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EFL STUDENTS' MISIDENTIFICATION OF INDIRECT CRITICISM IMPLICATURES

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Abstract

Indirect criticism is a type of utterance in which the criticism content of the utterance hides under the surface structure. An exchange between native speakers of English can involve criticism buried under layers of information. Native speakers could correctly identify indirect criticism but the case might not be the same for non-native speakers. This paper explores such events in where indirect criticism might be misidentified by non-native speakers. The data are taken from 110 EFL students who undertook written test containing three dialogs containing indirect criticism. This study attempts to reveal the students ability to interpret indirect criticism implicatures and what are tehir strategies to interpret indirect criticism. The results of this study are expected to shed some light to the subtlety of implicature interpretation by non-native speakers.

Keywords: pragmatics, implicatures, indirect criticism

Introduction

Implicature is a phenomenon in the field of pragmatic linguistics where a speaker tries to deliver an intent using a coded utterance with the hope that the listeners can decode the message depending on the context (Grice, 1975). Look at the following example.

Andy : Would you come to my party tonight?
Cherry : Well. I have to do some stuffs tonight.

From the conversation, Andy instinctively knows that Cherry has turned down his invitation. If the example examined closely, there is no semantic or syntactic evidence that Cherry said 'No'. However, from the context of the exchange, Andy can conclude that Cherry would not come tonight. In this case, Cherry has produced an implicature. Implicatures might be easy for native speakers but the might be troublesome for second language learners (Pratama et al., 2016)

There are some types of implicatures and indirect criticism is one of them. Indirect criticism implicatures are parts of implicature taxonomy stated by Pratama et al (2017). In their taxonomy there are ten types of implicatures which are supposed to be learnt by second language learners. The ten types of implicatures can be summarised into the following chart.
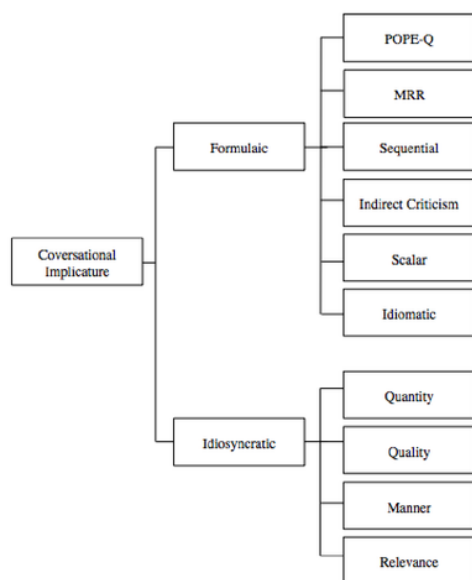
Figure 1. Ten Types of Implicatures

From the graph, it can be seen that indirect criticism implicatures are part of formulaic implicatures. It means that indirect criticsm implicatures have certain pragmatic markers to be identified. Formulaic implicatures are the opposites of idiosyncratic implicatures (Bouton, 1994). Idiosyncratic implicatures do not have the luxury of markers and dependable patterns. In fact, idiosyncratic implicatures can only be interpreted using situational context. The implicature taxonomy above is the combination between previous classifications introduced by Bouton (1994), Roever (2005), Grice (1975) and Arseneault (2014).

On this paper, I only focus on indirect criticism implicatures. Indirect criticism implicatures are introduced by Bouton (1992). Bouton explains that native speakers of American English like to surpress their criticism into a softer expression. This expression however turns into an ironic expression. Look at the following example.

Andy : How's the food?
Cherry : It's not particularly great. But it's okay.

Cherry's utterance is a way to say that the food is not good. However, Cherry finds a way make her criticism indirect. Instinctively, Andy can guess that Cherry does not like the food from her covert utterance.

Methodology

There are two main questions on this paper: (1) to what extent the second language learners understand indirect criticism implicatures and (2) what are their strategies to interpret indirect criticism implicatures. In order to measure the learners' perceptions, three items of indirect criticism implicature are prepared and learners were asked to guess the meaning of the implicatures by choosing the right answer from multiple choices. The following are the implicatures items:

Item 1

Context : Sara and Dave are in a romantic relationship. They both are attending the same event.

Sara : Hey, Dave.
Dave : Hey, Sara. Fun party?
Sara : Yeah, except for Arnie Shankman being here.

Question : What can be concluded from Sara's last statement?

a. Sara completely loves the party.
b. Sara likes the attendance of Arnie Shankman.
c. Sara does not like Arnie Shankman's attendance

Item 2

Context : Mr. Ray and Mr. Moore are teachers working at the same school. They are talking about a student's paper.

Mr. Ray : Have you finished with Mark's term paper yet?
Mr. Moore : Yeah, I read it last night.
Mr. Ray : What did you think of it?

Mr. Moore   : Well, I thought it was well typed.

Question   : What can be concluded from Mr. Moore's last statement?
a. Mr. Moore admires how tidy the student's typing is.
b. Mr. Moore does not really like the student's paper.
c. Mr. Moore likes the student's paper.

Item 3
Context   : Annie and Bertha are best friends. Last night, Annie was dating for the first time with a man named Harry.

Bertha   : What do you think of Harry?
Annie   : Nothing is wrong with him.

Question : What does Annie's statement mean?
a. Annie thinks that Harry is a great man.
b. Annie argues that Harry does not fulfil her expectation.
c. Annie believes that Harry is not guilty.

There are 110 semester-two students involved in this study. The students are divided into three groups: High Formal Exposure (HFE), Medium Formal Exposure (MFE) and Low Formal Exposure (LFE). HFE is a group where students are studying English at the college and the lecturers also teach them in English (N = 40). MFE is a group where students are studying majors other than English but the lecturers teach them in English (N = 32). LFE is a group where students do not study English and their lecturers teach them in their first language. Data are analysed using descriptive statistics. To reveal the learners' strategies, there were 18 students invited by the reasearcher to attend follow up session using Think Aloud Protocol (Ericsson and Simon, 2003).

The Students' Ability to Understand Indirect Criticism Implicatures

If the students answer all three questions correctly, their maximum score would be 3. If the students fail to answer all three, their score would be 0. The following graph is the summary of the students ability to answer the questions containing indirect criticism implicatures.
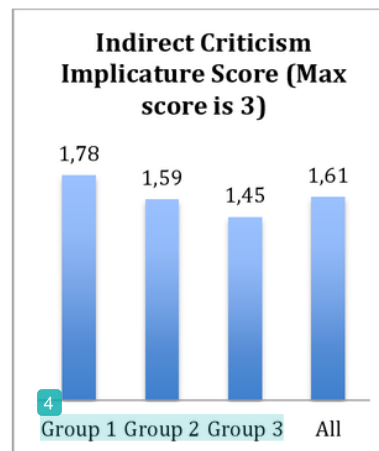

Figure 2. Average Score of the Participants

From the graph, it can be concluded that HFE has the highest mean score from other groups. However, with the maximum score of 3.0, HFE is in a critical area where they can only answer 1.78 of the questions. LFE suffers the most. LFE average score is only 1.45. If it is translated to real life situations, LFE has 50% of chance to misunderstand indirect criticism.

Going to item-by-item analysis, the results show that item 1 is not really a problem for the learners because 84% of the learners got it right. However, item 2 is a big trouble for the learners. Only 11% from the learners can give the right answer to item 2. Item 3 is medium difficulty. A percentage of 66% of the learners can answer the question from item 3.

The Students' Strategies to Interpret Indirect Criticism Implicatures
There were 18 students invited to proceed to Think Aloud Protocol (TAP) session. In the

TAP session, each student was asked to redo the test. However, during the test, the students were required to verbally express what is going on in their mind. The are allowed to ask questions. They are allowed to say whatever they think about the item they were currently doing. Based on the findings of my study and compare the findings of Vandergrift (1997), the following are the strategies used by the second language learners to interpret indirect criticism implicatures.

(1) Inference: to use the available information in the conversation to guess the parts of the conversation that they do not understand.

(2) Elaboration: to use knowledge outside the conversation and to relate it with the knowledge in the conversation to undertand the conversation

(3) Summary: to make mental and/or written summary about the infromation in the conversation.

(4) Translation: to translate from the second language to the first language usually word by word.

(5) Transfer: to use the knowledge in the first language to facilitate understanding in the second language.

(6) Repetition: to read aloud the conversation to understand the conversation.

(7) Grouping: to recall information based in the information with common atributes.

(8) Deduction/induction: consciously apply previously learnt rules or self made rules to understand the conversation.

Conclusions

Based on the finding and the analysis it can be concluded that second language learners have found that indirect criticism implicatures are troublesome in some instances. The group of second language learners who suffers the most is the low exposure group. The most difficult item for the learners is item number 2. The strategies used by the learners to interpret indirect criticism implicatures are: inference, elaboration, summary, translation, transfer, repetition, grouping and deduction/induction. Second language instructors are expected to put attention on teaching indirect criticism implicatures in their classes.

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