

Comprehension of Conversational Implicatures in English as an L2

Abstract

Sperber and Wilson (1995) argue in their theory of *Relevance*, that during verbal interaction, a speaker with a desire to have optimal relevance will leave implicit every detail that she thinks the hearer "...can be trusted to supply with less effort than would be needed to process an explicit prompt" (p.218). The reason why a speaker would make an utterance requiring the listener to decode it rather than explicitly stating an argument can be attributed to a shared knowledge between the interlocutors. Nevertheless, there may be differences between the degree of mutual knowledge the speaker believes the hearer has, and the degree of mutual knowledge the hearer actually possesses, which may lead to communication breakdowns.

Such communication breakdowns are more likely to occur when a speaker makes use of a conversational implicature, or in its simplest definition; an implied meaning. Considering the fact that understanding conversational implicatures may pose communication problems even between speakers sharing the same native language, it is only natural to posit that interpretation of such implicatures is not an undemanding task for second language learners.

With this perspective in mind, this study investigated the development of the ability to interpret conversational implicatures in English as an L2. The study followed a cross-sectional design and used an audio-visual oral production task. Participants demonstrated comprehension of conversational implicatures viewed in a video. 45 L2 learners of English from six different L1 backgrounds and at three proficiency levels took part in the study. There was also a control group, including 5 native speakers of English. The results showed that comprehension of conversational implicatures improved with L2 proficiency. This finding corroborates the results of previous studies (Bouton 1988, Taguchi 2005; Taguchi et. al, 2013) in that L2 proficiency created an advantage for L2 learners in their interpretation of conversational implicatures.

Keywords: pragmatics, second language acquisition, conversational implicatures.

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