

STUDY ON TEACHING THE INTERPRETATIONS OF CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION

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Abstract

This paper discusses the feasibility and effectiveness of applying the teaching of conversational implicature in English listening instruction . In the study , the author focuses on teaching the implicature interpretation on the basis of illustrating the basic concepts of the linguistic theories like the conversational implicature to foster the students listening competence , reform the traditional listening instruction mode , and optimize the classroom organization and interactive structure , so as to restore the learner-centered classroom instruction model . The data analysis reveals that the new instruction model changes the ratio of students teacher participation which increases the students involvement in the listening classroom dramatically . After acquiring certain basic linguistic knowledge applicable in their learning , the students manage to master the general structure of conversations in listening textbooks and the general conversational interpretation process . With guided drills and practices , students are competent of the basic skills in interpreting the conversational implicature . The study suggests that it is necessary to reform the current instruction model in College English listening classroom , and that suitable methodology in teaching the interpretation of conversational implicature can help further develop the students ability of passage interpretation , and can eventually develop their competence of English listening .

Key words

conversational implicature ; interpretation ; English listening ; classroom instruction

1 . Introduction

English teachers and researchers have ever been working to look for ways to fascinate the improvement of learner performance in listening skill . Many efforts have been taken to work out a learner-centered framework for teaching and learning listening (O Malley et al 1990 ; Oxford 1996 ; Dai 1999 ; Wu 2000 ; Liu et al 2001 ; Tian 2003) , while many others focus on reforming the teaching process (Lei 1999 ; Zhang & Wang 2004) to improve the effects .

Despite the above efforts , the traditional model of teaching , such as , introducing to the students new vocabularies as well as relevant background information , playing back tape to enable the students to listen again and again and then giving the correct answers , are still prevailing . Such approaches of “teaching ” listening is more like “testing ” listening , because listeners are simply exposed to a succession of listening texts and are then tested with many comprehension exercises , rather than being taught how to listen and how to cope with their listening problems in the class .

New pedagogies have been experimented to find a way out . Many scholars (Bouton 1988 , 1990 ; Harris & Chen 1994 ; Liu 2001 ; Li 2003 ; He 2003 ; Buckhoff 2004) have made their contributions in teaching implicature in listening comprehension class . Their researches indicate that if the students want

to fully understand the listening materials they have to first accomplish the task of understanding implicature, which is something meant, implied, or suggested distinct from what is said, and it can be part of sentence meaning or dependent on conversational context, and can be conventional or unconventional. And one unconventional implicature is called conversational implicature which is based on an addressee's assumption that the speaker is following the conversational maxims or at least the cooperative principle. According to their studies, implicature interpretation is one of the weak points in the students' listening. This is also proved by a survey at a certain college done by the author and the relevant data collected in CET4 and CET6 in the college. Therefore it is very necessary to train the students in achieving interpreting the implicature.

In order to have a better understanding of what the students actually think and what they actually do in listening class, and try to find an efficient instruction model in the classroom at the college that the author teaches, the author of this paper conducts one experimental study at his college through teaching implicature interpretation in listening class.

2. Design of the study

2.1 Objectives

The necessities for implicature teaching have been reported by scholars and language teachers (Cheng 1983; Bouton 1988; He 1989; Zhong 1994; Xiong 1997). Their main focus is that non-native speakers (NNSs) can develop a high level of proficiency in interpreting implicatures if given enough time, and classroom instruction on specific rules and patterns of implicature could speed acquisition of interpreting skills. Few have touched upon the pedagogical implications that are applicable in China. Thus this experiment concentrates on the effectiveness and advantages of implicature teaching in listening class.

- 1) What are the subjects' attitudes towards the experiment?
- 2) Are their improved performance related to the modified classroom procedures?
- 3) Can students' competence in dealing with conversation be transferred to that of passage?
- 4) How should the English teachers reform their pedagogies to enhance students' listening ability?

2.2 Subjects

The subjects of the experiment consisted of 128 non-English majors of Grade 2006. All the students had studied English for 6 to 9 years, but due to regional differences, their scores in the College Entrance Examination were different. This variety in English listening competences would add to the difficulties in the course of instruction. Since the students are from all over China, the situation there is similar to a lot of colleges and universities of the same level.

Then the 128 students were divided into two classes for the course of listening comprehension in language lab. In order to have a better control over as many variables as possible, the components of the two classes consisted of the students of similar academic and family background intentionally. Analysis of mean difference of the data obtained between the two groups using t-test found that the two groups did not differ significantly on any of the background characteristics. Then one of the two classes was randomly appointed as an experimental class and the other as a control class.

2.3 Teaching materials

Textbooks chosen for both experimental and control classes were New Horizon College English (Zheng 2002). All the materials in the textbook were required to be taught and finished before the end of the semester. Implicature theories were chosen by the teacher and delivered mainly in Chinese.

2.4 Instrumentation

The instruments for the experiment were questionnaires in supplement with the score analysis of the tests conducted. In the course of experiment feedbacks were obtained through questionnaires. A questionnaire was conducted before the starting of the actual experiment to check the students' attitudes toward the traditional method. At the end of experiment another questionnaire was distributed to obtain the students' view on the new teaching method. And two tests were given and the scores were used to evaluate the possible difference between the control class and the experimental class. The questionnaire

was designed in modification to Jiang (2004) ,and the students were encouraged voice their opinions by writing additional comments .

2.5 Procedure

The experimental class was experimented with the new teaching model ,while the control class was stillinstructed in the traditional model . The duration for the experiment was one semester .

1) The experimental class was given a four period training in their spare time before they set their hands on the new approach . The training included a short survey of the theory about the Cooperative Principle and the Conversational Implicature .

2) Since conversation is the most common type of information exchange ,understanding conversation bears significance both in everyday usage and examination . In listening textbooks the conversations are mainly between two persons (in most cases between a man and a woman) ,with simple sentences and oral wordings . The students are required to choose the correct answers after listening to the dialogues . In order to help students have a better idea of the different types of conversations ,the teacher in the experiment class classified the conversations in the textbook into the following categories :

Table 1 .

Number	Category
1	Situation (including Time &Occupation)
2	Sentence with "but "
3	Implied negative
4	Subjunctive mood
5	Suggestions
6	Illocutionary meaning
7	Rhetorical question

If the Cooperative Principle is applied into dialogue classification ,the above categories can be grouped into the following two major parts .

A :Those that observe the CP very strictly and are comparatively easier for the student listeners to infer the meanings :Category 1(part) ,6 ,7 .

B :Those that a speaker flouts a CP maxim or maxims and the conversational implicature interpretations become necessary ,which demands more efforts from the student listeners . In listening comprehension classroom ,the types of conversation that need to be interpreted to figure out the implicature include :

Table 2 .

Type	Category
Quantity	Category 1(part) ,2 3 4 5 7 8
Quality	Category 1 (part)
Relation	Category 2 4 5 6 7 8
Manner	Category 5 7

The classifications of the dialogues in listening textbook would help the students have a better understanding of the Cooperative Principle and the process of implicature interpretation .

3) After the students were equipped with certain basic theory of cooperative principles and the

conversational implicature ,the teacher set hand on reforming the classroom instruction . Playing the cassette was not the sole job for the teacher in listening class and listening to the tape was not the only enjoyment for the students any more . The following were the assignments for the students to finish after class ;vocabulary preparation ,and culture and background knowledge if applicable .

4) Classroom instruction :More attentions were paid to the process of implicature inference based on the Cooperative Principle and listening strategy training .

a . Pre-listening Stage . The students were required to do the following preparation work based on the printed materials on the textbook .

Table 3 .

Preparation	Contents
Psychological preparation	Be attentive yet relaxed .
Vocabulary preparation	Teacher would explain some of the new words or difficult expressions concerning what were going to be learnt and then the students were required to memorize them .
Review of existing knowledge	Activate knowledge of context from the title ,the questions ,etc .
Anticipation of content	After pre-reading the questions ,students would predict what the conversation might be .

b . Scanning Stage . Students scanned or extracted pieces of information from the listening text by following the cooperative principle and its maxims ;students were to identify the conversational implicature in a dialogue with the helps from the following four aspects :

Table 4 .

Aspects	Contents
Lexical features	In a dialogue some words serve as the indicators of implicatures ,such as Category 3 (Sentence with " but "). So recognizing discourse markers or repetitions is important .
Syntactic patterns	Some syntactic patterns will help identify the implicature ,such as Category 5 (Subjunctive mood) .
Logic information	Some questions in a dialogue could have been answered directly ,however these are not done . Logic explanation will help identify the implicature . Such as Category 7 .
Emotive expressions	Recognizing tones /intonation features will also help identify implicatures . Such as in Category 8 (Rhetorical question) .

c . Comprehension Stage . Students finished the exercises to check understanding ,and received feedbacks with respect to their comprehension of the oral message .

d . Transferable /Integrating skills stage (if time permits) . Students were provided opportunities to internalize new information ,develop ideas ,attitudes ,and evaluative judgments ,integrate other skills (writing ,speaking ,etc .) ,and be creative .

5) Other variants controlin the experiment

Motivation :Both classes were well motivated to focus their attention during classroom activities .

After class assignments :Allthe students were required to listen to the textbook and also to the school English radio broadcasting after class . It was possible that some students might have not fulfilled the assignments ,and some other students might have done more than the assignments ,such as listening to

BBC ,etc . ,but they were not considered .

Other factors : Since there is no significant difference between students of different sex and intelligence (Cheng & Cheng 2004) ,sex and intellectual factors were not put into consideration in the experiment .

6) The actual instruction steps and contents were scissored in agreement with the requirements of each lesson .

3 . Data analysis and discussion

3 .1 Questionnaire Analysis

Two questionnaires conducted in the experimental class got enthusiastic responses from the students which provided more information than it was expected . All the data are classified and analyzed as following .

Table 5 . (n =64)

Contents	1st questionnaire	2nd questionnaire
Do you believe the traditional classroom instruction model is effective ?	78 .1 %	64 .1 %
Is it necessary for you to learn language theories ?	35 .9 %	82 .8 %
Do you think it (will be) is it effective to try the new model ?	39 .1 %	90 .6 %
Does it bring demands to your listening class ?	78 .1 %	81 .2 %
Can the competence of implicature interpretation be applicable in all listening tasks ?	51 .6 %	90 .6 %
Is teacher s role important in listening class ?	96 .9 %	78 .1 %

Analyses of the questionnaire about the attitudes toward the traditional and new teaching model reveal that 94 % of the students do welcome the new model . In contrast with the two data collected at different time ($p < 0 .05$) ,the number of students approving the new technique increases sharply . In the first interview ,89 % of the students express the opinion that they have to accept the traditional model because they cannot think of any other ways themselves to improve —they have no choice . While in the second response ,a common opinion (95 %) is that since the teacher has given a fairly complete rationale for the technique ,they are willing to try the new method . And 92 % of the students accept it after they have experienced it . 84 % of the students say that before they often dozed in the class because it was boring and tiresome ,but now they find it is demanding and rather interesting and they have to keep wide awake all the time .

3 .2 The benefits of the New Model

One of the most important issues in the experiment is the introduction of linguistic theory —the Cooperative Principle and the Conversational Implicature into the listening classroom . Questionnaire analysis revealed that that the new model did great benefits to the students in many aspects ,not only their mastery of English knowledge such as vocabulary ,or grammar ,but also their English competence of listening to spoken English had been greatly enhanced .

It opened another door for the students to learn how to do their listening task . Linguistic theory explains why some dialogue seems difficult to infer the meaning but actually is rather easy . Most students acknowledged the usefulness of learning the linguistic theories . One student said :“ Before I took part in the new listening model I just listened to the tape and did the exercises and never thought about the rules governing the conversation . After I have got the training ,I can predict the possible implicature before hand after I have read the questions . It really helps a lot .”(Translated) .

It greatly reduced students anxiety while doing listening . In the course of learning listening , students felt personally that there actually exist general rules in interpreting the conversational implicature . They understood the rules ,and got used to the inference procedures ,and this helped to control their anxiety to the proper level both in their everyday training and examinations .

It provided the rare opportunity to analyze the listening materials . The new technique forced students to appreciate and analyze the listening materials . The students were positioned from a passive listener into an interpreter of the information . The analysis of words and phrases helped to enlarge vocabulary ,and sentence analyzing helped to have a better command of grammar . While the dialogue level analysis helped students to have a better understanding of English discourse and helped their oral expression .

The combination of linguistic theory and strategic training ensured the success of listening class . The theory being the guideline ,students benefited greatly from the explicit listening strategic training . Each of the strategies was described ,modeled ,and discussed in the classroom . The students were helped to develop both the ability and the confidence in handling communication situations that they might encounter beyond the classroom .

It helped students to increase their motivation in learning . The new model brought variation into classroom teaching ,which would be very boring if the controller was always the teacher . These variations combined with the students achievements in practice helped raise their interest in language learning ,and stimulated their intrinsic motivation which was held to be valuable for second language acquisition .

3.3 Score Analysis

After the students had experienced the listening course for two weeks ,both the experimental and control class were given a pre test to measure their listening comprehension performance . At the end of the semester ,a post test was conducted to determine students improvement in listening performance . The data obtained were processed by SPSS 11 .0 . The analysis procedures involved were ;in order to determine the students improvement in listening comprehension performance ,the pre - and post test mean scores were compared between the experimental and the control class respectively .

Table 6 .

Item	Pre experiment test score analysis		Post experiment test score analysis	
	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Control Class	64 .352	5 .435	66 .921	8 .7539
Experimental class	67 .527	1 .973	67 .527	6 .8359
T value	0 .76		2 .01	
Significance (P)				

The results of the analysis show that there is no significant difference in pretest between the experimental class and the control class . But after the experiment ,there is a significant difference between the pre -and post test of the experimental group which indicates the success of the experiment . The comparison of the post test between the experimental class and the control class also shows great significance ,while the t test of pre -and post test scores of the control class doesn t show significance values ,which indicates that the experimental class improves greatly and achieve more than the control class .

The experiment does prove the hypothesis that ;non -English majors can and also need to learn the necessary linguistic theories to guide their English learning ,the listening strategies can be trained through well constructed instruction model in the classroom which will activate students interest and improve the efficiency of listening class ,the difficulties and problems in the teaching can be adjusted dynamically and

solved in time . The analysis of the experimental results reveal that non -English majors are really short of linguistic theories ;the students need linguistic theories to guide their learning ;through systematic training of listening strategies the students become more confident in themselves when facing the listening tasks and both their interest and competence of English listening increase sharply ;the tasks in the classroom can be carried out through the mutual support and cooperation between students and teacher ,and focus of class shifts from the teacher to the students ;the success of listening class lies in the skillful model designing and the effective teaching process control .

The study illustrates that both learning and teaching implicature in listening are engaging ,interesting and provocative . The students respond with enthusiasm at the opportunity to discuss implicatures and the additional topics which invariably arise as a consequence of the implicature learning . The teacher does not take excessive amount of time and effort in the instruction process ,but get excessive achievements for their teaching .

The study also reflects that many long dearly held beliefs by the teachers and students are actually detrimental to the enhancement of listening competence . The traditional instruction models need updating to keep in pace with the demands of the new era .

4 . Pedagogical suggestions in teaching implicature interpretation

The study indicates that it is necessary to reform the current instruction model in College English listening classroom , and that applying the suitable methodology to teach the interpretation of conversational implicature can help to further develop the students ability of passage interpretation ,and can eventually develop the competence of English listening . Based on the findings ,the author draws implications and provides certain pedagogies that might be applicable in teaching implicatures to Chinese non -English majors in their listening class .

4 .1 Introducing linguistic theory into listening class

Since the students require the linguistic theories to guide their listening ,it will be the teacher's duty to satisfy the need . The teacher should be a researcher in his teaching of listening comprehension . He should know what else to teach his students besides just playing the cassette . Though the textbook does not provide additional theories on listening comprehension ,the teacher could serve as an organizer of resources and as a resource himself to convey the necessary theories to the students . The information can cover the nature of listening comprehension ,such as information processing ,the learning strategies involved in listening comprehension ;problems a listener may face ,and how to solve them . The nature of the learner can also be included ,as it is the learner who is directly involved in the learning process . Since L2 English learners can benefit from targeted focus on pragmatic comprehension ,it can be done by using authentic language samples to provide practice with how native English speakers express themselves pragmatically ,not just linguistically . A dual focus on pragmatic and linguistic meaning will provide learners ,particularly low level learners ,with a fuller picture of English language use .

Secondly ,students may get confused at the very beginning as to the classification of implicature categories . Their problem may well illustrate the need for more descriptive and theoretical work on implicatures . When teaching them ,the teacher would better to categorize them in an easy form for the benefits of students learning activities .

Lastly ,besides the above -mentioned Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature ,students should also be encouraged to have a dip in other linguistic theories such as the Principle of Politeness and the Speech Act Theory to help them do better jobs in inferring the conversational implicatures in their listening comprehension practice .

4 .2 Student guidance in implicature interpretations

In the course of teaching implicature in listening comprehension class ,specific guidance is needed for individual learners ,besides the general classroom instruction . The teacher student relationship will change accordingly . The teacher will retreat a little from the sole authority in the classroom to a player of fascination and guidance . Such a need is generated because of the disparity in learner characteristics .

Hence students will acquire more room in autonomy learning . In the actual classroom presentation , peer groups can also be formed to provide help to those incompetent learners which will be more efficient .

4.3 Background information in implicature interpretations

Background knowledge serves well in implicature interpretation if it is timely activated . In the course of classroom procedures , the teacher should activate listeners' existing background knowledge and provide new information that learners can use to facilitate listening . Meantime , students are encouraged to widen their knowledge background as much as possible .

4.4 Teaching listening instead of testing listening in implicature interpretations

The traditional method of testing listening must be abandoned in the new model of instruction . Many of the skills that students need to do well in the listening test apply to the whole exam and also to English listening in our everyday lives . Students need to understand how spoken English is different from written English , and to be given strategies to help them overcome the difficulties they face . The teacher is in the position to show students why English sounds so fast and how they can learn to cope with it . Since the skills in implicature interpretation need to be learned and fostered both inside and outside the classroom with the teachers' help , it is important that the teacher should teach listening in class , rather than only test it . The exercises in the students' book are necessary and useful , but they should be modified and adapted to meet the actual need , and should be used wisely in order to improve the students' abilities .

5. Limitations of the study

The author realizes that Cooperative Principle has its shortcomings such as it mainly deals with the particularized implicature instead of the generalized , which hence receives a lot of modifications from the latter linguistics (Horn & Levinson 1983 , etc) , and therefore in the interpretation of conversational implicature in listening through this kind of pragmatic model , the theories of Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature are not the only theories that can be applied . The Principle of Politeness and Speech Act Theory are also important theories . Sperber and Wilson (1986) put forward the concept of Ostensive-Inferential Communication , and the principle of optimal relevance in inferring the conversational implicature . The claim to optimal relevance leads to the hearer to accept the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance as the right , that is , the speaker intended , interpretation . However in this study the author only takes the Cooperative Principle into consideration for the benefit of students' easier accessibility , and the limitations are obvious . The author also realizes other handicaps of his study . One shortcoming is the small sample size , therefore the results of this study are referred to by keeping this in mind . And the findings could have been enhanced if the test results and attitudes of students of different competence are analyzed separately . And follow-up interviews could have helped to uncover some of the cognitive processes and decision-making skills which the participants might have used to complete task .

In order to further test the feasibility of introducing implicature inference into listening class , it is suggested that future studies should concentrate more on difference of the students with various English proficiency ; the investigation should be conducted with more subjects and the area for test should be extended to the interpretation of whole passages .

Note

1 . The classification is just a rough one for the convenience of the students' understanding . Certain category may violate several maxims at the same time .

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