

# An Overview of L2 Learners' Comprehension of Conversational Implicatures

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doi:10.56397/JLCS.2024.09.11

## Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the development of research on second language learners' understanding of conversational implicature both domestically and internationally, aiming to reflect the current state of research in this area. The results show that: 1) Pragmatic research on conversational implicature is becoming increasingly mature and systematic; 2) The research subjects are primarily college students, with limited studies on the pragmatic comprehension of junior high school students and primary school students; 3) From the perspective of interlanguage pragmatics, research on conversational implicature mainly explores the factors affecting L2 conversational implicature comprehension such as types of conversational implicature, second language proficiency, and language contact or exposure; 4) The number of research on conversational implicature comprehension in China is limited and the instructional effects on L2 pragmatic comprehension is scarcely explored. At last, the paper concludes with recommendations for future directions of the studies on implicature comprehension.

**Keywords:** conversational implicature, Chinese EFL learners, conversational implicature comprehension

## 1. Introduction

Since Hymes (1972) proposed the concept of communicative competence (communicative competence), as an essential part of it, pragmatic competence has attracted growing attention of the applied language researchers. The relevant empirical and non-empirical studies have been gradually systematic and refined. As a part of communicative competence, it is not isolated, instead, it is the guarantee and method for people to effectively use and understand language in the concrete use of language (He & Zhang, 2003). Pragmatic comprehension is the prerequisite for successful pragmatic expression

(Li & Zou, 2015). As one aspect of pragmatic competence, pragmatic comprehension refers to the ability to recognize the intention in the speaker's utterance (Taguchi, 2008). Existing studies on pragmatic comprehension of English learners mainly focus on the understanding of specific indirect speech act (Cook & Loddicoat, 2002; Holtgraves, 1999; Taguchi, 2002), and studies on conversational implicature comprehension (Bouton 1988, 1999; Taguchi 2005, 2007, 2008) have not been investigated sufficiently.

Conversational implicature, a concept introduced by H.P. Grice, involves the

interpretation of meanings that go beyond the literal content of statements based on context and shared knowledge. For Second language learners (L2 learners), grasping these implicatures can be particularly challenging due to significant cultural and linguistic differences between native language and target language. In this paper, the academic journal papers on second language learners' comprehension of conversational implicatures are retrieved and analyzed from the perspective of research trend, research subject and research content, aiming to reflect the research status of L2 conversational implicature comprehension and provide implications and recommendations for its future research.

## 2. Theoretical Basis of Conversational Implicature

This section introduces cooperative principle and relevance theory as theoretical basis in the comprehension of conversational implicatures.

### 2.1 Cooperative Principle

Grice (1975) claimed that a conversation is built upon four maxims that participants follow: quantity, quality, manner, and relevance. The maxim of quantity tells us not to say too much or too little, while the quality maxim tells us to be truthful and not to lie. The manner maxim is about being orderly and avoiding ambiguity, while the relevance maxim means making a relevant contribution to the conversation in progress. These maxims function as a set of rules for communication, guiding how we understand meaning. When the speaker produces an utterance, the listener understands that the message is relevant to the ongoing discourse and draws the most plausible interpretation of the utterance.

Although the conversational maxims of CP guide the ways in which the participants speak in conversations, the participants do not always observe the conversational maxims. They fail to abide by one maxim of the conversational maxims in various ways, such as flouting a maxim, violating a maxim, infringing a maxim, opting out a maxim, or suspending a maxim (Allot, 2016; Thomas, 1995). Among these different ways, flouting which is blatant violations of one or more maxims has been the most important one because flouting a maxim generates conversational implicatures. When a participant blatantly fails to abide by one or more maxims, with an intention of giving rise to

a conversational implicature, the participant attempts to make the hearer grasp the underlying meaning beyond what is said in the surface form. When a conversational implicature arises by the participant's flouting a maxim, the maxim being flouted is called to be exploited (Grice, 1975).

One or more maxims of the conversational maxims can be exploited to generate a conversational implicature in a conversation. Therefore, the conversational maxims can be used to explain how conversational implicatures arise in the conversation and how hearers comprehend conversational implicatures (He & Ran, 2009). That is, they function as a set of rules to explain how the speaker produces conversational implicatures and how the hearer comprehends implied meanings in the utterances and draws the most plausible interpretation. The exploitation of conversational maxims can provide explanations for comprehending conversational implicatures. More specifically, when the learners are confronted with a flout of a maxim, they will assume that the speaker is cooperative in the conversation and intends to express the additional meaning by flouting a maxim.

### 2.2 Relevance Theory

Sperber and Wilson (1995) advanced Grice's (1975) theory in several important ways. First, they condensed Grice's four maxims into one, i.e., the maxim of relevance, claiming that the four maxims often overlap. By condensing the four maxims into one, Sperber and Wilson underscored the central role of the principle of relevance in communication. When an utterance is presented, people automatically seek relevance of the utterance even when it is largely unrelated to the preceding information.

Another contribution of Relevance Theory is the theory's solid grounding in cognitive psychology. Sperber and Wilson explained the process of meaning comprehension as an asymmetry between contextual effect and processing load. The contextual effect indicates saliency of meaning presented, while the processing load refers to the degree of effort required for comprehension. When the contextual effect is strong (or meaning is salient), we do not have to process many contextual cues to detect meaning; as a result, our processing load decreases. When we comprehend meaning, many different

assumptions come to our mind. Among those, we select the assumption that has the greatest contextual effect (or most relevance) for the smallest processing load. Several factors affect our processing load: linguistic complexity, number of contextual cues to be processed, and accessibility of the cues (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). When the utterance is linguistically complex and involves a number of contextual cues to process, we need to go through extensive inferencing, resulting in a greater processing load. The universality and generalizability of the theory make it be applied to many types of conversational implicatures.

### 3. Present Research Status

#### 3.1 Research Trend

Based on the analyzing and summarizing of papers at home and abroad, it is found that the study on L2 learners' implicature comprehension is increasingly mature and systematic. Besides, it is also found that the number of domestic studies on second language learners' conversational implicature comprehension is limited compared with abroad studies.

The focus of research content lies on the extent to which learners can correctly understand the conversational implicature, especially the implied meaning, and the exploration of the role of cultural background, language contact, language proficiency in the correct understanding of conversational implicature. Some studies (Lee, 2002; Taguchi, 2002 etc.) explore the pragmatic strategies needed by L2 learners in the correct understanding of conversational implicature, but few studies discussed the reasons for misunderstanding or confusion in implicature comprehension.

In terms of research tools, there are mainly two forms of test: 1) Multiple choice reading comprehension test (Bouton, 1992, 1994, 1999; Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Roever, 2006, 2013; Tan, 1998; He, 2012); 2) Multiple choice listening comprehension test (Garcia, 2004; Taguchi, 2005, 2007, 2013). According to Bachman & Palmer (1996), one indicator of validity is the degree of consistency between the test task and the field of target language use (target language use, TLU), which can extrapolate learners' test performance into real life. In the domain of TLU, the conversations are often heard, not read. People cannot grasp the speed of information transmission in the conversation, and some

language characteristics of spoken English, such as discourse marker, parenthesis and so on, will also appear in the dialogue. Thus, the listening comprehension task is more likely to elicit a representative dialogue in the target language use domain compared with the reading comprehension task. In order to explore how learners comprehend conversational implicature, in addition to reading comprehension test, Lee (2002) and Taguchi (2002) used qualitative research tools such as interview and sound thinking in exploring the specific strategies learners used in the comprehension process.

#### 3.2 Participants

The oriented group of empirical research are mainly college students. College students include English majors and non-English majors, as well as foreign students (Chinese language learners).

The structure of language knowledge and cognitive level of junior high school students and primary school students are quite different from that of college students. Their general competence to comprehend conversational implicatures, especially the indirect meaning and whether and to what extent their pragmatic comprehension competence can be improved by implicit and explicit instruction remain to be investigated. Little research has been done on these learner groups.

#### 3.3 Research Content

The empirical researches mainly focus on L2 learners' performance on implicature comprehension, factors influencing L2 conversational implicature comprehension such as types of conversational implicature, second language proficiency, and language contact or exposure as well as strategies used in L2 conversational implicature comprehension.

##### 3.3.1 Learners' Performance in L2 Conversational Implicature Comprehension

According to Hymes (1972), learners' performance is the actual instances of learners' language use in real time. It consists of learners' observable language behaviors elicited through some tasks involving learners in interacting with the target language. Accuracy and speed are two different dimensions of learners' performance (Brumfit, 2000; Schmidt, 1992). Thus, there are two dimensions of learners' performance in L2 conversational implicature comprehension:

comprehension accuracy and comprehension speed. Taken together, in the existing literature, the overwhelming majority of studies (e.g., Bouton, 1988; Hagiwara, 2009; Köylü, 2018; Liu & Huang, 2012; Pratama et al., 2017; Roever et al., 2014; Sağdıç, 2021; Shively et al., 2008; Tai & Chen, 2021; Taguchi, 2009a; Tan, 1998; Xu, 2019; Yamanaka, 2003; Yang, 2022; Zughaibi, 2013) investigated learners' performance in comprehending L2 conversational implicatures only from one dimension: comprehension accuracy. For example, one of the earliest studies on L2 learners' performance in comprehending conversational implicatures with baseline data was conducted by Bouton (1988). The study on English learners' implicature comprehension was initiated by Bouton (1988, 1992, 1994, 1999) (Roever, 2013). He developed a multiple-choice implicature test to assess L2 learners' comprehension of conversational implicatures. The results indicated that non-native speakers differed significantly from native speakers in comprehending English conversational implicatures.

Only a limited number of studies to date have examined L2 conversational implicature comprehension in terms of both comprehension accuracy and speed. For instance, Taguchi (2005, 2007, 2008b, 2008d, 2011, 2013, 2019) did a series of studies on L2 conversational implicature comprehension in terms of both comprehension accuracy and speed. For instance, Taguchi (2005) investigated Japanese English learners' performance in comprehending conversational implicatures. The participants were 160 Japanese English learners. A computerized listening test was administered to measure their competence to comprehend conversational implicatures. Their average response time taken to answer the items correctly was taken into account. Generally speaking, the number of studies on Chinese EFL learners' performance in terms of comprehension accuracy and speed were scant.

### 3.3.2 Factors Influencing L2 Conversational Implicature Comprehension

The research on conversational implicature comprehension in cross-cultural context mainly involves types of conversational implicature, language contact or exposure, and second language proficiency.

In terms of types of conversational implicature, the classification of idiosyncratic conversational implicature and formulaic conversational

implicature is widely adopted (Bouton, 1988, 1992; Roever, 2006). Idiosyncratic implicature refers to relevance-based implicature in a specific conversation, based on violations of Grice's relevance maxim, while formulaic implicature implies structural, semantic, and pragmatic phrases such as the pope question (such as "Is the Pope Catholic?"), indirect criticism and irony, etc. It is easier for L2 learners to understand Idiosyncratic implicature (Roever, 2006) than formulaic implicature, but the latter are less likely to be acquired for them (Bouton, 1994b). Another type of classification is made by Taguchi (2005) based on the degree of conventionality encoded in conversational implicatures. Conversational implicatures were classified into conventional implicatures and non-conventional implicatures. Learners has more difficulties and spend more time to comprehend non-conventional implicatures than conventional implicatures, possibly because the comprehension of non-conventional implicatures requires a heavier processing load. The difference lies in the different dimensions of learners' performance examined in two classifications. The studies using Bouton's (1988, 1994a) classification investigated L2 conversational implicature comprehension only from the dimension of comprehension accuracy. In contrast, the studies using Taguchi's (2005) classification examined L2 conversational implicature comprehension from two dimensions: comprehension accuracy and speed.

In terms of language contact or exposure, there are several ways to approximate the amount and/or type of such second language exposure, including length of residence in the L2 country, intensity or types of interaction with native speakers, and whether or not one is in a study abroad environment versus a typical classroom environment (Perez & McDonald, 2020). In the existing literature, several studies (Bouton, 1994b, 1999; Roever, 2005; Roever et al, 2014; Taguchi, 2008c; Xu et al., 2009; Yamanaka, 2003) measured language exposure as length of residence in the target country. Some studies (Sağdıç, 2021; Taguchi, 2008a; Zughaibi, 2013) defined it in terms of the intensity of interaction or actual amount of contact with the target language. Additionally, Taguchi (2011) operationalized it as the experience of studying abroad. According to Roever (2013), the comprehension of indirect criticism is positively

correlated with the length of language contact duration. However, it's not that the longer of exposure, the better one performs in comprehension. It is showed that the most effective time period for the comprehension of conversational implicature was in the first 17 months, with no significant increase in the following four years (Bouton, 1994b).

As to the influence of language proficiency, there is no obvious correlation between the overall language proficiency and conversational implicature comprehension (Roever, 2006; Tan, 1998; Liu & Huang, 2012), but there are differences in individual types (such as indirect criticism) (Roever, 2013). However, there are also studies revealed that language proficiency is positively correlated with implicature comprehension (He, 2012), or L2 language proficiency has a significant effect on comprehension accuracy, but no significant effect on comprehension speed (Taguchi, 2007).

### 3.3.3 Strategies Used in L2 Conversational Implicature Comprehension

Researchers including Chen & Lin (2021), Liang (2006), Pratama et al. (2019), Taguchi (2002, 2008b), Taguchi et al. (2016), and Xu & Wang (2014) have explored how L2 learners use various strategies to comprehend conversational implicatures. Among the earliest empirical studies, Taguchi (2002) conducted research involving eight Japanese EFL learners with different proficiency levels and asked them to completed a pragmatic listening task. An introspective verbal interview was used to examine the learners' comprehension strategies. From their responses, six comprehension strategies were identified: paralinguistic cues, adjacency pairs, background knowledge, key word inferencing, logical reasoning, and speaker intention. The study found that paralinguistic cues and the rule of adjacency pair were the most frequently used strategies.

To summarize, research on L2 learners' strategies for comprehending conversational implicatures within the field of L2 pragmatics is limited. Most studies have adopted verbal reports and questionnaires to gather data. However, in some cases, there has been a significant time delay between the comprehension test and the verbal report in some research (Taguchi, 2008b; Taguchi et al., 2016), which can impact the accuracy of the findings. For example, Taguchi (2008b)

conducted an introspective interviews a week after the test, which could potentially affecting the reliability of the verbal reports due to memory decay. Additionally, some studies (Xu & Wang, 2014; Kim, 2014) used questionnaires to investigate strategy use. These tools may not accurately capture the participants' actual comprehension processes, as what the participants' wrote on the questionnaires may not fully reflect their real cognitive process.

## 4. Research Prospect

Having observed these generalizations that emerge from the past research and based on the above research status, we conclude this part with several directions for future research.

### 4.1 *The Studies on Implicature Comprehension Needs to Be Situated in an Interactional, Interpretive Work*

Previous studies often depicted learners as passive recipients of information, neglecting their active role in the process of jointly interpreting implicatures. Future research could utilize discourse analysis or conversation analysis to explore how participants collaboratively clarify implicatures during interaction. Researchers should investigate how adaptability and contingency play a role as learners work together to construct meaning using available resources. Such approaches will help us to shift the focus from individual comprehension to the shared understanding process among participants.

### 4.2 *Longitudinal Development of Implicature Comprehension Needs to Be Investigated*

Most existing research has concentrated on whether learners can understand implied meanings in L2, with few studies examining how L2 learners' comprehension competence develops over time. The difficulty hierarchy of different implicature types identified in previous research can suggest which types are easier and thus appear earlier in development. However, current studies have mainly focused on conventional versus non-conventional implicatures (e.g., Taguchi, 2012), which needs to be improved in the future. Future research can introduce other implicature categories to better track L2 learners' developmental patterns.

### 4.3 *The Scope of Targeted Participants Needs to Be Expanded*

From the perspective of the research participants, previous studies have

predominantly paid too much attention to college students and neglects middle school students. Given that middle school students typically have less autonomy in their learning, so it is important to pay more attention to this group in their basic education stage and develop tailored application systems suitable for them. In view of this, the targeted participants of future research should be extended to students in the compulsory education stage, exploring their pragmatic comprehension competence so as to enhance the comprehensiveness and generalizability of the research.

#### *4.4 The Research Scope and Direction Needs to Be Expanded and Deepened*

As most studies on implicature comprehension L2 investigated learners' current performance of pragmatic comprehension, and pragmatic instructional studies available in the literature have only focused on testing and analyzing L2 learners' knowledge of speech acts such as request and suggestion structures, more instructional researches on conversational implicatures are needed, which is a key element in interactional conversations. Such practice will contribute a lot to the development of students' overall pragmatic competence.

#### *4.5 SLA Theories Needs to Be Applied to Examine Implicature Comprehension*

Current practices can be advanced by incorporating theories and insights from SLA theories. A critical question for future research is to figure out how implicature comprehension develops over time. While existing studies have primarily focused on factors affecting comprehension, such as proficiency, study abroad experiences, and the duration of formal study, they have not thoroughly investigated the underlying mechanisms driving this development. Therefore, SLA theories can be adopted to identify these mechanisms and help advance learners' implicature comprehension competence. For instance, Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis could serve as a framework for designing instructional studies on implicature comprehension. Although this hypothesis has been extensively used in instructional intervention research comparing explicit and implicit teaching methods (Taguchi, 2015), its application to implicature teaching is still limited (Kubota, 1995). Future research is encouraged to investigate how consciousness and attention can improve implicature learning

through explicit learning tasks like consciousness-raising, input enhancement, and focus-on-form techniques.

#### *4.6 The Research Tools to Assess Implicature Comprehension Needs to Innovated*

Future research should broaden the research instrumentation used to assess L2 implicature comprehension. Previous studies typically relied on highly controlled, decontextualized listening or reading tests with researcher-created dialogues, which limits the generalizability of the findings in real-world situations. To address this problem, future research should develop new assessment tools that better reflect real-life inferential practices. One promising approach is to use multimodal input that integrates visual, auditory, and textual information. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), comprehension involves more than just interpreting linguistic input; it is a comprehensive process where all available cues—both linguistic and non-linguistic—are used together to infer meaning. To capture this comprehensive process, instrument design needs to be innovative. Advances in technology can help incorporate various contextual cues to simulate real-life comprehension. Researchers can explore how learners respond to paralinguistic cues such as tone of voice, stress, gestures, head nods, or gaze, and how these cues can be used for their inferences.

## **5. Conclusion**

In summary, this paper retrieved the academic journal papers on second language learners' comprehension of conversational implicatures and analyzed them from the perspective of research trend, research subject and research content. As the results show that: 1) Pragmatic research on conversational implicature is becoming increasingly mature and systematic; 2) The research subjects are primarily college students, with limited studies on the pragmatic comprehension of junior high school students and primary school students; 3) From the perspective of interlanguage pragmatics, research on conversational implicature mainly explores the factors affecting L2 conversational implicature comprehension such as types of conversational implicature, second language proficiency, and language contact or exposure; 4) The number of research on conversational implicature comprehension in China is limited and the instructional effects on L2 pragmatic

comprehension is scarcely explored. In terms of the future direction of implicature comprehension, it can be concluded that: Firstly, the studies on implicature comprehension needs to be situated in an interactional, interpretive work. Secondly, L2 learners' longitudinal development of implicature comprehension needs to be explored. Thirdly, the scope of targeted participants needs to be expanded. Fourthly, the research scope and direction need to be expanded and deepened. Fifthly, the application of SLA theories in examining implicature comprehension may provide more implications for future research. Last but not the least, the research tools to assess implicature comprehension needs to be innovated.

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