

Developing Students' Illocutionary Competence  
Through Conversational Implicature-based Instruction

تطوير كفاءة التصرف اللغوي لدى الطلاب من خلال تعليمات المحادثة الضمنية

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**Abstract:** Implicatures are culture-bound features of everyday language use. Understanding these features in an EFL/ESL context promotes learners' appropriate production and interpretation of various illocutions. This study explores the effect(s) conversational implicature instruction may have on developing EFL students' illocutionary competence. To bring about the objectives, an interview was devised and distributed on 10 teachers and a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) that targeted 35 third year EFL students at the English Language and Literature department of M'sila University was adapted to assess both students' ability to produce and work out contextualized conversational implicatures. The study used a mixed method approach and a correlational research design to correlate teachers' CI instructions with students' performance in CI small-scale tests. Findings revealed a significant positive correlation at the level 0.62 between teachers' CI instruction and students' test performance leading to a positive effect CI instruction has on developing the respondents' illocutionary competence. It is then advocated that CI instruction be laid importance in EFL classes to help students elicit pertinent illocutions and minimize miscommunication in naturally occurring English conversational exchanges.

**Keywords:** Conversational Implicature Instruction/ Conversational Implicature/ EFL learning/teaching/ Illocutionary Competence

**المخلص:** المحادثات الضمنية هي سمات مرتبطة بالثقافة لاستخدام اللغة اليومية. يعزز فهم هذه الميزات، في سياق اللغات الأجنبية والثانية، من قدرة الطلاب لإنتاج والتفسير المناسبين لمختلف التصرفات المعنوية. تستكشف هذه الدراسة تأثير (تأثيرات) تعليم المحادثة الضمنية على تطوير كفاءة طلاب اللغة الأجنبية في التصرف المعنوي. لتحقيق الأهداف، تم تصميم مقابلة وتوزيعها على 10 أساتذة وتم تكييف اختبار إكمال الخطاب (DCT) الذي استهدف 35 طالبًا في السنة الثالثة من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وأداها بجامعة المسيلة لتقييم قدرة الطلبة على تحقيق وفهم محادثات ضمنية سياقية. استخدمت الدراسة نهجًا مختلطًا للأساليب وتصميمًا بحثيًا مترابطًا لربط أداء المعلمين «تعليمات CI بالطلاب» في اختبارات CI الصغيرة. كشفت النتائج عن ارتباط إيجابي كبير في المستوى 0.62 بين أداء اختبار «تعليم CI والطلاب» للمعلمين مما أدى إلى تأثير إيجابي لتعليم CI على تطوير كفاءة المستجيبين في التصرف المعنوي. عل إثر ذلك يجب إعطاء تعليمات CI أهمية في فصول EFL لمساعدة

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الطلاب على إدراك وتحقيق التواصل اللغوي السليم والتقليل من سوء التواصل في تبادلات المحادثات الإنجليزية التي تحدث بشكل طبيعي.  
الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليمات المحادثة الضمنية: المحادثة الضمنية: تدريس، تعلم اللغة الأجنبية: كفاءة التصرف المعنوي.

### - Introduction:

Communication among individuals is a complex process; in fact, people often convey intents that go beyond the explicit statements they make in conversations, expecting the other participants to infer the intended meaning based on the contextual situation. H. Paul Grice first proposed this in 1975. The scholar differentiated between conventional and non-conventional implicatures. Since then, it has become a fundamental aspect of research in inter-language pragmatics.

Achieving effective communication in a second language is one of the primary objectives of English as a foreign language (EFL) education. Even though EFL learners may have a solid grasp of the grammatical rules of the target language, they may struggle on the interpersonal level when attempting to engage in conversation in the target language. This can result in communication breakdowns when learners are unable to infer the intended meaning of contextual utterances. According to communicative competence (CC) models (Canale, 1980; Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996), there has been significant progress in our understanding of how languages are learned and taught. There has also been a shift in the view of second language acquisition; a shift from an exclusive focus on linguistic or grammatical accuracy towards the development of practical skills in the target language, with the ultimate goal of achieving both competence and fluency that are appropriate within specific sociocultural contexts (Thomas, 1983).

The emergence of various theories and strategies about teaching pragmatic skills within the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) has increased awareness about the importance of developing illocutionary competence - the ability to effectively interpret what is said in a given contextual situation. At first, teaching this type of competence was subjected to doubt and to a sharp debate. However,

some researchers, including Bardovi-Harlig, viewed competence as a type of knowledge that can be developed through practice. Research has shown that teaching pragmatic skills in EFL classes can help learners better understand the target language community and achieve various goals beyond communication, such as maintaining good social relationships, using indirect language for different purposes, and enhancing verbal performance. Studies on teaching second language (L2) pragmatics have also demonstrated the advantages of instruction over mere exposure.

### **1- Background of the Study:**

H.P Grice (1975) was the pioneer in introducing the term implicature, which he defined as a unique situation where a speaker conveys a different meaning from the surface utterance, he/she expresses (Pratma et al., 2019). The use of conversational implicature has been discussed in numerous studies that dealt with effective communication and successful language use. In addition, many researchers have examined L2 learners' ability to comprehend implicature and indirect speech acts (Bouton, 1992, Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Garcia, 2004; Taguchi, 2007, (as cited in Taguchi, 2013).

Numerous attempts to study non-native speakers (NNS) of English production and comprehension of implicatures through classroom practices were conducted in the last decades. These include a study on groups of international students who had recently arrived in the United States (US) (Bouton, 1994). The aim of the study was to determine if they could derive the same messages from American English implicatures as natives did. The two groups were tested in two different years; the first group, consisting of 436 subjects, was tested in 1986, while the other group with 304 participants was tested in 1990. Later on, the comprehension of implicatures of the two NNS groups was compared with those of NS.

The comparison revealed that the 1986 group derived the intended message from implicatures 71.3% of the time, or 79.5% as often as the native American control group did. The 1990 group derived the intended message from implicatures 76.8% of

the time, or 84.8% as often as the Americans. This suggests that the use of implicatures as a cross-cultural conversational method can create a barrier to interaction between native speakers and international students. To find a solution to this problem, Bouton conducted a longitudinal study on a subset of the same groups of 1986 and 1990, and they were retested after they had spent a sufficient period at the university. After four and a half years, NNS interpreted implicature correctly 91.5% as often as natives did.

In a separate study, Bouton (1992) tested 30 EFL learners in conversational implicature. They took a written multiple-choice test consisting of 33 short dialogues with different types of implicature. After four and a half years, EFL learners were able to recognize implicature similarly to natives, although they still struggled with formulaic language (as cited in Taguchi, 2009).

Researchers in the field of EFL have also applied Grice's theory to the study of conversational implicatures in various contexts, including in classroom settings, where teachers and students must navigate complex communicative situations. Studies have shown that explicit instruction on conversational implicatures can improve students' ability to interpret and produce implicatures in English (Altasan, 2016).

Other researchers have explored the role of cultural differences in the use and interpretation of conversational implicatures in EFL contexts. For example, studies have shown that speakers from different cultures may have different expectations regarding what is considered relevant or polite in a conversation, which can affect the use and interpretation of implicatures (Allot, 2018).

Overall, it is then believed that L2 learners can derive the intended meaning of an utterance at the level of implied meaning depending on their mother tongue knowledge and set of cues (Taguchi et al,2013)

## **2- Statement of the Problem:**

Despite the extensive research that has been conducted on communicative competence in various contexts, including its constituents, developments, evaluations, and assessments, the question of how conversational implicature-based practices

impact the illocutionary competence of EFL learners has not received adequate attention. English language education aims to meet students' communicative and occupational needs, however there exists a significant gap between the authentic language used by native speakers and the language materials presented in pedagogical settings, which often neglect the pragmatic component (Gilmore, 2007). Consequently, it is advocated that third-year EFL students in the Department of English at the University of M'sila may experience difficulties when applying their language skills in contextual situations, resulting in the incapacity to infer intended meanings and misinterpret illocutionary forces of the utterances. Therefore, the lack of conversational implicature-based training in EFL classrooms may promote students' inability to comprehend and produce socially appropriate implicatures.

### 3- Research Questions:

The present research sets forth to answers to the following questions:

- Is there a statistically positive correlation between teachers' conversational implicature-based instruction and their students' test performance?
- How well can 3rd year EFL students perform in a small-scale test of conversational implicature?
- What effect does instruction in conversational implicature have on EFL learners' illocutionary competence?

### 4- Research Hypotheses:

In light of the aforementioned questions, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- There may be a statistically positive correlation between teachers' conversational implicature instruction and their students' test performance.
- 3rd year EFL students may perform well in the test of conversational implicature.
- Instruction in conversational implicature may have positive effects on EFL learners' illocutionary competence

## **5- Research Methodology:**

This section is a composite of three subsections namely; research design of the present study, the setting and participants taking part in this study, and the research instruments.

### **5.1 Research Design:**

This research utilizes a correlational design along with a mixed research approach to collect both quantitative and qualitative data to meet the research objectives. The adoption of a mixed-method approach is intended to provide a deeper understanding of the research problem compared to using a single research method. The use of mixed methods has always been supported in previous research. Moreover, the use of multiple tools, such as the DCT and an interview, in this research, can help minimize bias and enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings.

### **5.2 Setting and Participants:**

The target population for this research consists of third-year EFL learners and their teachers at the Department of Language and Literature at Mohammed Boudiaf University of M'sila, with an approximate size of 110 students distributed across four groups of 25 to 30 students each. To mitigate the risk of sampling bias, a simple random sampling technique was employed to select 35 students for testing. This technique was also opted for to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, purposive sampling was used to select ten teachers from the same department for the interview process. This sampling technique helped to gather detailed information about conversational implicature instruction and its impact on improving students' illocutionary competence, rather than to make statistical inferences.

### **5.3 Data Gathering Tools:**

The study employed conversational implicature tests based on designs by Grice 1975 and Bouton 1994 to gather data on students' ability to interpret English conversational implicatures. The tests were in the form of a Discourse Completion

Task (DCT) and comprised two parts: Test (A) was a multiple-choice test, while Test (B) was a sentence-composing test. Moreover, interviews were conducted with teachers at the department of English Language and Literature in the University of M'sila to assess their perceptions on conversational implicature instruction. The rationale behind using these instruments is to gather data from multiple sources for a comprehensive understanding of the research topic and to validate one data source with another. By comparing the interview transcripts to the DCT results, the study aims to increase the validity and rigor of the research, ensure reliability, and gain further insights into the investigation (Thien, 2009).

## 6- Findings:

### 6.1 The interview

The purpose of the interview was to investigate the perceptions as well as practices of teachers regarding the implementation of conversational implicature instruction to enhance the illocutionary competence of EFL learners. The main themes that emerged from the interview data are outlined below:

**Table N°1: Teachers' Conversational implicature instruction in their classes**

CI Instructions:	
▪	Promoting the use of students own learning strategies
•	contacting competent people and learning from their experience
▪	the use of authentic materials to introduce pragmatic content
▪	Ongoing training and practice
▪	Analyzing language moves and sequences
▪	Exposing learners to various interactive situation
▪	Analyzing conversations
▪	Interpreting expressions with accordance to the context of use
▪	Enhancing figurative thinking

The table presented depicts the activities that teachers reported using most frequently in their classrooms to assist students in improving their illocutionary performance. It is clear that teachers employ a variety of activities, ranging from

learner-centered approaches to promoting figurative thinking. These activities include Promoting the use of students own learning strategies, Ongoing training and practice, Interpreting expressions with accordance to the context of use and many others.

**Table N°2: Teachers’ Practices of the most Common Type of Functional English Patterns**

	Cultural norms and expectation	Unspoken/unwritten norms of interaction	Small basic talks
Percentage	60%	00%	40%

Table 2 highlights the various practices adopted by teachers in the context of functional English patterns. As per the teachers' responses, most of these practices are based on cultural norms and expectations prevalent in the classroom. Additionally, they also engage in small talk and similar activities, however, there was no explicit instruction on unspoken or unwritten norms of interaction.

## 6.2 The Discourse Completion Tests

**Table N°3: Overall Responses According to the Conversational Implicature in Test (A).**

Item	Type of conversational implicature	Number of students	% of students with correct answer
1	Quality-POPE Q implicature	25	71.42
2	Quality-POPE Q implicature	24	68.57
3	Relevance	27	77.14
4	Quality-understated negative criticism	9	26.46
5	Sequence of events implicature	12	34.42
6	Quality-understated negative criticism	28	80

Table 03 displays that the highest percentage of the correct answer was from item (6) pertaining to the quality understated criticism implicature with a percentage of 80%. Then item 3 (relevance), item 1 (quality), item 2 (quality), item 5 (sequence of events implicature) and at last comes item 4 (quality) with the percentages 77.14%, 71.42%, 68.57 %, 34.42 %, and 26.46 % respectively.



**Table N°4: Overall Results of Students' Implicature Comprehension**

Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
0	6	3.7	3.8	0.24

The mean score 3.7 indicates a satisfactorily acceptable ability to interpret and comprehend conversational implicatures. It shows that those who scored the highest are likely to be English majors, based on the personal information they provided after the test. This may indicate that individuals who possess strong linguistic and pragmatic skills are more likely to make accurate inferences about conversational implicatures.

**Table N° 5: Students' Overall Scores in Test B**

Lowest Score	Highest Score out of 4	Average of Correct answers	Median	Standard Deviation
0	3	2.46	2.4	0.142

The full mark of the feedback's items in test B was 4, the highest score attained in this part of test was 3, students were able to perform successfully with an average of 2.46 with a close median. This highlights that the students' ability to interpret and perform CI in different contextual situations can be described as medium and acceptable. Standard deviation is below the mean thus the distribution of data is small i.e., students may share the same level of producing CI in this test. To depict a full understanding of the situation, table (4) shows the percentages of the correct interpretations that were analyzed thematically.

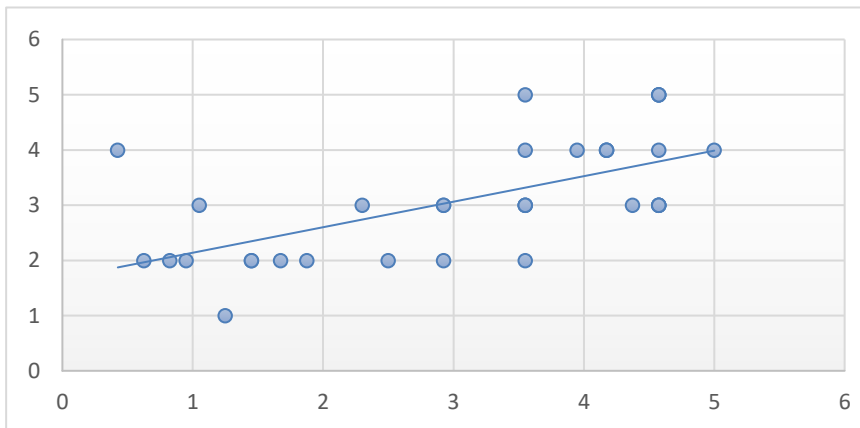
**Tables N° 6: Overall percentage of Correct Interpretation in Test (B)**

Type of the maxim floated in Test (B)	Number of items	% of students with correct answers
1. Not breaking any maxim	No. 1 in Test (B)	83
2. Breaking the maxim of quantity	No. 2 in Test (B)	46
3. Breaking the maxim of quality	No. 3 in Test (B)	57
4. Breaking the maxim of manner	No. 4 in Test (B)	63

Out of the total number of the participants, twenty-nine students (29), around 83% were able to interpret item (1) correctly. This was because Mike's response did not violate any conversational maxims and was easily understood, even by non-native speakers. John attributed the success of this communication to Mike's implied meaning and the external context, concluding that if there is a gas station nearby, it is likely to be open and have gas to sell. Only a small percentage (11%) of the sample provided irrelevant answers.

**Table N° 7: The Correlation between Students Score and Teachers' CI Instruction**

	ability to interpret CI in Test (A) +(B)	reception of CI in their classroom
ability to interpret CI in Test (A) +(B)	1	0,625729982705084
reception of CI in their classroom	0,625729982705084	1



**Graph N° 1: The Correlation between Students Score and Teachers' CI Instruction**

Graph (1) shows a scatter plot for students' scores of Tests (A) and Test (B) and teacher implementation of CI instruction, the variable on the horizontal axis is teachers' implementation of CI instruction and the variable on the vertical axis is the students' scores of the DCT.

This scatterplot shows a medium, positive, linear association between students' scores on Test A+B and their teachers' implementation of CI instruction. The more instruction in conversational implicature students is exposed to by their teachers, the higher scores are achieved. Pearson Correlation Coefficient in this study equals .62 ( $r=0.62$ ) as illustrated in the previous table (Table 07). Consequently, the more CI instruction implemented in the class, the more scores are achieved where students' scores on the DCT represent their illocutionary competence development. It can then be argued that CI instruction and Illocutionary competence are positively correlated.

### **7- Discussion of the Findings:**

Discussion of the present research findings follows the logical order of the research questions stated earlier. It also restates the main findings and relates them to other findings in the same research area. Discussion of the obtained results seeks to help deepen the understanding of the problematic under investigation as well as set guidelines for further research.

To begin with, the first fundamental question was stated as follows: Is there a statistically positive correlation between teachers' conversational implicature-based instruction and their students' test performance? The answer to this question, after analysis, is yes, there is a statistically positive, linear association between students' scores in the tests of conversational implicature and their teachers' responses on instructions in conversational implicature. This would confirm the use of CI-based instruction in developing students' illocutionary competence resulting in a pragmatic ability. Despite the fact that third year students at the English and literature department do not have any content instructions on implicature in their curriculum, their linguistic competence could have been the reason why they have performed well in the test.

These findings are consistent with previous research that has shown the effectiveness of CI instruction in developing students' language proficiency and

communicative competence in general. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by VanPatten and Williams (2015) found that CI instruction was associated with significant gains in language proficiency across a range of languages and learner populations. Another study by Kormos and Kiddle (2013) found that CI instruction was associated with improvements in both grammatical accuracy and fluency in English as second language (ESL) learners.

The second question was stated as follows: How well can 3rd year EFL students perform in a small-scale test of conversational implicature? After students have taken two tests, their performance could be evaluated as medium and acceptable. This result can be interpreted in terms of the possible linguistic control students have on the language or in terms of the similarities that resided in the implicatures across the students' mother culture and the target language's.

In relation to the specific result of the study in question, it is possible that the medium and acceptable performance of the students on the test of conversational implicature may be consistent with some findings (Takahashi and Beebe, 2016). It could be suggested that while the students have developed some level of linguistic proficiency in English, they may still be developing their pragmatic skills.

The last question was set to provide argumentation on the effects instruction in conversational implicature may have on EFL learners' illocutionary competence. Out of the accumulated data, it is apparent that the role of conversational implicature-based instruction in developing students' illocutionary competence is important. In the sense that teachers' feedback on the use of this instruction was supportive and acknowledged. This could be interpreted in the sense of teachers' experiences as teachers or as trainees or even as researchers in the EFL context.

These interpretations go in line with several research findings. For example, a study by Kim (2013) found that using explicit instruction of conversational implicature significantly improved EFL learners' ability to comprehend and produce indirect speech acts. Similarly, a study by Qian and Pan (2017) reported that explicit

instruction of conversational implicature had a positive effect on Chinese EFL learners' pragmatic competence. Overall, instruction in implicature, be it explicit or implicit, constitutes a readily constrictive step towards developing pragmatic competence.

#### **8- Pedagogical recommendations:**

Based on the findings as well as objectives of this research, some recommendations and pedagogical implications are drawn:

EFL teachers are then expected to incorporate conversational implicature-based instruction, as a standalone course or as a part of existing courses, in EFL curriculum as the results indicate that instruction in conversational implicature has a positive effect on students' test performance and their illocutionary competence.

Moreover, explicit instruction in conversational implicature would have better effects as long as students have some level of linguistic proficiency in English. Next, to provide explicit instruction in conversational implicature, this could be in the form of activities and exercises that focus on the different types of implicatures, the use of authentic materials such as videos, podcasts, and news articles. These can be a valuable resource for teaching conversational implicature as they provide real-life examples of implicatures and can help students develop their pragmatic competence in a more natural and engaging way.

Additionally, formative assessment can help teachers ensure that students are progressing in their understanding of conversational implicature, teachers can use discourse completion tests in both written and spoken forms. This would enable teachers to monitor students' progress and provide timely feedback, which can be used to guide further instruction.

Finally, teachers would better provide opportunities for practice. Opting for role plays an example is essential for practicing implicatures. Role-plays provide a safe and supportive environment for the students especially if these are followed by group discussions.

**Conclusion:**

Based on the analysis and interpretation of the data, this research has found evidence supporting the effectiveness of conversational implicature-based instruction in developing students' illocutionary competence and pragmatic ability. The positive correlation between teachers' use of implicature-based instruction and their students' test performance indicates that this approach can significantly contribute to the improvement of students' language proficiency and communicative competence. Moreover, the results suggest that students' performance on a small-scale test of conversational implicature may be indicative of their current level of linguistic proficiency and pragmatic skills.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research that highlights the importance of explicit instruction in conversational implicature for enhancing learners' ability to comprehend and produce indirect speech acts, and for improving their overall pragmatic competence. The positive feedback from teachers regarding the use of implicature-based instruction further supports the relevance of this approach for the EFL context.

In summary, the results of this research provide evidence that implicature-based instruction can be an effective tool for developing students' pragmatic abilities and illocutionary competence in the EFL context. Further research could investigate the long-term impact of this approach on students' language proficiency and communicative competence, and explore different ways of integrating implicature-based instruction into the EFL curriculum.

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