The Candidates' Inferring Problems of TOEFL Listening Module

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Abstract

Implied meaning (hereafter, non-literal or indirect implicature) is studied in the field of pragmatics which considers the intended meaning in the context of the situation (Yule, 1996). The implied meaning is not denotatively expressed, but it is only understood through the shared knowledge of the interlocutors. This study explores the MA Persian speakers' lack of mastery on the listening module of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) since they cannot comprehend the implied (i.e., non-literal) and consequently, they achieve unsatisfactory results in listening section. Sixty-two MA graduate students took the TOEFL listening module and they were divided into two groups of high and low achievers based on their test scores. Data were analyzed through the theoretical framework of Gricean Maxims (1975). K-S test and independent samples *t*-test showed that the sub-groups of high and low achievers are significantly different in understanding the implied meanings of relevance and quantity maxims. However, both high and low achievers were not significantly different in quality and manner maxims; however, the scores of high achievers were greater than the low achievers. The difference did not meet the significant level (.05). The findings of the study suggest that teachers should focus on relevance and quantity maxims as the problematic maxims in recognizing the implied meaning of the items. The nature of relevance and quantity maxims should be clarified to the MA learners who need to infer the implied meanings of the TOEFL listening module.

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Linguists always note the study of sentence meaning because an utterance may convey various interpretations. Implied meanings of these interpretations may not attract the attention of people since they are so conventionalized that we consider them as literal. However, they may hinder communication or cause misunderstanding on the part of the listener or reader. This problem can be amended through apologizing or giving background knowledge. Although everyone has various interpretations of the utterances, the context of the situation may limit a set of meanings. In this case, the listeners' meaning can be different from the speakers' intended meaning which is implied and this is the role of the listener or reader who should discover the implied or indirect meaning of the utterances. Thus, the receivers should distinguish the sentence and utterance meanings of the senders' speech. Certainly, linguistic structures convey fixed meanings at the syntactic level (e.g., It is very hot.) to open a small talk on the bus. This is different from the same utterance (e.g., It is very hot.) when the speaker implies a request (i.e., get me a glass of water.). If the addressee does not understand the implied meaning of the latter, he/she may get confused (Verschueren, 2016).

In this study, we analyzed the participants' responses to pragmatically loaded TOEFL short dialogues to identify the characteristics that made them difficult for MA students. The origin of the difficulty of understanding the nonliteral meaning is the employment of Grice cooperative principles in the tests. The short dialogues, which are characterized by the quantity principle, are the most difficult ones but those that are characterized by the relevance principle are the simplest. These simple dialogues may become difficult if they are culturally loaded or if there is a combination of implicatures. Some items are tricky and do not indicate the complexity of the dialogue or the implicature. Although the words "implied" and "inferred" are interchangeably used, they do not convey the same meaning and are not processed similarly. They may be a source of difficulty even for native speakers. If words such as "imply" "mean", and "suggest" are used in the item (e.g. what does the man imply?), it is the signal that there is an implicature in one of the utterances in the short talk exchange. This can help the learner to identify the nonliteral meaning. Although the scenarios in the TOEFL exam correspond to the real communication context, there is no one to help and signal the learner that her/his interlocutor may convey a nonliteral or implied meaning. In sum, it is recommended to consider these as well as Grice principles in teaching and learning listening comprehension module .

The study of the application of Gricean principles in the TOEFL listening exam revealed the difficulties in inferring the implied meanings of the listening items which contain pragmatic and connotative aspects of language. Thus, the learners even at the graduate level need to learn the inferring strategies. Administrators of the listening comprehension test may encourage the students to focus their attention on the implied meanings. Moreover, this study reveals the effective role of the distracters which may be used as an inappropriate implicature .

Further research may deal with the other international exams like IELTS, TOLIMO, GRE to discover the nature of listening items, their correct choices, and distractors as well. Reading, speaking, and writing skills could be the subject of future studies since both receptive and productive language skills need to be evaluated in terms of the quality of their items regarding the reliability and validity of test construction.

Keywords: Inferring, Implied meaning, TOEFL, Listening module