

Sentential and Conversational Implicature Inference-Making Ability of Tourism College Students Based on Proficiency Levels

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Abstract:

Studies on implicature inference-making ability of tourism students are 'deficient,' meanwhile implicature inference-making ability is crucial for tourism students. The current study aimed at: a) comparing implicature inference-making ability of sentences and short conversations between the low proficiency and high proficiency Tourism college students and b) exploring the factors which affect the learners' implicature inference making-abilities. This is a mixed-methods study. The participants involved 320 students. Data collected with test for inferential ability were analyzed with Two-way Anova and qualitative data through iterative analysis. It is concluded that implicature inference-making ability of single sentences and short conversations between the low proficiency and high proficiency of the tourism college students is significantly different. However, there is no interaction of types of discourse and proficiency levels on implicature inference-making ability. Since the degree of skills affects implicature inference-making ability, the improvement of the students' pragmatic understanding in English for Tourism should synchronize the types of implicature inference-making ability to be applied and their levels of skills.

Keywords: *discourse, English for tourism, inference-making ability, pragmatic meaning*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of tourism and hospitality education, teachers need to prepare knowledge and competencies or skills related to students' prospective careers and the size of the classroom (Iswati & Hastuti, 2020). In tertiary level of EFL education, particularly English language department and Tourism colleges, the students should be prepared with 'English for Tourism'

(Prachanant, 2012), one of the main courses in EFL education or Hospitality and Tourism educations. In fact, not all workers in hospitality and tourism sectors are those trained in hospitality and Tourism educations. Some of them were only introduced with basic tourism-related courses, like English for Tourism. Meanwhile, the employees in tourism and travel industries do need communicative English (Sari, 2016), including pragmatic abilities. Therefore, the workers should be prepared with technical English used in the area of hospitality and tourism industries.

Being in a vocational setting, tourism industry workers should also have professional communication (Jameson 2013) in global world. Absolutely, communication skills are an important element of hospitality education and industry (Bobanovis & Grzinic, 2011). In fact, Afzali and Rezapoorian (2014) report that tourism students are incompetent in performing and understanding pragmatics, the expressions with contextual meanings based on the situations. English with its particular objectives are inseparable from pragmatic use (Mohammadi et al., 2015) or pragmatic meanings become a key in communications (Wilson, 2018).

Some studies indicate that in hospitality and tourism industries, workers should show adequate pragmatic ability, for instance, understanding idiomatic expressions for their roles (Arifuddin et al., 2020) either expressed through individual sentences (or restatements) or dialogues (or dialogues). Therefore, students and institutions should anticipate the trends in the development of global hospitality and tourism industries (Kim & Jeong, 2018).

In the field of English for Tourism education, several studies have investigated learners' pragmatic competence, including their ability to comprehend implicatures in both everyday and professional communication (Taguchi, 2011; Nguyen, 2019). Prior research has predominantly focused on general pragmatic development or instructional interventions aimed at enhancing pragmatic awareness (e.g., Ishihara & Cohen, 2010; Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998). These studies have provided valuable insights into the nature of L2 pragmatic learning; however, they often overlook the cognitive process of inference-making that underlies successful implicature comprehension. In tourism contexts—where indirectness, politeness strategies, and intercultural nuances are frequent—learners' ability to draw inferences from implicit meanings becomes essential. Taguchi (2007) demonstrated that pragmatic comprehension varies across proficiency levels, and her subsequent work (Taguchi, 2008) highlighted how processing speed and accuracy in implicature understanding differ depending on learners' linguistic background and experience. Despite these contributions, there remains a notable lack of empirical studies specifically comparing the inference-making ability of low- and high-proficiency tourism students in understanding both sentential and conversational implicatures in English for Tourism. Additionally, studies such as Yamanaka (2003) and Roever (2005) confirm the role of proficiency and task type in implicature comprehension, yet they do not focus on domain-specific contexts like tourism. Therefore, a research gap persists in understanding how tourism students with varying English proficiency levels process and interpret implicatures, which is critical for improving pragmatic instruction in tourism-related curricula.

Accordingly, using mixed-methods, this study compared difference of sentential and conversational implicature inference-making ability between the low proficient and the high proficient students in tourism college in tertiary level and explored the factors which affect the learners' inference making-abilities.

The current study provides empirical profile of pragmatic competency of the students with different proficiency levels based on discourse genres. This is an essential contribution to the field of both classroom pragmatics, as a part of intercultural communication skills, and English for Specific Purposes (or ESP), English for Tourism in particular. As Yang et al. (2020) suggest, inference-making ability in international communication is crucial that employees and employers working in an international hospitality and tourism industries. That is why the present study is worth studying.

Accordingly, the following research questions were addressed: 1) At what extent does sentential and conversational implicature inference-making ability between the low proficiency and the high proficiency students differ? 2) What factors affect the pragmatic inference-making ability of the students undertaking English for Tourism?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Sentential and Conversational Implicature Inference

It clearly indicates that cultural background is a reliable predictor of nonnative speaker ability to infer implicatures the way native speakers do (Bouton, 1988). Listening to conversations is an interactive process by the listener in shaping the speaker's meaning (Hamouda, 2013) and understanding the pragmatic meanings or implicatures by inferencing (Solak & Erdem 2016) the activities from different levels (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). Importantly, a method of teaching and learning activities have been applied in foreign language learning (Pineh, 2022).

To infer the implicatures of different types of texts or discourses, it needs an understanding of a variety of conjunctions that connect the different parts of a text or a conversation (Ababneh & Ramadan, 2013). For example, inferring short conversations might be more complicated than inferring single sentences (or restatements). Therefore, the understanding of bridging anaphora in conversations or discourses requires the interplay of various information sources which are important in understanding the discourse or conversation context and content (Irmer, 2009). In other words, global inference-making of short conversations is more difficult than single sentences.

2.2 Factors Affecting Implicature Inference-making Ability

Understanding implicatures or pragmatic meaning is difficult for adolescents (Karasinski & Weismer, 2010). It indicates that readers with high memory made both bridging (single sentences or restatement) and elaborative (dialogues or conversations) inferences, while those with low memory made only bridging inferences (George, et al., 1997) supported by some aspects, namely vocabulary knowledge and memory (Currie & Cain, 2015).

Other aspects also that affect inference-making ability of short conversations or discourses, for example, decoding skills (Prior, et al., 2014), frequent use of assessment and controlling strategies, prior knowledge, self-awareness, frequent efforts to infer word meanings (Hu & Nassaji, 2014), age and instructional language (Aishwarya & Deborah, 2020), level and type of listening text (Huang, 2014), decoding skills (Prior et al., 2014). In addition, linguistic understanding, including syntactic or structural features of sentences, lexico-semantic knowledge and prior knowledge are crucial to the understanding of discourse context (Irmer, 2009). Besides, literal understanding of the words or sentences (Tomlinson, et al., 2011) also influence the ability to infer dialogues. However, the students' knowledge of vocabulary only helps to

understand the contents of the sentences, not to understand the meaning of pragmatics in listening activities (Mehrpour & Rahimi, 2010).

In conversations, foreign language learners experience many problems in inferring the implicatures expressed by speakers (Yavuz, et al., 2015). Those who obtained high scores in the listening test could not always infer successfully when faced with an audio-visual presentation, while some of those who obtained low scores (Low proficiency) in the listening test showed a very strong capacity to make inferences with visual clues (Guo, 2015). However, there was a significant relationship between inference-making ability and comprehension skills (Cain, et al., 2001). It also shows that proficiency affects inference-making ability (Jalilifar, et al., 2011).

Furthermore, various factors that influence inference-making ability towards the speaker's meanings in auditory discourses or conversations tests have also been identified, and it indicates that participants still encounter obstacles in inferring the speaker's meaning implied individual sentences and discourses (or conversations) in listening to Prediction TOEFL (Arifuddin, et al., 2018; Arifuddin, et al., 2017).

2.3. English for Tourism for Tourism Colleges Students

Generally, teachers promote English as essential in the future employability, but learners do not realize that English is important in hospitality and tourism industry (Bury & Oka, 2017). In Hospitality and Tourism colleges, the topics in their curriculums include management, marketing, tourism, English for Tourism and communication in general (Lu & Adler, 2009). Thus, English for Tourism is a crucial course in Hospitality and Tourism education.

Some research focusing on English for Specific Purposes, for instance, English for Tourism, has consistently proved that English is a key to successful communication in comparable multicultural industries (Jenkins, et al., 2011). The language use is a crucial phenomenon in the context of tourism discourse. Due to the role of expressive meanings, tourism discourses taught in English for Tourism also contributes to the understanding of pragmatic meanings needed by the travelers or tourism industry workers (Cappeli, 2013).

In intercultural communication, the interactants tend to use indirect speech containing pragmatic meaning. In addition, in transactional communication in tourism industries, the role of English for Tourism skills is important (Cruz & Lopez, 2017). Even 95.58% of tourism slogans need conversational implicature or pragmatic ability to infer or interpret (Laosirattanachai & Panyametheekul, 2018).

There are two problems learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The lecturer's problems involve ineffective teaching method and material development, while the student's problems include English proficiency, lack of vocabulary, lack of motivation and basic skill in reading, writing, listening and speaking skills (Claria & Warmadewi, 2020).

Regarding teaching materials, some studies report the shortage of materials in English for Tourism curriculum. Meanwhile, the importance of ESP in tourism industries is unavoidable (Afzalia & Rezapoorianb, 2014). It is important to supplement EFL textbooks with supporting teaching materials and examples of activities dealing with pragmatics (Nu & Murray, 2020). If the information about the distribution of pragmatics in English for Tourism books, teachers have the portrait of the content of the course, and if necessary, they can support with other related materials (Alemi & Irandoost, 2012).

In communication, the meanings of modals in English for Tourism. Understanding modals needs inference-making ability, local or global inference ability (Radovanović, 2020), and the students should understand the meanings of unfamiliar words, such as an idiom (Kim, 2015). Due to lack of pragmatic ability, the students' ability in responding varied and was less impressive (Mayanto, 2016). The students should be facilitated to increase authentic exposure to the real situation (Kohnke, 2021) to boost their pragmatic ability, for example, understanding the meanings of idioms (Allani, et al., 2022). Thus, pragmatic ability is important in the world of tourism industries (Kim, 2016).

In reality, oral and written communication skills are important in hospitality and tourism at different position levels (Bobanovic & Grzinic, 2011). Thus, English language proficiency and fluency of the students during their study facilitate their educational processes and their prospective careers in hospitality and tourism industries.

In reality, the significance of mastering communication skills for ESL learners engaged in jobs related to tourism has led researchers to conduct research in order to analyse the pragmatic needs of the students (Afzali and Rezapoorian, 2014). Misunderstanding in communication frequently occurs due to low pragmatic ability and proficiency (Sirikhan & Prapphal, 2011) which tend to be contextualized (Flor, 2019) in academic discourses (Martin, 2022). It shows that the levels of English proficiency affect pragmatic ability. In the area of ESP, Widiyastuti et al. (2020) studies the illocutionary act analysis of English tourism advertisements in Indonesia, and it indicates that interpreting advertisement language is difficult. Loredana (2017) found that in tourism settings, sometimes there is an unambiguous language that might lead to a breakdown in conversation. Therefore, pragmatic-inference ability is crucial for hospitality and tourism workers. Thus, pragmatic ability as a part of linguistic knowledge should be taught in English language classroom (Chen, 2020), for example, English for Tourism.

Based on the literature review, it is hypothesized: 1) "There is a significant difference of implicature inference-making ability between the low proficiency and the high proficiency of Tourism college students in Sentences and Short Conversations," 2) "There is a significant different of implicature inference-making ability between the low proficiency and the high proficiency of Tourism college students in Sentences and Short Conversations ," 3) "There is a significant difference of implicature inference-making ability between the low proficiency and the high proficiency of Tourism college students in Sentences and Short Conversations," 4) "There is an interaction between the levels of proficiency and types discourses in implicature inference-making ability of the Tourism college students."

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

Regarding data collection, data analysis and types of data, this study applied Mixed-methods. As a mixed-methods study, the quantitative study applied two independent groups Two-way ANOVA. This design is used because the variables of the present study involved independent variables 'types of discourses', sentences and short conversations, and dependent variables 'proficiency levels' and 'implicature inference-making ability.' Qualitative data were collected with a questionnaire and interview.

3.2. Instruments

In the current study, two types of tests and a questionnaire were used to gather the data. The 'Single Sentences' Test was used to test implicature inference-making ability of sentential implicature and the Short Conversations Test to test conversational implicature inference-making ability that contain 50 items respectively. All test items were adapted from the old version Listening Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) that measures implicature inference-making ability. Based on the Split-half Validity Tests, the reliability values of the Single Sentences Test and the Short Conversations Test are .89 and .87 respectively. The second instrument is an Open-ended Questionnaire which leads the participants to expressing their personal difficulties in listening and the factors affecting their inference-making ability to interpret the implicatures (or speakers' intent). Besides, short interviews were also applied clarify the factors that affect pragmatic understanding of both the low and the high proficiency students. Expert judgment was applied to validate the three types of instruments. The data collected with that questionnaire and interview were analyzed qualitatively, namely. compiling, disassembling, codifying, reassembling, analyzing, interpreting, and concluding (Yin, 2011).

3.3. Population and Sample

Population of the present study is all students of tourism colleges in Bali and Lombok. In reference to the objective of the present study, random sampling technique was applied to select two groups of learners from 450 students who took part in the TOEFL test. The test was done before collecting qualitative data. Based on the TOEFL scores, the students were grouped into two levels of proficiency, low proficiency students and high proficiency students as sample of the current study.

- 1) The first group, 'low proficiency': included 160 students, TOEFL Score of 450 or below, never attended TOEFL training.
- 2) The second group, 'High proficiency': 160 students, TOEFL Score of 500 or above, have attended TOEFL training.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

As mentioned in Instruments, two research instruments were applied to collect the data.

Research Question 1. The listening tests were played 2 sessions/rounds using audio player. The first round, Single sentences adapted Restatements tested in TOEFL Listening section, provided test takers the opportunity to infer the speaker's meanings implied in the Single Sentences Test (Multiple choices) to both the low proficiency and the high proficiency students.

Example:

1. Sentence : You should have reported the case.
Implicature : You do not report the case.
The second round, 'Short Conversations,' the participants inferred the speakers' meaning implied in the 'Short Conversations' Test to both the low proficiency and the high proficiency students.
Example:
 2. (Woman) : What do you like about your new house?
 3. (Man) : It's very close to a park.
- (Narrator) : What does the man mean?

These two types of tests were done before collecting qualitative data needed to answer Research Question 2.

Research Question 2. The data were gathered with a questionnaire in the form of Listening Difficulty Inventory. Participants filled out the questionnaire that had been provided, which contained factors that made it difficult for them to recognize the speakers' meanings in the single sentences and in the short conversations.

3.5. Data Analysis

As a mixed-methods study, quantitative and qualitative analyses were applied. The data to answer Research Question 1 were analyzed with Two-way ANOVA, based on the variables of the current study, independent variables types of discourses and the dependent variables 'proficiency levels' and 'implicature inference-making ability.' Meanwhile, data collected with the questionnaire to answer Research Question 2 were analyzed with qualitative iterative analysis covering compiling, disassembling, codifying, reassembling, analyzing, and interpreting, concluding and verifying (Yin, 2011).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Sentential and Conversational Implicature Inference

The descriptive summary of the results of this study were reported as follows. The scores of inference-making abilities of sentences and short conversations performed by the low proficiency students and the high proficiency students are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The summary of scores based on proficiency and types of discourse

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean
LPSS	160	50.00	50.00	100.00	13100.00	81.8750
LPSC	160	60.00	30.00	90.00	8705.00	54.4063
HPSS	160	25.00	75.00	100.00	15050.00	94.0625
HPSC	160	50.00	35.00	85.00	10375.00	64.8438
Valid N (listwise)	160					

Note:

LPSS: Low proficiency students' scores of single sentences

LPSC: Low proficiency students' scores of short conversations

HPSS: High proficiency students' scores of single sentences

HPSC: High proficiency students' scores of short conversations.

The scores of the inference-making ability of the sentences and short conversations performed by the low proficiency students and the high proficiency students were archived. Then, the summary of the ANOVA output covering the main effects, the interaction and the pairwise comparisons followed. The results of the tests were the bases for answering the entire formulated hypotheses.

To begin with, the descriptive statistics for each experimental condition is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistic

Dependent Variable: Inference Ability				
Proficiency Levels	Types of Discourses	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
1.00	1.00	81.8750	13.25547	160
	2.00	54.2188	11.15284	160
	Total	68.0469	18.47682	320
2.00	1.00	94.0625	7.03065	160
	2.00	64.8438	12.12386	160
	Total	79.4531	17.66364	320
Total	1.00	87.9688	12.22563	320
	2.00	59.5313	12.78955	320
Total		73.7500	18.94106	640

As mentioned in Population and Sample, the number of each skill level, the low proficiency and the high proficiency students, is 160 respectively. Based on Table 2, the total mean score of inference-making ability by the low proficiency students and the high proficiency students are 68.0469 and 79.4531 respectively. So, the low proficiency students showed lower inference-making ability than the high proficiency students. Next, the total mean score of inference-making ability of Single Sentences and of Short Conversations are 87.9688 and 59.5313 respectively. Thus, Single sentences are easier to infer than Short Conversations. The last, the grand mean of inference-making ability of both sentences and short conversations by the low proficiency and the high proficiency students is 73.7500.

To fulfill the requirement of parametric statistics analysis, in this study two-way ANOVA, it is important to test the variance (or homogeneity) of pragmatic understanding with *Levene's Test of Equality of Error* in Table 3.

Table 3: Test of Homogeneity: Levene's

Dependent Variable: Inference ability			
F	df1	df2	Sig.
13.422	3	636	.000

Tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is identical across groups.

- a. Design: Intercept + Proficiency Levels + Types of Discourses + Proficiency Levels * Types of Discourses.

Based on the result of Levene's Test (Table 3), Sig. .000 < .05, the variance of inference-making ability variables is *homogenous*, so that the data meet the requirement of parametric statistical analysis. Since the condition for parametric analysis is fulfilled, statistical analysis to determine the significant differences of the mean scores using *Two-way ANOVA* is eligible. Firstly, testing the Main Effects and Interactions through the Tests of Between-Subjects Effects in Table 4.

Table 4: Tests of between-subjects effects

DEPENDENT VARIABLE: INFERENCE ABILITY					
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	150304.688 ^a	3	50101.563	403.629	.000
Intercept	3481000.000	1	3481000.000	28043.666	.000
Proficiency Levels	20816.406	1	20816.406	167.701	.000
Types of Discourses	129390.625	1	129390.625	1042.398	.000
Proficiency Levels * Types of Discourses	97.656	1	97.656	.787	.375
Error	78945.313	636	124.128		
Total	3710250.000	640			
Corrected Total	229250.000	639			

a. R Squared = .656 (Adjusted R Squared = .654)

Based on the Tests of Between-Subjects Effects (Table 4), the results of the analysis is presented based on the order of hypotheses placed at the end of Literature Review.

Based on Table 4, the *F* value 403.629 is far above $\alpha = .05$ and Sig. $.00 < .05$. The difference of the mean of 'in groups pairs' and 'between groups' is *significant*. Thus, hypothesis 1, "There is a significant difference of inference-making ability of the low proficiency and the high proficiency students in sentences and short conversations is accepted. It means that single sentences are easier to infer than short conversations and the low proficiency students showed lower inference-making ability than the high proficiency students.

Based on Table 2, the total mean score of inference-making ability by the low proficiency students and the high proficiency students are 68.0469 and 79.4531 respectively. In relation to hypothesis 2, and based on the *F* value 167.701 is far above $\alpha = .05$ and Sig. $.00 < .05$ as shown in Table 3, the mean difference of inference-making between the low proficiency and the high proficiency students is *significant*. Thus, hypothesis 2, "There is a significant different of inference making ability in English for Tourism between the low proficiency and the high proficiency students" is accepted. So, the low proficiency students showed lower inference-making ability.

In Table 2, total mean score of inference-making ability in sentences and of short conversations are 87.9688 and 59.5313 respectively. Based on the *F* value 1042.398 is far above $\alpha = .05$ and Sig. $.00 < .05$ as shown in Table 4, the difference of the mean of inference-making the sentences and short conversations in English for Tourism is *significant*. Thus, hypothesis 3, "There is a significant difference of inference-making ability between sentences and short conversations" is *accepted*. Thus, restatements are easier to infer than short dialogues.

Based on Table 4, with *F* value .787 and the Sig. $.375 > .05$, Proficiency Levels*Types of Discourses interaction does not occur. Therefore, hypothesis 4, "There is no interaction of proficiency levels and types of discourses in inference-making ability between the low proficiency and the high proficiency students" is *accepted*. Thus, no interaction of proficiency levels and

types discourses in inference-making ability between the low proficiency and the high proficiency students in inference-making ability. So, there is no joint effect of proficiency levels and types of discourses on implicature inference-making ability performed by the low proficiency and the high proficiency students of tourism colleges. This is the *novelty* of the current study.

4.2. Factors Influencing Pragmatic Understanding of the Low Poficiency and High Proficiency Students

Table 5: Summary of factors influencing inference-making ability (simplified)

Aspects of difficulty	Low proficiency students	High proficiency students
Context understanding	Does not understand the context of conversations	—
Phrase/Content comprehension	Does not understand the meanings of phrases	—
	Does not understand the content/topic of the conversations	—
Vocabulary	Low vocabulary mastery	Vocabulary limitation
		Ambiguous words or polysemy
Speaker'meaning / Pragmatics	Does not understand the speaker's meaning or implied meanings	Pragmatic meaning differs from literal meaning
		Low interpretation ability
Idioms	Difficulty in understanding idioms	Difficulty in understanding idioms

Based on Table 5, low proficiency students experienced more diverse factors and/or difficulties which hinder their understanding of pragmatic meanings in the Pre-TOEFL Listening. Both the low proficiency and the high proficiency students share some factors. For example, both groups have limited vocabulary, including idioms and other expressions. So, the understanding of idiomatic expressions should be improved. By so-doing, their inference-making skills is also improved.

To the high proficiency students, low vocabulary mastery or semantic or lexical understanding still exists. However, they show higher understanding of contextual and pragmatics meaning. This is aligned with the statistical analysis indicating that the low proficiency students showed lower inference-making ability.

In short, both the low proficiency and the high proficiency still find it difficult to infer pragmatic meanings. As a result, even the high proficiency students still show low interpretation skills. This a big gap.

To enhance the depth of qualitative analysis and strengthen the credibility of the findings, the following section presents selected interview excerpts and an analysis of the overlapping challenges in pragmatic comprehension faced by both low and high proficiency learners.

Interview excerpt (Low proficiency student)

Interviewer: When you listened to the conversation, what confused you?

Student (L3): I don't understand why the speaker say 'break a leg' when the other person go to stage... I think break leg is bad, not good.

Interviewer: So you didn't think it was encouragement?

Student: No... I think maybe accident or something bad.

This low proficiency student misunderstood the idiomatic expression due to a literal interpretation, indicating limited exposure to real-world idiomatic usage in English.

Interview excerpt (High proficiency student)

Interviewer : What did you think about the phrase 'You're such a genius' in that conversation?

Student (H2): At first, I thought it was a compliment, but then I realized the tone was sarcastic... so it actually means the opposite.

Interviewer: Did that affect your understanding of the message?

Student: Yes, I had to think again. The literal meaning didn't match the speaker's tone, so it was confusing at first.

This high proficiency student was able to detect a mismatch between literal meaning and speaker intention, but still experienced difficulty in quickly interpreting sarcasm or irony during spontaneous conversation.

Table 6: Overlap and pragmatic challenge analysis

Pragmatic aspect	Low proficiency	High proficiency
Idioms	Interprets idioms literally (e.g., "break a leg" seen as something negative)	Understands idioms generally but struggles when used ironically
Implied/Sarcastic meaning	Fails to recognize implied meaning or sarcasm	Aware of hidden meanings, but may take time to interpret sarcasm or irony
Speaker's intention	Focuses on surface-level language without grasping speaker's intended message	Recognizes tone, but may misinterpret in humorous or sarcastic contexts
Contextual inference	Weak in linking context to conversational meaning	Better at inference but may still err in unfamiliar or culturally specific contexts

Although language proficiency affects the extent of learners' overall comprehension in English, both low and high proficiency groups face pragmatic challenges, especially in understanding non-literal, idiomatic, or sarcastic meanings. However, the nature of the challenge differs:

- a) Low proficiency learners tend to misinterpret language literally and rely heavily on word-for-word understanding.

- b) High proficiency learners can detect pragmatic cues but still struggle with quick interpretation and contextual nuance, particularly when it involves sarcasm or cultural references.

To address these issues, explicit pragmatic instruction is recommended, including training in recognizing tone, irony, and idiomatic usage across different social and cultural contexts.

5. DISCUSSION

Research Question 1 was answered by testing four hypotheses, and Research Question 2 needs descriptive analysis. The discussion follows from the order of Research Questions and hypotheses. The discussion is structured according to the two research questions and the related hypotheses.

Research Question 1. Hypothesis 1, stating that there is a significant difference in inference-making ability of sentences and short conversations between low and high proficiency students in tourism colleges, is accepted. This indicates that single sentences are easier to infer than short conversations, and that low proficiency students performed worse in inference-making tasks. This result aligns with Mehrpour & Rahimi (2010) who emphasized the role of inference-making in boosting overall language proficiency. Similarly, Lepola et al. (2012) found that inference skills significantly influence listening comprehension. Chen et al. (2010) also supported this view by highlighting the contribution of semantic and pragmatic understanding to L2 proficiency.

Regarding strategies, successful listeners employ a variety of inference skills—including both sentential and conversational inferences—to monitor their comprehension. Conversely, less proficient listeners tend to rely mainly on local inferences, leading to reduced comprehension (Savic, 2018). This explains why low-proficiency students in tourism institutes often struggle, particularly with conversational implicatures. However, it is important to note that this finding does not necessarily imply a linear cause-effect relationship between proficiency and inference ability. Other factors—such as cognitive load, working memory, or even test anxiety—might also mediate this difference, as suggested by Vandergrift & Goh (2012).

Hypothesis 2, which states that there is a significant difference in inference-making ability between low and high proficiency students, is also accepted, affirming the findings of Al-Mohizea (2017), Alkarazoun (2015), and others. This supports the notion that inference-making is intertwined with proficiency. Huang (2014) further showed that pragmatic competence increases alongside language proficiency. Yet, these studies primarily reflect correlational patterns, and do not fully disentangle the directionality of the relationship. For instance, does pragmatic inferencing improve language proficiency, or does increasing proficiency enable better inference-making? Longitudinal data might be required to clarify this issue

Hypothesis 3, stating that there is a significant difference in inference-making ability of sentences and short dialogues, is accepted. This supports Irmer's (2009) observation that inferring meaning from dialogues is more complex than from single sentences, given the interplay of grammatical, semantic, and contextual information. This finding is also consistent with Singer's (2009) view that discourse-level inference, especially causal inference, imposes heavier cognitive demands. Explicitly, learners' success in second language listening is affected by various dimensions of student language ability, the substance, structure, and genre of the academic discourses which should be interpreted with sentential or conversational implicature inference (Aryadoust, et al.,

2012). Still, this interpretation might underestimate the role of familiarity with discourse structure and genre. A student might struggle not due to the inferencing demand per se, but due to unfamiliarity with turn-taking conventions or rhetorical structures common in dialogues (Cutting, 2002).

Hypothesis 4, stating that there is no interaction between proficiency level and discourse type, is accepted. This implies that discourse type and proficiency influence inference ability independently. However, this result might reflect a limitation of the research design, such as sample size or test sensitivity. An interaction effect could potentially emerge in a larger or more diverse sample, or with finer-grained categories of discourse.

Furthermore, the analysis did not explore whether individual differences (e.g., metacognitive awareness or inferencing strategy use) moderated these relationships, which might mask nuanced interaction effects (Koda, 2005). Future studies could adopt mixed-method approaches or qualitative protocols to unpack these dimensions.

Research Question 2. The descriptive analysis shows that low-proficiency students experienced more diverse and significant difficulties in understanding conversational implicatures, particularly in Pre-TOEFL Listening tasks. These included limited vocabulary knowledge (especially idioms), difficulty making inferences, and unfamiliarity with topics. These are consistent with Nejad & Farvardin (2022), Masrai (2020), and others who attribute low pragmatic performance to low vocabulary and lack of listening practice.

However, it is important to recognize that the self-reported data may be subject to biases. Students might attribute their difficulty to vocabulary because it is the most salient or expected explanation, while deeper causes—such as poor inferencing strategies or low motivation—remain underexplored. This issue is acknowledged in Aryadoust & Goh (2014), who argue that various textual and cognitive features interact in complex ways to determine listening difficulty.

Idiomatic expressions were also identified as a major obstacle. This confirms earlier findings (e.g., Saleh & Zakaria, 2013; Hamza et al., 2017) and more recent insights from Kim (2015), who emphasizes the need to teach idiomatic meaning explicitly. Additionally, unfamiliar topics and lack of contextual understanding were found to hinder comprehension. This is consistent with studies by Atef-Vahid et al. (2013), Aljabari (2013), and Cai & Lee (2010). However, the current study did not control for topic familiarity or contextual support, which might have confounded the findings.

Therefore, future research should include pre-task topic familiarity checks and consider using authentic materials to ensure ecological validity (Gilmore, 2007). In addition, the complexity of pragmatic listening comprehension requires more nuanced, multifactorial investigation rather than reliance on binary proficiency group comparisons.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has revealed that implicature inference-making ability among Tourism college students significantly differs based on their English proficiency levels and the types of discourse, single sentences or short conversations. High proficiency students consistently outperformed their low proficiency counterparts, especially in interpreting implied meanings. The data further showed that single sentences are generally easier to infer than short conversations, yet there is no joint interaction effect between proficiency levels and discourse types. These findings underscore

the novelty of the research. The study also identified key hindrances faced by low proficiency students, including difficulties in understanding context, topic, speaker intention, pragmatic versus literal meanings, and ambiguous or polysemous words. While high proficiency students experienced some similar challenges, they generally did not struggle with phrasal expressions to the same extent.

From both theoretical and practical perspectives, these findings highlight the importance of integrating pragmatic comprehension into language instruction in Tourism education. Strengthening students' ability to infer implicatures—through exposure to both sentence- and conversation-based discourse—can significantly enhance their listening skills, including performance on standardized tests like TOEFL. The results contribute to informed curriculum design and pedagogical strategies in English for Tourism and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), enabling educators to tailor materials based on students' proficiency levels. Ultimately, this research offers valuable implications for developing the communicative competence of future professionals in the hospitality and tourism industries.

7. REFERENCES

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