# Exploring Undergraduate EFL Students' Comprehension of Conversational Implicatures

**[1]Ardi Nugroho, [2]Jessica Gloria Antouw**

[1]*English Department, Bunda Mulia University,*
*INDONESIA*

[2]*English Department, Bunda Mulia University,*
*INDONESIA*

| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
|---|---|
| | Pragmatic competence is crucial for language learners, more specifically EFL learners. Nonetheless, it has been found that when it comes to English language teaching in the EFL context, more emphasis is put on linguistic instead of pragmatic competence. Furthermore, in terms of understanding conversational implicatures, little attempt has been made in the EFL classrooms to make the learners aware of the use of implicature as a communication tool. From this, the writers have become interested in exploring undergraduate EFL students' ability to comprehend conversational implicatures, more specifically, students from the English Department at Bunda Mulia University, Jakarta. Additionally, the writers would like to investigate whether the students' English proficiency influence their ability to understand the implied meaning behind conversational implicatures. A total of 60 students are included as the respondents. For the data collection, the researchers distribute a multiple-choice test to the respondents, and they are also asked to do the online English proficiency test. The result of the multiple-choice test is analyzed qualitatively to find out which of the four types of implicatures are the most problematic for the students. Additionally, the result of these two tests is then analyzed quantitatively using the Pearson Product Moment Correlation to find out whether there is a significant relationship between these two variables. The result shows that students had the most problem understanding indirect refusals, and that there is a significant positive correlation between the learners' English proficiency and their ability to understand the indirect meanings in the conversational implicatures. |

*Correspondence:*

Ardi Nugroho

ardi_n4382@yahoo.com

## INTRODUCTION

To be a competent speaker of a language entails that a person is not only linguistically competent, but pragmatically as well. Linguistic competence is concerned with being able to use the language with the proper grammar and linguistic expressions, while pragmatic competence deals with being able to use the linguistic expressions appropriately in context. For instance, when communicating with a close friend, of course we would use different expressions compared to when we communicate with our superiors at work. In addition, it is often the case that people's intentions are not directly reflected in their utterances, or it can be said that people often speak indirectly. Being able to interpret the real meaning behind people's utterances in specific contexts is also part of pragmatic competence.

Considering that pragmatic competence is crucial, it is especially important for language learners, more specifically EFL learners, to have an adequate level of this competence. Nonetheless, it has been found that when it comes to English language teaching in the EFL context, more emphasis is put on linguistic instead of pragmatic competence. Furthermore, in terms of understanding conversational implicatures or being able to interpret the implicit meaning behind utterances, little attempt has been made in the EFL classrooms to make the learners aware of the use of implicature as a communication tool and few opportunities have been given to the students to actually practice using it (Bouton, 1994 as cited in Abdelhafez, 2016). The result of this kind of teaching practice is reflected in the way some learners are unable to clearly grasp the hidden meaning behind implicit utterances, even though they are linguistically competent and are able to understand the literal meaning of the utterances well.

With regards to the background that has been briefly described above, the writers have become interested in exploring undergraduate EFL students' ability to comprehend conversational implicatures, more specifically, students from the English Department at Bunda Mulia University, Jakarta. Additionally, the writers would like to investigate whether the students' English proficiency influence their ability to understand the implied meaning behind conversational implicatures. Therefore, two research questions are formulated as follow:

1) How do the students comprehend conversational implicatures?

2) How do the students' English proficiency correlate with their ability to understand conversational implicatures?

The objective of conducting this study is to investigate the students' ability to grasp the implied meaning in conversational implicatures. More specifically, the writers would like to see how the students are able to comprehend the different types of conversational implicatures in English. Moreover, this research aims to find out whether there is a correlation between the learners' English proficiency and their overall comprehension of conversational implicatures.

It is hoped that the result of this study can contribute to the body of literature concerning EFL learners' understanding of conversational implicatures and its relation to the level of English proficiency.

Several studies related to conversational implicatures have been conducted by previous researchers. Some of them are briefly described here. Firstly, Pratama, Nurkamto, Rustono, and Marmanto (2017) investigated Indonesian university students' comprehension of the different types of conversational implicatures in English as well as the factors that affect their competence in understanding them. A total of 110 first year students were used as the respondents for this research. The results revealed that indirect criticism implicatures were the most problematic for the students, and that variables such as vocabulary and grammar, which reflect the students' proficiency, are directly correlated with implicature comprehension.

In addition, Köylü (2018) explored L2 learners' ability to comprehend conversational implicatures by asking them to orally report their interpretations. A total of 45 L2 learners with different cultural backgrounds, along with 5 native speakers of English were included in this study. The L2 learners were also grouped based on three proficiency levels. The findings of the research indicate that the higher the L2 proficiency, the better the learners were able to understand the conversational implicatures. Moreover, it was found that giving the students the opportunity to orally report their interpretations provide a better understanding of their pragmatic competence, especially in terms of interpreting the implied meanings in conversational implicatures, compared to just employing a predetermined response approach that is commonly used in earlier studies.

Lastly, Alsalloom (2022) examined the effectiveness of employing consciousness-raising approach in interpreting conversational implicature using audiovisual input. In this study, 126 Saudi female students participated as the respondents. The respondents were divided into the experimental group, which is deductively and inductively exposed to video extracts on four types of conversational implicature (i.e., irony, indirect criticism, manner, and relevance), and the control group, which received no treatment and was only instructed from the coursebook. Based on the findings, it was found that utilizing this consciousness-raising approach is indeed effective in facilitating the learners' interpretation of conversational implicatures.

For the final part of the introduction section, some literature related to pragmatic competence and implicature are explained briefly. First of all, the concept of pragmatic competence has evolved over time. Taguchi (2019) states that in the current era, pragmatic competence can be understood as a multi-dimensional and multilayered construct that involves several knowledge and skill areas. These include (1) linguistic and sociocultural knowledge, more specifically what expressions should be used based on the context; (2) interactional abilities, i.e., being able to use the knowledge flexibly depending on the changing contexts, and lastly (3), agency to decide on whether or not to use the knowledge in the community. She further explains that in current multicultural settings, "pragmatic competence goes beyond the traditional focus of how learners perform a pragmatic act in L2. It extends to how learners co-construct pragmatic norms with others and how they appropriate the norms" (p. 4). In other words, it can be said that for EFL learners, pragmatic competence does not only involve the ability to use appropriate language expressions in English depending on the context, but it also involves their ability to understand and integrate the different norms of the different cultural backgrounds of the interlocutors and use that to determine the expression that they would use. Of course, it should also be noted that pragmatic competence encompasses several elements, one of which is implicature.

Implicature essentially deals with the real meaning behind a person's utterance. The linguistic or literal meaning of an utterance may not always be completely the same as the actual intended meaning of the speaker since what a speaker intends to communicate is normally richer than what is directly expressed (Horn and Ward, 2006). Clark (2022) further argues that we can interpret the meaning of an utterance not only from the linguistic expression itself, but from the context in which the utterance takes place. Therefore, a particular expression can mean very different things depending on when and where it is said. For example, the utterance, "It is hot here" can literally mean that the person is expressing how hot the room is, or it may also mean an indirect request in which the speaker indirectly asks the hearer to turn on the air conditioner to make the room cooler.

Additionally, according to Holtgraves (1998 as cited in Samaie and Arianmanesh, 2018), implicature can be classified into four types as follows:

a) indirect refusals - indirectly refusing to perform any action
b) negative opinions - replies that avoid giving negative opinions directly
c) disclosures - replies that are used to avoid disclosing embarrassing information
d) topic changes - indirect replies that completely change the topic

Another classification of implicature is proposed by Bouton (1994, as cited in Pratama, Nurkamto, Rustono, and Marmanto (2017) in which he categorizes implicatures into two main groups, namely formulaic and idiosyncratic. The former is concerned with implicatures that have particular semantic and pragmatic patterns, while the latter deals with implicatures that rely heavily on the context of the conversation. Formulaic implicature can be further divided into five types of implicatures, namely POPE Question, Minimum Requirement Rules, Sequential, Indirect Criticism, and Scalar. Meanwhile, the idiosyncratic implicature can be further classified based on Grice's (1975, as cited in Pratama, Nurkamto, Rustono, and Marmanto (2017) maxims, namely implicature related to quantity, quality, relevance, and manner.

## METHOD

### Source of Data

There are two main data that are used in this current study. The first one is the result of the multiple-choice test that measures the students' comprehension of the four types of implicatures proposed by Holtgraves (1998). The second one is the result of the online test that measures the students' English proficiency. The students that are included in this study are students from the fourth and sixth semester from the English Department at Bunda Mulia University. A total of 60 students are included as the respondents. They are selected as they are either currently taking or have already passed the Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics subject, so they have already been introduced to the topic of implicature.

### Research Instrument

The main research instrument that is employed in this study is a multiple-choice test which is adapted from Samaie's and Arianmanesh's (2018) research. This test measures learners' understanding of conversational implicatures. A total of 20 test items are included in this test, five for each of the four types of conversational implicatures proposed by Holtgraves (1998). For each test item, the learners are presented with a brief description of a specific situation and

a dialogue between two people. After the short dialogue, the students must answer a question which deals with implicature by selecting the best option from the four available ones. The second research instrument is the online test that measures the students' English proficiency. The test is free and readily available online but can still give a good illustration of the students' overall proficiency as it assesses their grammar, vocabulary, listening, and other skills. The test is provided by English First.

## Data Collection and Analysis

For the data collection, the researchers distribute the multiple-choice test to the respondents. The students are also asked to do the online English proficiency test. With regards to the first research question, the result of the multiple-choice test is analyzed qualitatively to find out which of the four types of implicatures are the most problematic for the students. Additionally, to answer the second research question, the result of these two tests is then analyzed quantitatively using the SPSS version 23 software. More specifically, the Pearson Product Moment Correlation is utilized to find out whether there is a significant relationship between the students' ability to comprehend the conversational implicatures and their overall English proficiency.

## FINDINGS

With regards to the first research question concerning the students' comprehension of conversational implicatures, it can be argued that the students generally have a rather good understanding of how to interpret the indirect responses found in the conversations. This can be seen from the result of the conversational implicature test which can be seen from **Table 1** below, where the students have a mean score of **70.25**. This average is quite decent considering that this kind of score would translate to a final grade of B, at least in the university where the students are currently studying at. Nevertheless, it should be noted that compared to the result of the online English test, this average is lower as the students' average for the English test is **86.05**, which would translate to the highest grade of A. Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that even though the average score for the conversational implicature test is quite decent, there are some students who scored quite low, with the lowest score being 25, and several other students scoring below 40. In other words, there are some students who practically did not understand most of the implicit meanings behind the responses in the conversations.

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the English Proficiency and Conversational Implicature Tests**

|  | Mean | Std. Deviation | N |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| English_Test | 86.05 | 9.66815 | 60 |
| Conv_Implicature_Test | 70.25 | 15.138 | 60 |

In addition to the overall score of the conversational implicature test, it should be highlighted that out of the four types of implicatures, namely indirect refusals, negative opinions, disclosures and topic changes, the students had the least difficulty with disclosures. This is evident from the result of the test shown in **Table 2** below where the students have an average of **85.67**, which means that most of the students were able to comprehend this type of implicature quite well. The following is an example of the test item for this type:

<u>**Situation:**</u>

Laura plays tennis for her high school team. She has lost five straight games. Her father has heard that Laura isn't doing well. He wants to know if it is true.

**Father:** So Laura, how are you doing in your matches?

**Laura:** Oh, I think … I gotta keep practicing.

**Question:** What does Laura probably mean?

a)  She hasn't been doing much practice.

b)  She wants to play tennis for her high school team.

**c)  It's true that she hasn't been playing well. (correct answer)**

d)  She wants to learn to play tennis.

For this test item, 50 out of the 60 respondents were able to answer correctly, i.e., that it is true that she has not been playing well. It is possible that most of the students choose the appropriate response since the situation made it clear that she has not been performing well, yet she was quite embarrassed to honestly answer her father, so she replied indirectly in that way. Moreover, it is also probable that most of the students selected the correct answer since the other options are not very logical choices.

**Table 2. Result of the Conversational Implicature Test**

| No. | Type of Implicature | Average Score |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Indirect refusals | 56.33 |
| 2 | Negative opinions | 61 |
| 3 | Disclosures | 85.67 |
| 4 | Topic changes | 78 |

In contrast, it was found that the students had the most trouble with the first type, i.e., indirect refusals, where the students only had an average score of **56.33**. This shows that the students

had difficulty understanding situations where the speakers are indirectly refusing to do something. Perhaps the students believed that when people refuse, they would do so in a more direct but still polite manner. However, when the speakers in the conversation refused using implicit statements, it would seem that a lot of the students ended up misunderstanding the actual meaning behind the indirect responses. The example test item below clearly exemplifies this:

<u>**Situation**</u>:

David and Laura are classmates. David asks Laura whether he can borrow her book for a while.

**David:** Say, Laura. Do you think you could lend me your book?

**Laura:** Ah … well …, I'm still using it right now.

**Question:** What does Laura probably mean?

a) **She can't lend him her book. (correct answer)**
b) She will lend him the book when she's finished.
c) She can only lend him the book for a while.
d) She isn't sure if she can lend him the book.

Out of the 60 respondents, only 16 of them selected A as the answer. A lot of the students chose B as their answer, even though it is not clearly implied from the situation and conversation that Laura will indeed lend David the book once she is done with it. This shows that the students mostly did not really comprehend the real meaning behind the indirect refusal.

As for the second research question regarding the relationship between the students' overall English proficiency and their ability to understand conversational implicatures, it was found that there is indeed a significant correlation between these two variables. Based on **Table 3** below, it can be seen that the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient is **0.545**, which is higher than the critical value of **0.254** for the 5% level. It is also higher than the critical value for the 1% level, which is **0.330**. This means that the alternative hypothesis that there is a significant correlation between the two variables under study is accepted as the correlation is significant at both 5% and 1% levels. This is further supported by the Sig. 2-tailed value of **0.000**, which is lower than **0.05**. Therefore, it is clear that there is a strong relationship between students' overall English proficiency and their overall competence in understanding conversational implicatures.

**Table 3. Pearson Product-Moment Correlations Result**

|  | English_Test | Conv_Implicature_Test |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| English_Test | Pearson Correlation | 1 | .545** |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | | .000 |
| | N | 60 | 60 |
| Conv_Implicature_Test | Pearson Correlation | .545** | 1 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | .000 | |
| | N | 60 | 60 |

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Furthermore, seeing as the result is positive, it means that the relationship is also positive in the sense that the higher the English proficiency, the higher their ability to understand or interpret indirect responses, and vice versa. This is quite evident from the result of the two tests, where students who have a high English proficiency also performed well on the conversational implicature test, whereas students who have a rather low English proficiency were not able to properly understand the implicit meaning behind the indirect responses found in the conversations. Nonetheless, as has been stated above, it should be noted that the overall average between the two variables is quite different, namely **86.05** for the English test and **70.25** for the conversational implicature test. Hence, even though there is a significant relation between them, it does not change the fact that the students have a higher overall English proficiency compared to competence in understanding conversational implicature. For instance, even though some students scored highly on their proficiency test, i.e., above 85, they only got around 60 for their implicature test.

## DISCUSSION

Comparing the result of the current study and the previous ones, there are several points worth highlighting. First of all, this study yielded similar results to that of Samaie's and Arianmanesh's (2018) research since it was found that in their study students with higher proficiency levels were able to outperform those with lower proficiency levels in terms of comprehending the four types of implicatures. In other words, similar to the findings of this research, it would seem that a high English proficiency does indeed influence learners' abilities to understand conversational implicatures. Moreover, in terms of English proficiency, similar to Tanihardjo's (2016) research findings, it is found that students from the English Department at Bunda Mulia University generally have high English proficiency. In other words, their level of English can be said to be quite good. Although the students under study are not the exact same students, it can be argued that the students who study in this major end up having a rather

high English proficiency, even though they are all EFL learners.

Furthermore, with regards to the pedagogical implications, considering that the findings revealed that the students' competence in understanding conversational implicatures is decent at best, it is suggested that teachers pay more attention to teaching implicatures to the learners. In line with the result of Nurdiana's (2019) study which underscores the importance of teachers to understand the pragmatics in ELT materials, it is highly suggested that teachers not only give more focus on the teachings of conversational implicatures, but they must be well equipped to teach them as well. There are many elements of pragmatics and conversational implicature that can be found in various textbooks and other ELT materials, so it is the responsibility of the teachers to make sure that they fully understand these elements and teach them appropriately to the learners. Lastly, using ELT materials are not the only way to teach pragmatics, more specifically conversational implicatures, but using medias such as movies also proved to be beneficial in raising learners' awareness of conversational implicatures (Nurdiana, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

Pragmatic competence is essential for EFL learners if they want to be fully proficient in English. One aspect of pragmatic competence is conversational implicature, which deals with comprehending implicit meanings behind people's utterances. The result of the current study has shown that the learners' overall English proficiency correlates positively with their ability to interpret the hidden meanings. In other words, the higher their English competence, the better they will be at understanding conversational implicatures. Although, it should be highlighted that in general, the students' average for the English proficiency test is higher than the average for their conversational implicature test. There are also some learners who scored quite highly on the first test but did not perform too well on the latter. Additionally, it was also found that there are some types of implicatures that are more difficult to understand compared to others. So even with a relatively high English proficiency, some of the students still had some problems understanding certain types of implicatures.

From these findings, it can be concluded that having a high English competence, especially linguistic wise, does not always guarantee that an EFL learner would be able to comprehend conversational implicatures well (although a higher proficiency does contribute to better understanding overall). Considering that the students' result for the conversational implicature test still has room for improvement, it is highly suggested that more emphasis is put on the teaching of conversational implicatures. Learners need to be made aware of the importance of understanding implicit meanings as it is an important part of daily interactions. It is the responsibility of language teachers to make sure that they themselves have sufficient pragmatic competence so that they can include this in their teaching of English.

## REFERENCES

Abdelhafez, A.M.M (2016). The effect of conversational implicature instruction on developing TEFL students' pragmatic competence and language proficiency. *US-China Education Review A, 6*(8), 451-465.

Alsalloom, F.A. (2022). The effectiveness of consciousness-raising approach in interpreting conversational implicature using audiovisual input. *Journal of Second Language Acquisition and Teaching (JSLAT), 28*, 55-95.

Clark, B. (2022). *Pragmatics: The basics*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Horn, L.R. & Ward, G. (Eds.). (2006). *The handbook of pragmatics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

Köylü, Y. (2018). Comprehension of conversational implicatures in L2 English. *Intercultural Pragmatics, 15*(3), 373-408. doi: 10.1515/ip-2018-0011

Nurdiana (2012). Raising Pragmatics Awareness: How to Raise Conversational Implicature Awareness through Movies. *Journal of English Language and Culture, 2*(2), 159-168. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.30813/jelc.v2i2.304

Nurdiana (2019). Understanding Pragmatics and Pragmatic Competence in ELT Materials. *Journal of English Language and Culture, 10*(1), 30-40. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.30813/jelc.v10i1.1906

Pratama, H., Nurkamto, J. Rustono, & Marmanto, S. (2017). Second language Learners' comprehension of conversational implicatures in English. *3L: The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies, 23*(3), 50-66. doi:10.17576/3L-2017-2303-04

Samaie, M., & Arianmanesh, M. (2018). Comprehension of conversational implicature in an Iranian EFL context: A validation study. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies, 14*(4), 44-62.

Taguchi, N. (2019). *The Routledge handbook of second language acquisition and pragmatics*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Tanihardjo, J. (2016). The analysis of students' English competence in the grammar section in the paper-based TOEFL: A case study at English Department in Bunda Mulia University. *Journal of English Language and Culture, 6*(1), 19-30. doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.30813/jelc.v6i1.270

**APPENDIX**

The following are examples of the test items for the conversational implicature test that is adapted from Samaie and Arianmanesh (2018). One example for each type of conversational implicature is presented here.

1. **<u>Indirect refusals</u>**

   **Situation:**
   There is an outdoor concert and Bob invites Stephanie, her classmate, to go with him.
   **Bob:** Stephanie, wanna come with me to the concert tonight?
   **Stephanie:** Oh, I'm not done with my history paper yet.
   **Question:** What does Stephanie probably mean?
   a) She can't attend the concert.
   b) She needs to work on her paper.

   c) She can only go for a short while.
   d) She is going after she finishes her paper.

2. **<u>Negative opinions</u>**

**Situation:**
Ellen goes downtown and buys a new and expensive dress. When she returns home, she wears it and asks her husband what he thinks of it.
**Ellen:** So Mark, how do you like this dress?
**Mark:** Well, maybe it's just me, but I think it's hard to make a good purchase.
**Question:** What does Mark probably mean?
a) It's no use trying to make a good purchase.
b) He doesn't mind the cost of the dress.
c) Ellen's choice is the best.
d) He doesn't like the dress.

3. **Disclosure**

**Situation:**
Bill and Fiona are classmates. Fiona heard that Bill has got into a fight with his roommate, John.
**Fiona:** Oh, by the way, is it true that you got into a fight with John?
**Bill:** Well … I guess, we just don't get along well.
**Question:** What does Bill probably mean?
a) He is going to get a new roommate.
b) He and Fiona don't usually get along.
c) Bill and John used to be good friends.
d) Bill admits that he has got into a fight with John.

4. **Topic changes**

**Situation:**
Diana has just found out that she failed many of her courses. When she comes back from school, her mother asks her about the exams.
**Mother:** So Diana, how are you doing with your classes?
**Diana:** Say, what's for dinner, Mom?
**Question:** What does Diana probably mean?
a) She doesn't want to tell her mother about her grades.
b) She is hungry right now.
c) She doesn't hear her mother's question.
d) Diana prefers to eat at home.