

# Conversational Implicature in English Listening Comprehension Teaching

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**Abstract**—Owing to the importance of listening comprehension among the four basic second language acquisition skills, considerable attention has been given to the pedagogic method of improving listeners' proficiency. In China, there exist some problems in English listening teaching in Senior Middle Schools. Professor Wang Zhongyan said "In listening teaching, it is not unusual that teachers just play records without offering any hints". In listening teaching, listeners are only viewed as passive receivers without any hints. After listeners listen to a passage once or twice, teachers check the answers, and then play the tape sentence by sentence. However, listening comprehension is an active process. The importance of developing students' listening competence in Senior Middle School English Teaching is obvious. So far much work has been done at home and abroad to look for ways to facilitate students' listening competence.

**Index Terms**—listening comprehension, cooperative principle, conversational implicature, instruction model to teach listening

## I. INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension is a complex activity in which listeners must distinguish between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what is gathered in all of the above, and interpret it within immediate and larger sociocultural context of the utterance. (as cited in JT Chen, 2011)

In order to have a general picture of the theoretical framework of the present study, it is necessary to first review the literature on the mainstream listening comprehension researches in domestic and foreign countries.

In foreign researches, from a Schema-theoretic Perspective, Cognitive scientists believe that knowledge is organized in the form of schemata, that is, stereotyped scenarios and sequences of actions that fit common situation. Schemata aids comprehension by providing a context and filling in missing information. From a Psycholinguistic Perspective, Anderson has proposed a cognitive framework of language comprehension.

In the past 20 years there are many scholars in China who have shown their interests towards the subject of conversational implicature. The early studies concentrate on the introduction of the theories, while the latest researches begin to apply the theories to the course of instruction and try to work out the pedagogical implications that are applicable in China. Li Yaling made one study on the relationship between the conversational implicature and listening comprehension, which points out that abiding by the basic notions and maxims of Conversational Implicature will help to better the students' performance in listening comprehension.

Though researchers have pointed out that it is necessary to teach implicature to ESL students, the situation is that there is still not enough attention paid to it. And most of the studies so far still center around the theoretical discussion on the implicature interpretations. A lot of teachers still give their lectures in listening class by using the traditional pedagogy. The students wait for the teacher to play the tape and then wait for the explanations. It is necessary to probe into the subject in order to enhance the development of the students' listening comprehension competence.

These questions make us think of teaching listening comprehension in Senior Middle Schools from a new perspective by explaining listening comprehension under the framework of the Theory of conversational implicature proposed by H. P. Grice.

## II. CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE THEORY

### A. Cooperative Principle

#### 1. Definition of Cooperative Principle

Grice(1986) noticed that in daily conversations people do not usually say things directly but tend to imply them. For example, when A and B are talking about their mutual friend C, who is now working in a bank, and A asks B how C is getting on, B might answer "Oh, quite well, I think; he likes his colleagues and he has not been to prison yet." Here B certainly implied something, though he did not say it explicitly. Grice coined the term implicature. And he explored the question how people manage to convey implicature, which is not explicitly expressed. His answer is that there is some regularity in conversation "Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, co-operative efforts, and each participant recognizes them, to some extent, a common purpose or a set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted

direction.” (as cited in Wu, 2005) This purpose or direction is usually fixed at the beginning of conversation. Certainly, the common purpose or direction could come about in the course of conversation for the participants to settle the same problems. Grice formulates a rough general principle --the co-operative principle, which participants will be expected to observe. Grice has defined the cooperative principle as “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchanges in which you are engaged.” In other words, the participants should be co-operative, and then their utterances can be relevant to each other. Only in this way can the participants infer what the other one really means in their conversation. And this principle is known as the Cooperative Principle or CP for short. (as cited in Wang, 2011)

## 2. The component maxims of CP

The cooperative principle is concise and comprehensive. It has wide explanatory ability and reflects the most essential meta-requirement of communicative activity. The four maxims and their subordinate maxims proposed by Grice are:

- (1) The maxim of quantity. It refers to the quantity of the information to be provided and has two maxims:
  - a. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
  - b. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange);
- (2) The maxim of quality. Try to make your contribution one that is true especially
  - a. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
  - b. Do not say what you believe is false;
- (3) The maxim of relevance

Under this category, Grice only proposed one subordinate maxim, that is, make sure that whatever you say is relevant.

- (4) The maxim of manner. Be perspicuous, and the specific maxims are:
  - a. Avoid ambiguity;
  - b. Be orderly.
  - c. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity);
  - d. Avoid obscurity of expression;

Grice pointed out: the adherent importance of the respective maxim is different. When following the respective maxim, different speaker, different occasion, they have different emphasis. According to Grice's implicature inference model, the purpose of the communicator's conveying certain idea is to make the receiver understand his intention of conveying this idea. Intention is the psychological symbol of the communication participants which can only be inferred but not decoded. From Grice's point of view, these maxims may be violated from time to time, and the conversational implicature is created just due to the violation of them.

### B. Violation of the Maxims

In the above we have had a full discussion about Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) and its maxims. There are cases when a speaker fails a maxim or several maxims in conversations in order to convey additional meaning. He appears to infringe the maxims deliberately in appearance, and the speaker will assume that he is still adhering to the maxims at a deeper level and that he infringes the maxims because he wants to draw the hearer's attention, so that the hearer can get particular inferences and understand the particular inferences. In fact, conversational implicatures come about just in such cases. Here are some examples of the violation of the four maxims: (as cited in M Lee, 2011)

#### (1) Violation of Quantity Maxim

For example,

A: When Tom left the school last night?

B: Eleven o'clock. And he went to Jean's home.

According to quantity maxim, the contribution should not be more informative than is required. In this way, in the example, as the answer to A, generally, “eleven o'clock” is enough. However, B adds the later sentence, provides some information that seems not necessary and violates the quantity maxim. We can infer that B wants to tell A that Tom might have some special relationship with Jean. (as cited in SNM Goretta)

#### (2) Violation of Quality Maxim

For example,

A: What will you do if you fail the exam?

B: I'll eat my hat.

Obviously, B violates the quality maxim because “hat” cannot be eaten. The words can be inferred that: I will not fail this exam definitely. So words expressed with irony, metaphor, meiosis and rhetorical question, etc. usually belong to the violation of quality maxim.

#### (3) Violation of Relevance Maxim:

For example,

A: Did you enjoy the play?

B: Well, I thought the ice creams they sold in the interval were quite good.

It seems that the answer has nothing to do with what A asks, that is, it violates the relevance maxim. However, if A thinks that B keeps to the cooperative principle, he can infer immediately that: The play is terrible.

## (4) Violation of Manner Maxim

For example,

A: What did your sister buy at Sears yesterday?

B: She bought a red dress, she bought a green dress, and she bought a blue dress.

B answers the question by repeating the same sentence structure which violates the maxim that the contribution should be brief, and gives the words the implicature that my sister is always buying dresses.

C. *Characteristics of Conversational Implicature*

Grice states that conversational implicature had five characteristics:

## (1) Cancellability

Conversational implicatures are cancelable or defeasible if we add some other premises to the original ones. For example,

A: Do you want some coffee?

B: Coffee would keep me awake.

Here it seems that B does not want to have a cup of coffee because coffee will keep him awake. But if B adds this sentence:

A: Do you want some coffee?

B: Coffee would keep me awake. And I want to stay awake.

Then, B's meaning changes; we can infer that he is willing to have a cup of coffee.

## (2) Non-detachability

The conversational implicature is attached to the semantic content of what is said, not to the linguistic form used. Therefore it is possible to use a synonym and keep the implicature intact. In other words, the implicature will not be detached, separated from the utterance as a whole, even though the specific words may be changed. (as cited in WA Davis)

For example,

A: What did you think of the lecture?

B: Well, I thought the lecture hall was big.

B implies that he is not quite interested in the lecture. If B replaces "thought" with "believe, should say or reckoned, etc.", "big" with "large, great, etc.", the implicature of the sentence remains the same.

## (3) Calculability

The conversational implicature of an utterance is different from its literal meaning. There is no direct link between the two. So if it is to succeed as the speaker intends to, there must be ways for the hearer to work it out.

## (4) Non-conventionality

Conversational implicature is an extra meaning, not inherent in the words used. One cannot find conversational implicatures listed in the dictionary. To work out the conversational implicature of an utterance, one needs to know its conventional meaning and the context in which it is used. In other words, a conversational implicature is the adding up of the conventional meaning and the context. The implicature will also change when the context changes. (as cited in H.G.Widdowson)

For example,

A young man invited a lady to dinner and escorted her back home after dinner and said:

Man: Would you like to invite me up for a coffee?

Woman: Oh, I'm afraid the place is in a terrible mess.

Of course, the man does not just want the lady to invite him a cup of coffee. The lady understands it. On the other hand, the lady's response does not lie in declaring the house is in a mess. Obviously, her answer is a polite refuse. This example indicates that conversational implicature should be decided according to the context.

## (5) Indeterminacy

An expression with a single meaning can give rise to different implicatures on different occasions, and indeed on any one occasion the set of associated implicatures may not be exactly determinable. (as cited in J Verschueren)

For example,

John is a machine.

This could convey that John is cold, or efficient, or never stops working, or puffs and blows, or has little in the way of grey matter, or indeed any and all of these.

## III. THE NECESSITY IN APPLYING THE THEORY IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION TEACHING

Though researchers have pointed out that it is necessary to teach implicature to ESL students, the situation is that there is still not enough attention paid to it. And most of the studies so far still center around the theoretical discussion on the implicature interpretations. A lot of teachers still give their lectures in listening class by using the traditional pedagogy. The students wait for the teacher to play the tape and then wait for the explanations. According to one survey conducted at Tancheng No.2 middle school, 90% of the teachers in listening class just play tapes and conduct the

explanations. A few of them display some variation, including the practice of listening techniques and application of oral speech. When it comes to the passages, some of them will totally be at a loss. Some gradually lose their enthusiasm and motivation. Teachers often focus their attention on the textbooks, the students do not feel like the testing and some of them even believe that tests cannot improve their listening competence. This thesis tries to demonstrate the application of the Theory of Conversational Implicature to the teaching of English listening for the purpose of improving both teaching and learning. Make an effort to find a more efficient instruction model to teach listening.

#### IV. EXPERIMENTAL STUDY ON THE INTERPRETATION OF CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE IN LISTENING COMPREHENSION

##### A. *The Objective of the Study and Hypothesis*

Though researchers have pointed out that it is necessary to teach implicature to ESL students, the situation is that there is still not enough attention paid to it. The research was conducted in Senior Middle Schools for the purpose of identifying the feasibility of teaching implicature in Senior Middle Schools' English listening class, and found a more efficient instruction model to teach listening.

Based on the discussions made in the previous sections, one research hypothesis is formed. The application of the Theory of Conversational Implicature to listening teaching is more effective than the traditional approach in improving the students' listening comprehension ability.

##### B. *Methods*

###### 1. **Subjects**

The subjects are Grade Three students from Taishan University, class One and Two in Grade Two. 20 students of Class One are chosen as Experimental Group (EG), 20 students of Class Two used as Control Group (CG). In the experimental class, I tried to explain the Theory of Conversational Implicature in listening teaching, focusing on the development of the students' listening ability as well as their linguistic competence. While in the control class, during the teaching process, the author mainly taught in the traditional way, focusing on the acquisition of linguistic knowledge and explanation of linguistic phenomenon. The experiment lasted on three month. Each teaching class had two periods per week.

###### 2 **Instruments**

The instruments used in the experiment are two tests. The test consists of a Pretest and a Posttest. The goal of the pretest was to identify the present situation about their listening comprehension before the experiment, while the posttest is designed to provide the evidence to know the efficient of the experiment. Each test paper consisted of fifteen short conversations.

###### 3. **Pretest and Posttest**

Before experiment, all the closed students took an English listening comprehension test at the same time. The goal of the pretest was to identify the present situation about their listening comprehension before the experiment. The test paper was taken from the quiz. It consists of 10 questions in the form of conversations or dialogues to be answered within 20 minutes.

Pretest: test 1 (as cited in New horizon college skill training book one)

1. M: Congratulations! I understand you've got a job. When will you start to work?

W: You must be thinking of someone else. I'm still waiting to hear the good news.

Q: What does the woman mean?

A) She does not need the job. B) She hasn't got a job yet.

C) She has got a job. D) She is going to start work soon.

2. W: Did you see last night film on Channel 4?

M: Well, I meant to see it, but a friend of mine came to see me. We had a nice long talk about our school days.

Q: What did the man do last night?

A) He watched television with his friend.

B) He stayed at home talking with his friend.

C) He went to see a film with his friend.

D) He went to see his schoolmate.

3. W: Mr. Jones, your student Bill shows great enthusiasm for musical instrument.

M: I only wish he should have as much for his English lessons.

Q: What do we learn from the conversation about Bill?

A) He has made great progress in his English.

B) He is not very interested in English songs.

C) He is a student of the music department.

D) He is not very enthusiastic about his English lessons.

4. W: Your room is a mess. When is the last time you tidied your room?

M: It was when Linda.

Q: What does the man mean?

A) He hasn't cleaned his room since Linda visited him.

- B) Linda is the only person who ever comes to see him.  
 C) He's been too busy to clean his room.
5. W: Are you sure you've corrected all the mistakes in this paper?  
 M: Maybe I'd better read it though again.  
 Q: What's the man going to do?  
 A) Leave the mistakes as they are.  
 B) Read the newspapers again.  
 C) Check the paper for mistakes.
6. W: Are you coming with me to the museum?  
 M: I already have my hands full with this report.  
 Q: What does the man mean?  
 A) He must hand in a full report on the museum.  
 B) He is too busy to go along.  
 C) He has to put down the report.
7. W: How did you enjoy the football match last night?  
 M: Well, I got home too late to watch it.  
 Q: What can we learn from this conversation?  
 A) The man enjoyed the match very much  
 B) The man was too tired to watch the game.  
 C) The game was over before the man got home.
8. W: I think you've been working too hard. You should take a vacation.  
 M: Tell that to the pile of papers on my desk!  
 Q: What situation is the man in?  
 A) He has too much work to do.  
 B) He'll take work with him on his vacation.  
 C) He's already made his vacation plan.
9. W: Was the football match as wonderful as you expected?  
 M: It was a waste of time. I should have done my homework.  
 Q: What's the man's opinion about the football match?  
 A) He enjoyed it very much.  
 B) He felt disappointed.  
 C) He was too busy with homework to watch the match.
10. W: Mark is playing computer games.  
 M: Should he do that when the final exam is drawing near?  
 Q: What does the man think Mark should do?  
 A) Go on with the game.  
 B) Draw pictures on the computer.  
 C) Review his lessons.
- Following are the scores of the two classes:

Class 1		Class 2	
Students	Scores	Students	Scores
A	60	1	90
B	40	2	50
C	30	3	30
D	60	4	60
E	50	5	40
F	20	6	20
G	40	7	10
H	10	8	50
I	80	9	80
J	70	10	90
K	60	11	50
L	50	12	30
M	40	13	60
N	30	14	70
O	50	15	50
P	70	16	40
Q	90	17	60
R	30	18	50
S	50	19	40
T	60	20	30
Total	990	-	1000

Test 1 showed that there is no significant difference between the EG and the CG in the pretest. The average of the subjects' global scores in the Control Group was 50.0, while the average of the subjects' scores in the Experimental Group was 49.5.

A posttest was given to the control class and experimental class. The goal of the posttest is to know the changes of the students' result comparing with the pretest. According to the changes we can test the hypothesis whether the application of the Theory of Conversational Implicature to listening teaching is more effective than the traditional approach in improving the students' listening comprehension ability or not. The posttest was composed of ten short conversations.

Posttest: test 2 (as cited in <http://www.233.com/cet4/shitiku/moniti/20081209/092516167.htm>)

1. M: Did you go to the big sale at Spencer's yesterday?  
W: I had to visit my aunt in the hospital.  
Q: What does the woman imply about the sale?  
a. She bought something for her aunt.  
b. She missed it.  
c. She was there only briefly.
2. M: Would you like a copy of Professor Smith's article?  
W: Thanks, if it's not too much trouble.  
Q: What does the woman imply?  
a. She is not interested in the article.  
b. She has given the man much trouble.  
c. She would like to have a copy of the article.
3. M: I've noticed that you get letters from Canada from time to time. Would you mind saving the stamps for me? My sister collects them.  
W: My roommate already asked for them.  
Q: What does the woman imply?  
a. She will save the stamps for the man's sister.  
b. She will no longer get letters from Canada.  
c. She can not give the stamps to the man's sister.
4. M: Do you want to turn on the air conditioner or open the window?  
W: I love fresh air if you don't mind.  
Q: What can be inferred from the woman's answer?  
a. She'd like to have the windows open.  
b. She likes to have the air conditioner on.  
c. The air is heavily polluted.
5. W: We're informed that the 11:30 train is late again.  
M: Why did the railway company even bother to print a schedule?  
Q: What do we learn from the conversation?  
a. The train seldom arrives on time.  
b. The schedule has been misprint.  
c. The speakers arrived at the station late.
6. M: I am told that Alice is trying to find a job in an electronics company.  
W: As far as I know, she is good at anything but electronics.  
Q: What does the woman mean?  
a. Alice does not know much about electronics.  
b. Alice is unlikely to find a job anywhere.  
c. Alice is interested in anything but electronics.
7. M: Jimmy is going on a journey tomorrow. Shall we have a farewell dinner tonight?  
W: Do you think it's necessary? You know he'll be away just for a few days.  
Q: What does the woman mean?  
a. Jimmy is going to set out tonight.  
b. Jimmy has not decided on his journey.  
c. There is no need to have a farewell dinner.
8. W: I'm thinking of taking five courses next semester.  
M: Wouldn't four be wiser?  
Q: What does the man mean?  
a. There are too many courses offered to students.  
b. The woman should take fewer courses next term.  
c. The man will take four courses next term.
9. M: Is Jane looking forward to going home for the summer?  
W: She is counting the days.

Q: What does the woman imply?

- a. Jane is looking for a summer job.
- b. Jane is packing for the summer vacation.
- c. Jane is eager to go home for the vacation.

10. W: Have you met Marge yet?

M: We are from the same hometown.

Q: What does the man mean?

- a. Marge has gone home.
- b. Marge feels at home there.
- c. He's known Marge for a long time.

Following are the scores of the two classes:

Class 1		Class 2	
Students	Scores	Students	Scores
A	60	1	70
B	70	2	50
C	50	3	80
D	40	4	30
E	80	5	20
F	80	6	90
G	70	7	10
H	40	8	30
I	50	9	40
J	30	10	50
K	60	11	60
L	60	12	40
M	40	13	50
N	50	14	60
O	60	15	70
P	20	16	40
Q	40	17	30
R	60	18	60
S	50	19	50
T	70	20	40
Total	1080	-	970

Test 2 showed that there is some difference between the EG and the CG in the pretest. The average of the subjects' global scores in the Control Group was 48.5, while the average of the subjects' scores in the Experimental Group was 54.0.

### C. Major Findings

(1) In the course of dialogue analysis the students are trained to develop their culture sensitivity, which enables them to feel the different cultures that English and Chinese embody respectively. And this will help them achieve the real cross-culture competence in their speaking and writing.

(2) The new model brings variation into classroom teaching, which would be very boring if the controller is always the teacher. These variations combined with the students' achievements in practice help raise their interest in language learning, and stimulate their intrinsic motivation which is held to be valuable for second language acquisition.

### D. Pedagogical Implications

Based on previous studies the author draws some implications and provides some pedagogy that might be useful in the teaching of listening comprehension to senior high students.

(1) Introducing linguistic theories into listening class. Since the students are in want of linguistic theories to guide their listening, it will be the teachers' duty to satisfy the need. Though the textbook does not provide additional theories on listening comprehension, the teacher should serve as an organizer of resources and as a resource himself to convey the necessary theories to the students.

(2) Introducing background information in implicature interpretation. Background knowledge refers to what a person finds out about the world such as cultural background knowledge. Miscommunications caused by lack of shared cultural background knowledge are not uncommon.

(3) Offering Student Guidance in Implicature Interpretations

However, there are some limitations in this study. This study was done in Tancheng No.1 middle school and the subjects chosen were Senior Three students. The students in other middle schools were not included. We can't say it is also the same case in other places. The size of the experiment is small. Generally speaking, the larger the participant sample is, the more reliable the experiment as a whole will probably use. But for this study, the sample is not big enough. Because only two classes in senior three attended, the size is not enough. Besides, this study focused mainly on short conversations because for tests in the class, short conversations are easier to learn than other forms of exercises

and it is the main form of listening test in senior high. In listening classes, other materials can be used such as films, news reports, etc., and if permitted the teacher can use VCDs or DVDs in classroom teaching. In that case, the effect of watching films will be better than that of listening to tapes. Last but not least, the listening teachers should also focus on helping students to improve their comprehensive listening comprehension in real settings instead of teaching in a testing approach.

#### V. CONCLUSION

This thesis gives a literature review of listening comprehension and introduces Grice's theory of Conversational Implicature. This thesis also has offered an experimental study on the possibility of teaching the implicature to Senior Three Middle Schools' students under the context of Chinese teaching environments and the discussions on the feasibility of applying it to improve the students' listening competence. The study shows that the traditional instruction models need updating to keep in pace with the demands of the new era. Some students may find the inadequacy of the teaching but they cannot figure out how to improve and they also have no alternatives. So it should be the teacher's duty to work out some new ways to interest the students and improve the effectiveness of listening comprehension class. The author also provides several suggestions for both the teachers and students to improve the teaching of listening comprehension. These suggestions include the introduction of linguistic theories into listening class, the need to change the principles and model for instruction, and the applicable steps for listening strategy training. It is expected that the findings obtained in this study can be of help for Chinese teachers of English to have a better understanding of what the students actually think and what they actually do in listening class, and to help find an efficient instruction model in the classroom, and also be of help for the students to have a correct adopt possible evaluation of their English listening strategies and competence and to measures to improve their listening.

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