermediate to upper intermediate level than in the Malaysian course books. There was also a minor increase in difficulty level for agreements in *New Headway* (from 4 to 18 for upgraded agreement), but this was not evident in the Malaysian course books. As for disagreements, there was less increase in the difficulty level detected in both

course books as the proficiency level increases. When the upgraded agreement expressions from *New Headway* were examined, most of them were also found to be repeated, from the intermediate to the advanced level. This indirectly helps the students to reinforce the expressions learnt by introducing the agreement types in the lower level and gradually presenting more examples of the same expressions as the level progresses. In contrast, the upgraded agreement expressions found in the Malaysian course books were different and not repeated at each level. This seems to suggest that certain expressions were inserted randomly by the authors based on their intuition. There was also no specific increase in difficulty detected in the Malaysian course books for downgraded and upgraded agreements.

Table 9. Various agreement types based on different levels

Malaysian Course books	Downgraded Agreement	Same Level Agreement	Upgraded Agreement
Intermediate	1	11	1
Upper Intermediate	1	7	0
Advanced	2	16	3
Total	4	34	4
<i>New Headway</i> Course books	Downgraded Agreement	Same Level Agreement	Upgraded Agreement
Intermediate	1	14	4
Upper Intermediate	5	22	18
Advanced	0	23	7
Total	6	59	29

Table 10. Various disagreement types based on different levels

Malaysian Course books	Disagreement with Mitigation	Disagreement without Mitigation
Intermediate	2	1
Upper Intermediate	6	1
Advanced	8	6
Total	16	8
<i>New Headway</i> Course books	Disagreement with Mitigation	Disagreement without Mitigation
Intermediate	11	2
Upper Intermediate	5	4
Advanced	10	2
Total	26	8

## Conclusion

Overall, this study has attempted to find out how the speech acts of agreement and disagreement were presented in the Malaysian and *New Headway* course books. In general, the findings of the study revealed that there were some differences in how the agreement and disagreement types were presented in both Malaysian and *New Headway* course books probably due to the formality of the topics used in the course books. Some expressions were presented only in *New Headway* but not included in Malaysian English course books as these expressions might frequently occur in spoken British English and are not common in Malaysian spoken English. The findings also revealed some minor variations between the two course books in terms of the presentation of agreement and disagreement expressions across different proficiency levels.

Based on the results of this study, some recommendations can be put forward for the further improvement of the Malaysian English course books. The course book writers could consider increasing the agreement and disagreement expressions found in the course books as they were found to be limited in frequency. This is to ensure that students are exposed to the language item frequently so as to master the item. Apart from that, the topics or contexts in which the expressions of agreement and disagreements were introduced in Malaysian course books should also be modified to include more of informal and conversational topics. Hesitations and pauses which are means of disagreements could also be inserted into the dialogues of the listening and reading texts as these were found to be absent from Malaysian course books. Other forms of agreement and disagreement expressions such as the ones found only in *New Headway* or in British spoken English can also be introduced to raise awareness to the Malaysian students about the different forms of expressions used in other countries. In addition, Malaysian course books could also attempt to introduce the use of sarcasm as a mitigation strategy for disagreement in higher levels as it occurs frequently in some of the natural discourse.

This study serves only as a springboard for research into agreement and disagreements in English course books. For future research, it is recommended that different types of English course books of various levels can be analysed in order to provide a more in depth-study of the presentation of agreement and disagreement in English course books.

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