

Production of Implicatures in English as a Second Language

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Abstract – The study reported in this article investigated the use of indirect speech, or implicatures, by second language learners of English in “implicature-prone” situations (contexts which most native speakers find the use of implicature to be appropriate). An online questionnaire accompanied by video clips to portray the given situations was administered to two groups: native speakers and intermediate learners, to compare their choice of directness in request refusals and negative evaluation. The results of the quantitative data (multiple choice and open-ended) revealed that learners were inclined to use non-implicated expressions in situations where most native speakers feel that in the given context, use of implicature is preferable to direct speech. Furthermore, most learners judged that direct responses without implicatures are the most appropriate communicative strategy in those situations, even when they were given the choice of implicated and non-implicated expressions. The test results revealed in the study indicate that the learners lacked the ability to produce implicatures in appropriate situations, and they did not realize the need for implicated messages even in delicate situations.

Keywords: implicature, indirect speech, L2 pragmatic acquisition

1. INTRODUCTION

Indirect speech typified by implicatures is said to be “an absolutely unremarkable and mundane conversational strategy” (Green, 1996, p.94) in our daily communications. As Riley states, under normal circumstances, we unconsciously use implicatures to achieve not only understandable but also polite communication whenever we speak (Riley, 1993).

However, it is also known from past research that learners are less competent in comprehending and producing implicatures than the native speakers of that language (e.g., Bouton, 1988, 1994, 1999; Garcia, 2004; Lee, 2002; Roever, 2006; Taguchi, 2002; Yoshida, 2014). For instance, Bouton (1988) had native speakers and L2 learners of English take a test that consisted of 33 short dialogues including implicatures and the results showed that the learners' performance in interpreting the implicatures was significantly poorer compared to the natives. He later retested some of the learner participants in the study, after 17 and 54 months after their arrival to the United States, and found that whereas the 54-month group had reached an almost native-like level after immersing in the target language culture for over 4 years, the 17-month group showed signs of improvement, but their accuracy did not reach the native-like level. According to Bouton, learners lack the ability to interpret implicatures

in English, and on top of that, its unconscious acquisition is a time consuming process which requires a considerable amount of exposure the target language.

Preceding literature exemplified by Bouton, however, has mainly focused on the interpretation of implicatures by the non-native speakers, and not the production of implicatures or indirect speech in a second language. This shortfall should not be treated lightly as lacking the ability to produce implicature has the risk of causing predicament to learners because if a learner always spoke too bluntly, such pragmatic miscarriage could be attributed not to the non-fluency of the speaker but to the rudeness of that person, and could be criticized accordingly (Thomas, 1983). The current study attempts to fill this gap in the literature to explore on the production of implicatures by second language learners through investigating the linguistic behavior of English learners in situations which native speakers often prefer using implicatures.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

2.1. Objective of the study

The study reported here investigated learners' responses and also their judgement on whether the use of indirect speech is required at "implicature-prone" situations (contexts which most native speakers find the use of implicature to be appropriate) in English. Therefore, the central research questions were as follows:

- (a) Do learners of English produce responses with implicatures in implicature-prone situations?
- (b) Do learners of English recognize the need to use implicatures in implicature-prone situations?

3. METHOD

3.1. Research design

An experiment was administered to observe and compare the responses of intermediate learners of English and native speakers of English using an online questionnaire with visual assistance to collect quantitative data. The pragmatic strategies tested were chosen and revised from a pilot test prior to this study (c.f. Yoshida, 2015). The implicature-prone strategies, i.e. the pragmatic strategies where the natives usually respond using implicatures, tested were Request Refusals (two situations), Negative Evaluation, and Criticism. Responses in strategies which the natives chose to respond directly (Request Acceptance and Positive Evaluation) were also investigated for comparison purposes. The common denominators of the characters in the questionnaire were work colleagues of equal status who are familiar with each other, but not close friends.

3.2. Participants

Participants of this study consisted of two groups: a native speaker group and a learner group. The native speaker group included 31 native speakers of English, their ages

laying between 21 and 38 (average 27.5 years old), and from whom 16 were male and 15 were female. The native participants were collected from different cultural background to avoid regional bias, and their countries of origin were the United States (17), the United Kingdom (7), South Africa (3), Australia (2), and Canada (2). The learner group were recruited from the first-year students at a top-tier private university in Tokyo, Japan. Their ages were either 18 or 19 years old (average 18.20), and consisted of 21 males and 25 females. All of the participants were native speakers of Japanese, and none of them had lived in English speaking countries for more than one consecutive month. The rough indication of their level of English proficiency was intermediate, which can be estimated by their scores from the Reading and the Listening test of TEAP (Test of English for Academic Purposes). TEAP is a test of English designed to evaluate the academic proficiency of EFL students in Japan. According to the guideline provided by the Eiken Foundation of Japan (Eiken, 2015), the steering body of the test, the proficiency of the participants in the current study is equivalent to B1, A2, and A1 level of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference).

3.3. Test Material

The online questionnaire used to collect quantitative data comprised of an online questionnaire using Video Assisted Discourse Completion Task, in which the questionnaire was accompanied by video clips in which exchanges by real-life characters lead up to and follow the target turn. The video clips were created for this study, and samples are available at: <https://youtu.be/cERpm7VB0To> and <https://youtu.be/n3qhFbqRiz4>. The merits of applying this testing battery are that it can provide rich background information on situation and characters, and also aid the participants with visual and paralinguistic information (facial expression, tone of voice, etc.) so that through the process of viewing, it enables participants to make their decisions based on deeper and more unified understanding of the situations compared to the conventional Discourse Completion Tasks. In addition, it can greatly reduce the burden on test takers, because they do not have to read lengthy situational explanations in a foreign language.

The online questionnaire included both open-ended and multiple choice questions. In each section, participants first watched the video clip describing the situation, and then filled in the blank turn in the conversation. The first half of questionnaire were open-ended questions, typing down what they would say in the given situation (Figure 1), and the second half was multiple choice, choosing the most appropriate response in the same situation as the first round (Figure 2). Here, participants were given four given options assigned with different level of directness, two of which included implicatures and the other two were direct responses.

Question 1

Access:
<http://youtu.be/C0BsH06FKgc>

Start viewing the video clip titled "Question 1"

Please answer the question AFTER you have finished watching the entire clip.

If you were in Victoria's position, what would you say to Tom?
Please write down the actual words you would use.

Figure 1: Sample of open-ended question

Question 7

Restart the video (<http://youtu.be/C0BsH06FKgc>) and watch the video clip titled "Question 7"

Please answer the question AFTER you have finished watching the entire clip.

Which of the below is the most appropriate comment for Victoria to say?

(a) I can't give you a hand. I'll be away on holiday next Friday.

(b) Oh, I'm afraid I can't. I'll be away on holiday next week. I'm attending my sister's wedding in Hawaii.

(c) Oh, actually, I'll be on holiday next week.

(d) Oh, my sister's getting married in Hawaii next week.

Figure 2: Sample of multiple-choice question

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Open-ended section

All data from the open-ended questions from the questionnaire were coded into non-implicated responses and implicated responses. The coding was conducted by two independent coders; the researcher (Coder 1) and a native speaker of English (Coder 2: male, Canadian) who was a graduate student in applied linguistics. Cohen's kappa value for degree of agreement on coding done by Coder 1 and Coder 2 turned out to be substantial ($k=0.86$).

Table 1 below represents the summary of open-ended section. In the column labeled “Implicature”, “non-implicated” stands for the number of participants responded with direct messages, and “implicated” corresponds to the number of responses comprising implicatures.

Table 1: *Summary of open-ended questionnaire*

Strategy		Implicature	Learners (n=46)		Natives (n=31)	
Q1	Request Refusal	non-implicated	24	52%	2	6%
		implicated	22	48%	29	94%
Q2	Positive Evaluation	non-implicated	24	52%	28	90%
		implicated	22	48%	3	10%
Q3	Negative Evaluation	non-implicated	27	59%	12	39%
		implicated	19	41%	19	61%
Q4	Request Acceptance	non-implicated	44	96%	30	97%
		implicated	2	4%	1	3%
Q5	Request Refusal	non-implicated	18	39%	5	16%
		implicated	28	61%	26	84%
Q6	Criticism	non-implicated	25	54%	10	32%
		implicated	21	46%	21	68%

The majority of the native participants chose to use implicatures to convey their messages in the implicature-prone situations, and settled for direct measures in non-implicature-prone situations as expected. On the other hand, learners’ responses were more diversified and favored direct responses in all items except for Q4 (Request Acceptance) and Q5 (Request Refusal). Statistical comparison of the two groups (Table 2) revealed that in the two Request Refusal items (Q1, Q5), the difference between the choice of direct and indirect responses was apparent, indicating learners’ preference of direct communication style.

Table 2: *Statistical comparison of open-ended items by Chi-square and Phi*

Strategy		χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Phi
Q1	Request Refusal	17.31	1	.000**	0.47
Q2	Positive Evaluation	12.29	1	.000**	-0.40
Q3	Negative Evaluation	2.96	1	.085	0.20
Q4	Request Acceptance	0.06	1	.803	-0.03
Q5	Request Refusal	4.68	1	.031*	0.25
Q6	Criticism	3.65	1	.056	0.22

Note. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

4.2. Multiple-choice section

Compared to the open-ended tasks, learners' choices were less diverse, and more inclined to non-implicated expressions in the multiple-choice section (Table 3). Apart from Q9 where the choices were equally split over between implicated and non-implicated, the majority of learners selected the choices without implicature in all strategies.

Table 3: Summary of multiple-choice questionnaire

Strategy	Implicature	Learners (n=46)		Natives (n=31)		
Q7	Request	non-implicated	45	98%	14	45%
	Refusal	implicated	1	2%	17	55%
Q8	Positive	non-implicated	42	91%	27	87%
	Evaluation	implicated	4	9%	4	13%
Q9	Negative	non-implicated	23	50%	9	29%
	Evaluation	implicated	23	50%	22	71%
Q10	Request	non-implicated	44	96%	28	90%
	Acceptance	implicated	2	4%	3	10%
Q11	Request	non-implicated	30	65%	9	29%
	Refusal	implicated	16	35%	22	71%
Q12	Criticism	non-implicated	33	72%	8	26%
		implicated	13	28%	23	74%

Again, statistical significance was observed in the two Request Refusal items (Q7, Q11) and also in Criticism (Q12) as represented in Table 4. These results indicate that the learner group showed strong tendencies to opt for non-implicated expressions, even in the implicature-prone strategies.

Table 4: Statistical comparison of multiple-choice items by Chi-square and Phi

Strategy	χ^2	df	p	Phi
Q7 Request Refusal	28.68	1	.000**	0.61
Q8 Positive Evaluation	0.35	1	.707	0.07
Q9 Negative Evaluation	3.35	1	.099	0.21
Q10 Request Acceptance	0.87	1	.643	0.11
Q11 Request Refusal	9.70	1	.003**	0.36
Q12 Criticism	15.70	1	.000**	0.45

Note. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

4.3. Discussion

With respect to the first research question, the majority of learners responded with direct expressions without implicatures in three out of the four implicature-prone situations. In two of those situations (Request Refusals), the difference between the learners and the natives were statistically significant. The answer to the second research question was also negative. Many learners chose direct responses instead of the implicated options given, and their preference of direct communication strategies was apparent in three out of the four implicature-prone situations. The data from the experiment revealed that learners are not only less skilled at interpreting implicatures as the past studies prove, but also less competent at producing implicatures in implicature-prone contexts. In addition, the result from the multiple-choice section suggests that learners seem unaware that in English, indirect manner of speech is preferred in some situations such as refusing requests. In other words, the learners did not think that indirect speech is the appropriate communicative strategy in the implicature-prone contexts, and consequently, they either did not or could not produce implicated messages like most of the native subjects.

Interestingly, the first language of the participants of this study was Japanese, whose communication pattern in general, is regarded as indirect and context dependent compared to most Western languages. Therefore, through their daily communication, the learner participants were used to indirect speech styles, but nevertheless chose to speak directly without implication in the English implicature-prone situations. Although further research is required for conclusive remarks, the fact that even the learners with sufficient experience of implied speech in their first language still lack the ability to produce implicatures, or even to select implicated messages as more appropriate than the direct, indicate the possibility that learners with other first languages may also have similar tendency to speak too bluntly to the natives' expectations.

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this study unveiled that second language learners were not competent at producing implicatures in situations where most native speakers avoid direct speech. It is yet unknown why the subjects chose non-implicated communication strategy. However, frequent use of blunt terms laden the risks of rifting social relationships, and therefore learners should be given the chance to understand and choose the directness of their speech based on the realistic understanding of how English is spoken. In order to avoid unnecessary accusation or unintended relational friction, it is beneficial for learners to understand that certain strategies in English are often performed through implicatures, and in such situations, straightforward way of speech may be regarded as rude or impolite.

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