Teaching Conversational Implicature:

Indirect Criticism Through Inductive and Deductive Instruction

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Abstract

Teaching pragmatics through explicit instruction promotes second language learners' pragmatic competence and, in more general terms, communicative competence (Bardovi-Harlig, 2001). This quasi-experimental study investigated the efficacy of explicit instruction with inductive and deductive modifications on English as a Second Language (ESL) learners' pragmatic development. It particularly focused on interpreting indirect criticism, a type of conversational implicature, in American English. The participants were two intact groups of high-intermediate students at an intensive English program at a southwestern American university. The results of the two instruction types suggest that while proficiency gains were significant after receiving both types of instruction, there was no difference between the two instruction types. The study also investigated the relationship between exposure to English-speaking environment and ability to interpret indirect criticism, finding no significant correlation, indicating that competence was not gained through exposure to English-speaking environments. The findings of this study confirm students benefit from pragmatic instruction and continue to support the need for pragmatic instruction for ESL learners.

Keywords: Conversational implicature, indirect criticism, explicit instruction, pragmatic competence, pragmatics

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Background

Pragmatic competence has been considered an important aspect in second language acquisition since Hymes (1966, 1972) considered pragmatic competence as a part of communicative competence. More recently, Schmidt (1993) and Bardovi-Harlig (2001) argued that English as a Second Language (ESL) learners cannot be expected to learn pragmatics through exposure only and therefore need to be taught pragmatics. There have been numerous studies on teaching speech acts (Billmyer, 1990; Kasper & Rose, 2002; Martinez-Flor, 2008; Rose & Ng, 2001). However, one understudied area of instructed pragmatics is conversational implicature (Taguchi, 2015) a term coined by Grice (1975). A review of the literature has revealed that only two studies have investigated indirect criticism, a subset of conversational implicature (Bouton, 1994; Kubota, 1995). Another neglected area is the comparison between explicit instruction with deductive modification and explicit instruction with inductive modification (Glaser, 2013). This study aims to bridge the gap in the literature by investigating the results of instructed pragmatics in indirect criticism, including the differences between explicit instruction with inductive modification and deductive modification. It also looked at the impact of the amount of time spent in an English-speaking environment and the pragmatic competence prior to instruction.

Research Questions

1a. Do ESL learners correctly interpret conversational implicature after receiving different types of instruction on conversational implicature?

1b. Do explicit with deductive modification and explicit with inductive modification have

different effects on interpreting indirect criticism?

2. Do learners who have had more exposure to an English-speaking environment interpret

conversational implicatures better than who have not?

Methods

The participants were 23 PIE students in an intact level listening/speaking class. The

inductive group consisted of 9 participants, all with Arabic as their first language (L1). The

deductive group consisted of 14 participants whose L1s were Arabic (9), Chinese (3), Spanish

(1), and Korean (1). The instruments in this study included a short background questionnaire, a

pretest, and a posttest. The background questionnaire had questions about their L1 and the

number of months they have spent in an English Speaking environment. The pretest and posttest

were created by the researchers to measure the proficiency of participants in interpreting

conversational implicature and were modeled after other conversational implicature studies

(Bouton, 1994; 1996). Each group was given one 45-minute lesson on indirect criticism (One

group received an explicit instruction with deductive modification and the other with inductive

modification). The lesson components included (a) a warm-up session, (b) an explanation of

Grice's (1975) maxims, (c) two video examples of implicature, (d) pair-work analysis of the

video examples and (d) a multiple-choice practice worksheet. The deductive group was given

part (b) after parts (c) and (d) to allow for explicit theoretical information to be given after rules

are deduced.

Results

Two items (pretest 1 and 3, posttest 1 and 4) were removed to increase instrument

reliability, resulting in .73 Cronbach's alpha. To retain parallel scales, two items were also

removed on the posttest, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of .62. In response to Research Question

1a, a paired-sample t-test was run on each group's pretest and posttest scores. The results showed

that there was a statistically significant difference between the pretest scores and the posttest

scores for both the inductive and deductive groups. The effect size was moderate for both groups

(inductive eta^2 = .40, deductive eta^2 = .35). This supports the idea that pragmatic instruction

helps students improve their interpretation of indirect criticism, which may contribute to

learners' pragmatic competence. This confirms the studies by Bouton (1994) and Rose and Ng

(2001) as well and continues to outline the need for pragmatic instruction for L2 learners

(Bardovi-Harlig, 2001; Bardovi-Harlig, Mahan-Taylor, 2003; Schmidt, 1993).

Responding to Research Question 1b, an independent sample t-test was run on the pretest

scores using the instruction type as a factor. The results of an independent sample t-test indicate

that there is no statistical difference between the inductive group and the deductive group on the

pretest or the posttest (see Table 5). This means that both groups performed similarly on the

posttest, regardless of the instruction they received, suggesting that teachers could potentially

choose to present information either inductively or deductively when teaching conversational

implicature or perhaps other areas of pragmatics. This confirms the findings of Kubota (1995)

that inductive and deductive modifications do not significantly vary the proficiency gains.

Responding to Research Question 2, the nonparametric Spearman rho Correlation test

was computed and it did not reveal a statistically significant relationship between the pretest

results and the number of months spent in an English-speaking environment r_s = .11, $p < .05$ (r_s

$_{critical}$ = .40). The results indicated there was no relationship between number of months of

exposure and students' pragmatic competence level in terms of interpreting indirect criticism.

This result questions the view that exposure without instruction typically leads to improvement

of pragmatic competence. It supports that instruction is necessary for L2 learners as "some necessary features of language and language use are quite subtle in the input and not immediately noticeable by learners" (Bardovi-Harlig & Mahan-Taylor, 2003, p. 4). To make the input more salient and noticeable, explicit pragmatic rules of the target language should be employed in ESL classrooms (Schmidt, 1993), and explicit instruction with either deductive or inductive modification could be an effective way to present the information related to indirect criticism. It should be noted, however, that pragmatic instruction should consider the needs and cultural backgrounds of ESL learners. Pragmatic norms should "equip the students to express themselves in exactly the way they choose to do so- rudely, tactfully, or in an elaborately polite manner" (Thomas, 1983, p. 96). When considering indirect criticism, teachers should therefore give L2 learners the ability to recognize such remarks and to use them if and when they desire.

Relevance to PIE and Second Language Learning

The results of the study suggest some important points regarding teaching pragmatics and, in particular, conversational implicature for ESL students studying English for Academic Purposes (EAP). One of the implications of the study is that conversational implicature, particularly indirect criticism could be taught to level 5 PIE students who are taking listening/speaking class through explicit instruction with either deductive or inductive modification. Inference is an important skill that PIE students should master as there are inference questions not only in their PIE exams but also in TOEFL exam. Therefore, PIE instructors could help their students practice inferencing skills through teaching indirect criticism as it requires listeners to infer the implied meaning through contextual clues and this would both help learners being aware of pragmatic rules of English and help them practice their inference skills.

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