

## A Study of Kurdish EFL University Learners' Comprehension of Implicatures

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the comprehension of implicatures by Kurdish EFL university learners. For this purpose, the Implicature Comprehension Instrument (ICI) was the sole 14-item questionnaire instrument used for data collection from 43 respondents whose responses were analyzed both quantitatively and descriptively. The results of data analysis revealed that for each category, a noticeable number of the participants differently comprehended varied types of implicatures. They also show no statistically significant difference between the participants' comprehension of implicature according to gender. Finally, there has also been a moderately high level of implicature comprehension by the participants; a finding that may benefit students, instructors, and curricula designers.

**KEY WORDS:** *comprehension, co-operative principle, implicature, pragmatic competence.*

### 1. Introduction

English as foreign language (EFL) learners (EFLs) are expected to efficiently transfer intention and meaning to their listeners when they are involved in a perfect exchange of meaningful communication. They are also expected to effectively interact, negotiate and have transactional communication utilizing the foreign language (FL) or pragmatics in language use. As such, EFLs are advised to be extensively and intensively exposed to the FL for better interaction and negotiation. EFLs who live in an FL setting are rarely exposed to language input that comprises the saliency of pragmatics (Bardovi-Harlig, 2010). Such a limited input of pragmatics impedes their comprehension and realization of the FL's pragmatic characteristics, including implicatures.

Generally speaking, EFLs may encounter pragmatic and socio-pragmatic challenges. The latter is represented by maintaining the length of the conversation, using proper formality, and socializing acceptably by the target community (Yates & Major 2015). They may also face pragma-linguistic challenges in indirect utterance, pragmatic versatility, and the use of natural language (Nguyen 2008; Lee 2011; Li, Raja & Sazalie, 2015). EFLs may further overuse or underuse some pragmatic characteristics (Bada 2010). They, according to Ecomidou-Kogetsidis's study (2009), tend to use lexical downgraders less often than native speakers, at the time when they repetitively use positive moves more often when making requests. Finally, in Bada's (2010) study, EFLs overused

repetition as a communication technique.

The implicature in which EFLs are supposed to develop abilities for effective communication forms one of the focal points of pragmatic competence. A problem that awaits constructive solutions and has aroused ELF/ESL scholars' interest to conduct research on EFLs' comprehension of conversational implicatures based on Grice's theory of co-operative principles (1989). It is worthy to state that speech acts can be overt or indirect in terms of communication. Conversely, in the case of indirect communication, the addressee must deduce the meaning intended by the addresser. This point necessitates understanding the implicature as it is the sense of a speaker's utterance that is not found in their actual words.

### 2. Statement of the Problem

EFLs come under noticeable pressure as they must apply, when involved in communication, the rules of the new language, including its cultural associations. This is evidenced by the relevant studies that have outlined the varying degrees of difficulty the EFLs in understanding the speaker context in the target language. Such a point forms the impetus to investigate the difficulties encountered by EFLs in the Kurdish context and their perception of the different types of implicatures based on gender in particular.

#### 2.1 Research Questions

The present study seeks to give answers to the followings research questions:

1. To what extent can university EFLs comprehend implicatures in the English language?
2. Is there any statistically significant difference

between male and female EFLs in understanding implicatures?

## **2.2 Rationale of the Study**

The concept of implicature forms a crucial element in both communication and pragmatics. Despite the lack of a well-documented theory of implicature, Potts (2004) stresses the prevalence of implicatures in social intercourse by stating that "conversational implicatures are elusive but essential to communication. They can help us understand the vagaries and misunderstandings typical of everyday communication". This research is planned to contribute to the understanding of Kurdish EFLs, i.e. their ability to process/comprehend and produce implicatures. A further important aspect of the present study is its probing of the assumption of whether Kurdish EFLs face difficulty in comprehending implicatures due to some cultural factors. This important point needs to be seriously addressed.

## **2.3 Hypotheses of the study**

This study hypothesized two assumptions in this regard:

No.1: EFLs variedly comprehend implicatures in the English language.

No.2: There are statistically significant differences between male and female EFLs in the comprehension of implicatures.

## **2.4 Limits (scope) of the study**

The participants in this study do not represent all Kurdish EFLs. Hence, the findings should not be generalized but limited to research populations and samples similar to those under investigation in the current study.

## **2.5 Theoretical Framework**

Almost all seminal literature on contemporary pragmatics, to mention just a few (Grice 1975; Leech 1983; Levinson 1983; Brown & Levinson 1987; Thomas 1995; Cummings 2005), addresses conversational implicature in general. According to Levinson (1983), discussions on implicatures are significant. Such a point which is common sense and very short does not need documentation.

Chomsky's (1965) definition of linguistic competence concentrates primarily on grammatical skills, with the widespread perception that a speaker with linguistic competence talks flawlessly. Later, linguists' presentation of the pragmatic/communicative competence marked the beginning of a new phase in methodology and theory of the target language (TL). Hymes (1972) was the first to coin the word communicative competence. He stated that teaching an FL involves more than just teaching linguistic structures and grammar. Emphasis should also be on the sociolinguistic dimensions of linguistic competence by developing the ability to apply grammatical competence in various communicative situations. Commenting on the significance of communicative

competence, Hymes adds that

the importance of concern with the child is partly that it offers a favorable vantage point for discovering the adult system and that it poses neatly one way in which the ethnography of communication is a distinctive enterprise, i.e., an enterprise concerned with the abilities the child must acquire beyond those of producing and interpreting grammatical sentences, to be a competent member of its community, not only what may be said, but also what should and should not be said (Hymes, 1972, p. 26).

Hymes further outlines how cultural intervention in FLL forms another important topic wherein different cultures characterize different speech patterns. Regarding the variations in meaning between lines, Grice (1957) states that what the speaker means and wants to express are two different things. Works by both Hymes (1972), and Grice (1957) later prompted ESL/EFL researchers and scholars to conduct further studies on communicative and linguistic competence to improve EFLs' pragmatic competence. Later, several researchers and scholars in the field of EFL, such as Thomas, 1983; Kasper, 1989; Bardovi-Harlig, 1996; Kasper and Rose, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin, 2005; Ishihara & Cohen 2010; Rzaolu and Yavuz, 2017; and Taghizade, 2017 to mention just a few, focused on strengthening and developing EFLs pragmatic competence,

Several other forms of implicature studies have recently been undertaken by many researchers worldwide. Taguchi (2007) published a review on native Japanese English learners to know how skilled they were at inferring meaning in dialogues. The findings of his study demonstrated that "development of pragmatic knowledge and processing capacity of using the knowledge may not coincide perfectly in L2 development" (p. 313). In another study conducted in the EFL context in Indonesia, Cummings (2005) tackled the most troublesome implicatures and the variables affecting students' comprehension skills. He found out that indirect critique implicatures were the most troublesome, a finding that supported Bouton's (1988) claims. Finally, Rzaolu and Yavuz investigated Turkish EFL students' comprehension and development of implicatures. The findings showed students' relatively good comprehension of comprehension and development skills.

## **3. Method**

The research design of the present study is descriptive as descriptive assertions concerning the comprehension of implicatures features are provided. The data are analyzed quantitatively to "establish the

relationship between variables and look for and sometimes explain the causes of such a relationship” (Fraenkel, Norman, & Hyun, 2012: 11). Based on this, the current study attempts to provide a picture of the pragmatic ability of Kurdish EFLs at the university level.

**3.1 Participants of the study**

43 fourth-year students (20 males, 23 females) from the Department of Translation, College of Languages, Nawroz University, took part in this study in the spring of 2020. On receiving the filled-in questionnaires, four were discarded as some items of the administered questionnaire were not responded to

by the participants.

**3.2 Instrument**

Implicature Comprehension Instrument (ICI) in the form of a questionnaire was the only instrument used for data collection. It contained 14 items of the multiple-choice type. It is a simplified version of the questionnaire constructed by Bouton (1988-1994) for data collection and it is adapted to the Kurdish context. Bouton's initial test has a high-reliability coefficient as the 14 items came out with 0.80 Cronbach alpha. A complete list of how alpha might be interpreted is given in the following Table (Cohen et al., 2007: 506):

**Table 1: Interpretation of Cronbach alpha**

|       |        |           |           |                 |                      |
|-------|--------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|----------------------|
|       | Low    | Minimal   | Reliable  | Highly Reliable | Very Highly Reliable |
| Alpha | < 0.60 | 0.60-0.69 | 0.70-0.79 | 0.80-0.90       | > 0.90               |

**3.3 Data Collection and Analysis Procedures**

The participants were given 30 minutes to respond to the questionnaire. After collecting the questionnaires, some responses were excluded as two options of the same item were ticked twice or left blank. Then all responses have been computerized and analyzed using the SPSS program version 21. The percentage and success rate have been stated for each questionnaire item. Finally, the significant difference in the mean score proceeded to show the statistical difference between males and females in implicatures comprehension.

**3.4 Data Analysis and Findings**

**-Research Question No.1:** To what extent can university EFLs comprehend implicatures in the English language?

**-Hypothesis no.1.** EFLs variedly comprehend implicatures in the English language.

According to the total success rates, the four fundamental maxims of conversation have been measured to understand the variations in the comprehension of implicatures within broader categories. Table (2) shows the success rate of the four main categories.

**Table 2: Implicature comprehension in terms of implicature type**

| Implicature Type | Details                         | Success rate | Av.    |
|------------------|---------------------------------|--------------|--------|
| Quantity         | Understated negative criticism, | 49.8%        | 64.75% |
|                  | Be sufficiently informative     | 79.7%        |        |
| Relevance        | Be relevant                     | 83.3%        | 83.30% |
| Quality          | Irony/Sarcasm                   | 39.6%        | 45.53% |
|                  | Conventional expression         | 51.4%        |        |
| Manner           | Be orderly                      | 59.4%        | 59.45% |

Table (2) shows that the interpretation of relevance implicatures had an almost 84 % success rate; the highest percentage scored among other categories. The success rates of 64 % and 59.45 % are followed by the quantity implicature— be sufficiently informative and the manner implicature, respectively. While 53.45 % of

the participants correctly answered the quality implicatures—set expressions items. However, Irony/sarcasm items, the second subcomponent of quality implicatures, were responded with a lower success rate of 39.62%. Students experienced considerable difficulty in comprehending the

understated negative criticism items with a rate of 35.12%.

Further analysis of the sub-categories of

implicature is presented in Table (3) where all the sub-categories of the implicature are represented by the items and their success rates.

**Table 3: Success rates per item of ICI**

| Implicature type                       | Item | Success rate |
|--|------|--------------|
| Relevance                              | 5    | 79.9         |
|  | 8    | 89.1         |
|  | 13   | 84.40        |
|  | 14   | 79.8         |
| Quantity-understand negative criticism | 1    | 19.2         |
|  | 3    | 43.6         |
|  | 11   | 42.7         |
| Quantity-be sufficient informative     | 6    | 49.8         |
|  | 12   | 79.7         |
| Quality - irony/sarcasm                | 2    | 47.7         |
|  | 10   | 31.6         |
| Quality - set conventional expression  | 4    | 48.9         |
|  | 9    | 53.9         |
| Manner - be orderly                    | 7    | 59.4         |

As shown in table (3), the success rates noticeably differ across the various categories of implicatures. On the four relevant implicature items (5, 8, 13, and 14), participants got an overall success rate of 83% or higher. There were five items, namely items (2, 3, 4, 6, and 11), with a (40-50%) success rate. Two distinct categories of quality implicature items, viz. "irony/sarcasm" and "set conventional expressions" represented by the items (2 and 4), had approximately the same success rate, (47-48 %). Similarly, the rates of two of the understated negative criticism implicatures (3, 11) were the same (42-43%). Item (8) scored a success rate of (89 %), which is above average, while two items

(1 and 10) scored below-average success rates of (19% and 31%), respectively. On this basis, hypothesis no.1 which reads: EFLLs variedly comprehend implicatures in the English language

- **Research Question No. 2:** Is there any statistically significant difference between male and female EFLLs in the comprehension of implicatures?

- **Hypothesis No.2:** There are statistically significant differences between male and female EFLLs in the comprehension of implicatures.

Here, EFLLs' gender, i.e. male and/or female, has been accounted for to evaluate participants' ability to comprehend implicature.

**Table 4: Gender implicature comprehension**

| Gender  | N  | Mean Score | Standard Deviation | t-test | Significant difference |
|---------|----|------------|--------------------|--------|------------------------|
| Females | 23 | 7.841      | 2.4691             | .679   | .547                   |
| Males   | 20 | 7.917      | 1.7584             |        |                        |

As shown in table (4), there is a slight difference between male and female participants' mean scores for each item. However, male participants showed a slight difference in the success rate compared to females. The independent *t-test* revealed that there was no statistically significant difference (Sig. = .547,  $p > 0.05$ ) in the participants' implicature comprehension scores

based on gender. On this basis, hypothesis no.2 which reads: There are statistically significant differences between male and female EFLLs in the comprehension of implicatures is rejected.

**4. Discussion**

According to the findings, Kurdish EFLLs had a moderate level of success in interpreting implicatures

in English. In ICI, the total success rate was 58.57%. In some instances, however, the success rate was higher or lower. It had been consistent with prior studies on EFLs' comprehension of implicature at the intermediate and advanced competence levels (Ergüven, 2001; Lee, 2002). As in the previous research, comprehension of implicature differed depending on the individual and the exact form of implicature.

When the success rates of certain items of the "comprehension instrument" were compared, it was found that some implicature types were better understood than others. The significance category had the most properly interpreted implicature types (85.8%). Nearly half of the students correctly comprehended the way, quality-set expressions, and quantity-minimum requirement implicatures.

Half of the participants, i.e. 20, correctly interpreted the implicatures generated by the Pope inquiry (Is the Pope Catholic?), which is another word for a quality-set expression item. When a question concerning a global phenomenon was posed to produce a similar impact to the Pope question, the rate of success increased somewhat. Some participants viewed these accusations as attempts to shift the focus of the conversation focus. This suggests that cultural knowledge is required to comprehend some forms of implicatures.

The perception of quality-irony implicatures had a low average success rate (39%). A high percentage of participants tended to take the literal interpretation of the implicature, including utterances in the irony-based type. This might support the argument that linguistic and pragmatic understanding notions are different.

Quantity implicatures—understated negative statement implicatures—were the hardest to grasp (35.1%). Since the speaker was concerned with face control and offense avoidance, they were the most implicitly conveyed implicatures. These findings match those of Ergüven's (2001) study of upper-intermediate EFL students, who had the most trouble understanding quantity and manner flouting. In effect, the situation is understandable, given Bouton's (1988) conclusion that even native English speakers encountered difficulty in interpreting indirect criticism.

The data analysis showed no statistically significant difference in mean scores between males and females. In several implicature categories, there were still slight variances in the results. Female participants were more adept in interpreting quantity-understated negative criticism implicatures, which were difficult to read. The understanding of significance implicatures was better for male participants. When compared to males,

females were more successful at interpreting generalized implicatures, while males performed slightly better when it came to interpreting specific implicatures. Such findings could highlight certain differences in males' and females' thinking styles. For instance, in the case of implicature comprehension, males may be heeding the specific components of context, whereas females may be thinking in a more context-independent style.

## **5. Conclusion**

The current study's findings confirm the significant assumptions of the Gricean theory co-operative principle. The participants of this study could understand most of the implicatures and what is said and what is implied. Any success with a high rate is an indication of communication co-operation. Otherwise, they might not have made the connection between the irrelevant answers provided in the discussions or dialogues.

Regarding the universality of the maxims across cultures, this study has found that, despite cultural differences, EFLs could understand the majority of the implicatures at a moderately high level. Just one situation where comprehension was challenging was that of indirect criticism. On the other hand, relevance implicatures were relatively simple to read; this indicates either one's innate ability to perceive implied meanings or the non-native speakers' general knowledge to understand implicatures in the TL with less reliance on linguistic forms. Additionally, the study has also found out that there is no statistically significant difference between male and female participants in terms of the comprehension of implicature. Based on these conclusions, the current study's findings can be accommodated to benefit the process of teaching EFL at large and teachers and students in particular.

## **6. Recommendations**

Based on the literature review and obtained results, the followings are recommended:

1. The inclusion of pragmatics training in foreign language classes becomes quite demanding since (a) grammatical competency may not correspond to discourse proficiency or the ease with which pragmatic output can be accomplished, (b) when language learners need to be indirect, they can use implicatures to convey their goals using a variety of speech acts, and (c) the adequacy of these reactions does not appear to be highly compatible with native speakers' norms.
2. To develop EFLs' comprehension of implicatures, they can be assigned a particular situation prompt and some basic language

expressions and asked to compose and execute conversations in roleplays. These performances might be videotaped, and the students' adherence to and violations of implicatures could be discussed in class.

3. To build pragmatic skill in indirect meanings, it is recommended that (a) concentration should not be limited to surface meaning decoding but also on interpretation, (b) grammar and lexis should be taught in context and through texts rather than isolated sentences, (c) authentic or authentic-like texts should be used, (d) students should not be exposed to texts, where meaning is (over) explicitly, presented, and (e) learners should be educated about critical cultural components and guided to use their knowledge, experience, and values deliberately and flexibly. Well done.

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