

Assessing Pragmatics: Listening for Implied Meaning

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Abstract

This study used a listening achievement test to analyze ESL student's proficiency in Pragmatics, through their ability to listen for implied meaning. This assessment was given to Northern Arizona University's Program of Intensive English Students in Listening courses of levels 4, 5A, 5B, and 6. The test items were made up of short dialogues about 10-15 seconds long utilizing various linguistic elements such as: speaker pausing, and tone inflection as well as various pragmatic situations like, apologies, refusals, requests, idiomatic phrases, and sarcasm. Students were asked to first listen to the dialogue, and then circle the correct multiple choice answer provided on written test. The variance between the levels ability to get the most answers correct revealed no extreme differences. Some level 4 students scored the same as some level 6 students and vice-versa. The results revealed that the test items that proved most difficult for all levels of students were the ones implementing the use of sarcasm.

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Background

Students ability to listen for implied meaning is critical to pragmatic and communicative competence throughout their language acquisition process. Recognizing linguistic cues, speakers tone, and the formulaic pattern within speaking is important for learners to develop during language acquisition. Taguchi (2005, p. 544) stated, "Despite their importance, pragmatic inferential skills in L2 have been a relatively underrepresented area of investigation. Although abundant research has analyzed pragmatic production, particularly speech act performance, little research has examined L2 comprehension processes from a pragmatic perspective." Speakers often are not aware of their own pragmatics in their native language, and many perceptions within an L1 may be completely different with the illocutionary acts faced in the L2. Therefore, pragmatic competence must be learned for appropriate communication. Taguchi's article defines pragmatic comprehension as, "the ability to understand implied speaker intention by using linguistic knowledge, contextual clues, and the assumption of relevance (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Thomas, 1995)" (p. 544). Taguchi also explains that, "The degree of indirectness or implicitness of an utterance is closely related to the amount of "work" that the listener has to do to comprehend meaning and is largely influenced by the amount of contextual information required for comprehension" (p. 545). This study seeks to see the difference in pragmatic inferencing through listening for implied meaning. Students will receive data in the form of auditory speech samples with different pragmatic situations. They will then be asked after each sample to infer what the speaker meant by their response or question. The data retrieved from the

test items will then be graphed in excel files to differentiate by level, L1, and overall analyzed by score. The test is to function as an achievement test to see where students range in pragmatic inferencing and listening for implied meaning. It can be used as a pilot to see if students inferencing and listening abilities improve with level or if there is a difference depending on the student's L1.

Research Questions

- Question 1: How do L2 learners differ by level and L1, in their ability to pragmatically listen and infer the implied meaning?
- Question 2: Does this pilot study reveal any need for further explicit pragmatic instruction within the classroom?
- Question 3: Is there a particular speech act or linguistic element that proved more difficult than others for this group of ESL students?

Methods

Participants

The 46 participants in this study were Northern Arizona University Program of Intensive English (PIE) students, in levels 4, 5A, 5B, and 6 Listening courses.

Instruments

The materials used in this study were, a written script (Appendix A) containing eleven different discourse functions and speech acts such as: sarcasm, requests, indirect requests, apologies, invitations, indirect references, refusals, idioms, and hedging, was developed and revised before being recorded by two different speakers. Each of the scenarios recorded contained 15 seconds or less of audio dialogue between a male and a female speaker. This was

done so that the differentiation between the question being asked would be clearer for the listeners. The recorded dialogue was compiled into one audio recording, where each segment was played twice. Students were given a multiple choice test (Appendix B) with eleven questions for the eleven recordings. Each question contained three multiple choice answers for the participant to choose from, based on what they interpreted the male or female to mean by their response. Listeners were given a full 15 seconds after each recording was played twice to select the answer they believed was most correct. A permissions form was also used to confirm that the participant indeed was willing to allow their data to be used (Appendix C). Tests were scored using a score sheet with the correct multiple choice answers. The data was then documented into separate excel sheets for each level to calculate the scores. After these results, all of the data was compiled into one excel spreadsheet to see the over-all results.

Procedures

The administration of the test took about 15-20 minutes to complete. The administrator spent about three to five minutes explaining the purpose of the study and the consent form (see Appendix C). The audio file was set up, and the administrator read the directions on the test aloud. Students were asked to take out a pen and pencil if they hadn't already and fill out the form of consent upon agreeing to releasing their scores, and proceed to get ready to listen for the audio. The audio recording was played, and once complete the multiple choice tests were collected. Once the tests were collected, the administrator entered in the scores into an excel sheet separated by level. A final spreadsheet was created containing the results of all of the levels which were then color-coded to show the differentiation. The spreadsheet showed the test scores, the test item difficulty, the mean, the standard deviation, the S2, and the reliability KR21.

Results

Item Analysis

The listening test was made up of eleven multiple choice items, with a total of 46 students taking the test. Each item based on the results of the test-takers was calculated for item difficulty. The following chart shows the results of difficulty for each item.

Test Item	1 Sarcasm	2 Request (hedging)	3 Invitation	4 Request	5 Sarcasm with Idiom	6 Request to/from Professor	7 Indirect Request	8 Indirect Reference	9 Apology	10 Apology for circumstance	11 Refusal
ID	0.022	0.935	0.609	0.804	0.174	0.804	0.804	0.935	0.696	0.978	0.261

Figure 1. Item difficulty.

Item #1 scored a 0.022 as the most difficult item, which utilized sarcasm. Item #5 which also measured for sarcasm was the second most difficult with a score of .174. The third most difficult item was #11 as a refusal scoring .261.

Distractor Analysis

The following table shows the results from the distractor analysis items from Excel.

answer key	b	b	b	a	c	c	b	c	b	b	c
Selected Answer	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7	Item 8	Item 9	Item 10	Item 11
a	0.7391	0.0000	0.3261	0.8043	0.3261	0.0435	0.0435	0.0435	0.0652	0.0000	0.1087
b	0.0217	0.9348	0.6087	0.0435	0.5000	0.0435	0.8043	0.0217	0.6957	0.9783	0.6304
c	0.2174	0.0652	0.0652	0.1522	0.1739	0.9130	0.1522	0.9348	0.2391	0.0217	0.2609
Item Difficulty	0.022	0.935	0.609	0.804	0.174	0.804	0.804	0.935	0.696	0.978	0.261

Figure 2. Distractor analysis.

The following results showed variance within the distractors chosen. Item#1 which elicited sarcasm, showed that most students chose the distractor *a* which interpreted the sarcastic remark as an agreement to the request, when the correct answer was *b*, a refusal to the speaker's request. Item#5 revealed that the idiomatic sarcasm used in the dialogue, students

were more likely to choose distractor *b*, which used the word “fish” which was a word in the idiomatic response, instead of the correct answer which was *c*, which was a sarcastic “yes”. Item#11 which functioned as a refusal, showed that most students chose distractor *b* which was very similar to the correct answer *c*, in that both options refused the offer of cookies. However, this particular item used *tone* and *pausing* to show that the speaker indeed wanted to accept the offer of cookies, but had to refuse because of their diet.

Descriptive Statistics

Figure 3 shows the results between levels, with the red colored data representing all 46 participants scores calculated together. The average of the various levels all had close mean score although Level 5B has the lowest mean, but the amount of test takers was the highest. The test reliability shown in KR-21 is a negative value revealing short-comings in the test’s reliability. The standard deviation is also much lower than the mean revealing the variety in scores on the test items to be much smaller with less variance.

	Mean	SD	S2
Level 4	7.700	1.3123346	1.7222222
Level 5A	7.125	1.363589	1.859375
Level 5B	6.7333333	1.1813363	1.3955556
Level 6	7	1.0444659	1.0909091
All	7.022	1.2421778	1.5430057
All Data			
M (Mean)	7.022		
S (Standard	1.2421778		
s²	1.5430057		
k	11		
k-1	10		
KR 21	-0.71033		

Figure 3. Descriptive statistics and reliability.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

This study sought to give authentic examples of dialogue, with particular attention to pragmatic aspects of English as a spoken Language. Many students in the ESL classroom may not be in an English speaking country while learning, and some may experience difficulty with things like sarcasm or idioms if they are not made aware of these functions upon being immersed in an English speaking environment. There can also be a heavy focus on Academic English within the ESL classroom, which may unintentionally leave out pragmatic situations that students may encounter with professors or classmates. Students also may not be prepared for authentic encounters involving pragmatic functions outside of the classroom and may experience difficulty in communicative competence.

This particular assessment is limited in that it only contains 11 items, and a sample size of 46 students. However, it was able to show significant differences in comprehension when it came to sarcasm. This factor, could be taken into consideration as a possible language function to introduce and cover in ESL listening and speaking courses. This can serve to bring awareness to the pragmatics of English language to students within the classroom and increase comprehension upon inferencing and listening, and responding.

References

Miller, M. D., Linn, R., & Gronlund, N. (2013). *Measurement and assessment in teaching* (11th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.

Taguchi, N. (2005). Comprehending implied meaning in English as a foreign language. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89, 543-562. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4781.2005.00329.x

Appendices

Appendix A. Written Script

1. Audio: Sarcasm

Mary: Hey Mark is it okay if I borrow your car tonight?

Mark: Yeah... sure... I love giving all my gas money to my friends.

2. Audio: Request (hedging)

Matt: Margaret, can I use your computer for class today? Mine isn't working.

Margaret: Umm....well I don't know, I don't usually let other people take my computer with them to school.

3. Audio: Invitation

Matt: Jennifer, I'm having a party at my house this Saturday, do you wanna come? **Jennifer:** Oh.. ummm.. You're having another party? Well..I have to ummm, go run errands or something that night, but hey! Thanks for thinking of me though.

4. Audio: Request

Max: Maria, why won't you go to the library with me? We are literally going to fail our exams if we don't go study.

Maria: Okay, okay, don't be such a worrywart.

5. Audio: Sarcasm with idiom

Mark: Mary, do you think we will have to take the test today?

Mary: I don't know, do fish swim?

6. Audio: Request from Professor

Student: Professor Anderson? Would it be okay to come into your office tomorrow morning, before class?

Professor: Well, hmmm, is there another time you can come in?

7. Audio: Indirect request

Max: What food are you going to get Margaret?

Margaret: Oh, no! Max, I forgot my wallet...but we walked all the way to the market and I am so hungry...

8. Audio: Indirect reference

Connie: Wow, it is so cold in here. Mark is there a window open?

Mark: Oh – yes there is.

9. Audio: Apology

Matt: Hey Leslie, do you mind helping me with my assignment for class? I really don't understand the math questions.

Leslie: oh my gosh I'm so sorry, that class is the worst! Let me finish my music homework first.

10. Audio: Apologizing for circumstances

Leslie: Chad how is everything? I heard about the wild fires near where you live... **Chad:** It's been so awful, our house burned down in the fire, and we lost everything. **Leslie:** Oh my gosh I'm so sorrychad.

11. Audio: Refusal

Sarah: My boyfriend Mark, his mom makes the best- I mean- the best cookies. I can't believe he gave me a whole bag. Hey , do you want some?

Matt: Awww man - I'm definitely on a diet right now, but thanks Sarah!

Appendix B. Multiple Choice Test

Name: _____

Level: _____

Where are you from: _____

Directions: Listen to the Audio, then **circle** the answer that **best represents** what the speaker **means** by their response.

Questions

1) What does the man mean when he answers his friend?

- a. Sure, you can borrow my car.
- b. No, you cannot borrow my car.
- c. The man wants to help with gas money for his friends.

2) What does the woman mean?

- a. Yes, you can take my computer to school.
- b. No, you cannot take my computer to school.
- c. I do not know where my computer is.

3) What does the woman mean?

- a. Yes, she wants to go to the party, but she is sad that she can't.
- b. No, she does not want to go to the party, so she makes up an excuse.
- c. She must run errands the night of the party, but she can go to the party.

4) What does the woman mean?

- a. Yes, I will go to the library.
- b. No, I will not go to the library.
- c. Her friend is a worry wart.

5) What does the woman mean?

- a. The man and his friend will not have a test today.
- b. The woman is distracted by fish.
- c. The man and his friend will have a test today.

6) What does the man mean?

- a. He wants to meet tomorrow morning.
- b. The professor does not want to meet the student.
- c. Let's find another time.

7) What does the woman mean?

- a. We should go back to get the wallet.
- b. Can you pay for my food?
- c. I don't want to walk back home.

8) What does the woman mean?

- a. She has a cold.
- b. She wants to know if Mark is cold.
- c. She wants the window to be closed.

9) What does the woman mean?

- a. She is sorry and cannot help because of her music homework.
- b. She is sorry and will help after her music homework.
- c. She does not like the class and she is sorry she has to do her music homework.

10) What does the woman mean?

- a. She is apologizing to her friend for doing something wrong.
- b. She is sorry for what happened to her friend.
- c. She is apologizing for being surprised at the news.

11) What does the man mean?

- a. He is on a diet right now.
- b. He does not want any cookies because he is on a diet.
- c. He wants to eat cookies, but can't because of his diet.

Appendix C

Human Subject Verbal Informed Consent Script**INTRODUCTION**

Hello! Thank you for letting me come to your class. Can you understand me OK? Am I talking too fast? I am Katelyn Tedesco, a graduate student, in the MA TESOL program at Northern Arizona University. I am conducting a research study for the purpose of Listening for implied meaning and pragmatics .

I will ask you to listen to some audio, and then circle 11 a answers. This will take you about 15 minutes of your time. I will collect your papers after all the answers are circled.

Your participation is appreciated, but it is voluntary. *Voluntary* means that this is optional. You may choose not to participate, or you may change your mind and decide to stop participating at any time without any penalty. To make a good decision, please ask me any questions that you have about this project.

Any information about you will be confidential. *Confidential* means that it is kept secret. Your names will not be used, as well as no other personal information.

The benefits of this research are getting to participate in a study that may help teachers grow in their teaching in Applied linguistics and ESL. Especially in the field of Pragmatics and curriculum .

The risks involved in this research are no greater than the risks in everyday conversation, you will simply circle what you think the speakers meant by their audio .

CONSENT

Next, I will ask you to participate in this study. Any verbal consent to participate in this study that you give today will show you understand this study and will participate. **Remember though, your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time without penalty.** If you have any questions later, you may contact PIE Assistant Director, Jacqueline Church.

Do you have any questions about this study you would like to ask me

now? Do you wish to participate in this study?

Human Subject Written Informed Consent Script

Research title: Listening for Implied

Meaning Principle investigator(s): Katelyn

Tedesco

Do you agree to allow your: test score, native language, gender, level, or country of origin, and time spent in the USA, to be used in this research?

Participant printed name: _____

Researcher printed name: _____