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Classroom Procedure for Explicit Instruction in Conversational Implicature

Richard Blight

Ehime University

When Japanese EFL learners visit English-speaking countries, they experience difficulty understanding forms of implicit meaning that do not match their own internalized expectations for social interactions. This is a significant problem area since in all cultures non-literal meanings are routinely communicated through a range of implications that need to be inferred according to each situation of use. This paper discusses a procedure for raising pragmatic awareness by providing explicit instruction in native speaker use of conversational implicature. The application of Grice's maxims is analyzed in a range of social interactions according to Verschueren's framework for two types of conversational implicature. In each situation, a variety of interpretations are considered and discussed in light of adherence or non-adherence to the maxims. The resulting procedure helps learners to understand areas of cultural difference and similarity, and promotes the development of more effective communication skills.

英語圏を訪れる日本人英語学習者は、言外の意味を理解する際に、社会的相互行為に対する自らの予測が合致しない表現に対して困難を経験する。これは、字義通りでない意味が状況に応じて慣習的に一連の含意として導き出され、聞き手がそこで推察を行わなければならないために生じるが、文化を問わず起こるものであり、重大な問題である。本論は、母語話者の用いる会話の含意を明示的に教示することで、学習者の語用論的能力を上達させるための方法論について議論する。分析には、公理遵守の有無に基づく会話の含意についてのVerschuerenの理論的枠組みが用いられ、一連の社会的相互行為へのGriceの公理の適用が考察された。そして、会話の含意に対する様々な解釈が、個々の社会的相互行為の置かれたコンテクストに照らし合わされて分析・議論された。本論が提案するEFLカリキュラムへの語用論的教示の導入手続きは、学習者が文化の相違点や類似点を理解することを容易にし、より効果的なコミュニケーション・スキルを伸ばすことに役立つものといえるだろう。

Introduction

The study of pragmatic theory that focuses on comprehending implicit aspects of communication is particularly useful for advanced Japanese learners. Forms of implicit meaning commonly occur in social discourse through the use of conversational implicature, but the process of interpreting implicatures is especially problematic to foreign language learners. This paper discusses a classroom procedure for providing explicit instruction in native speaker use of conversational implicature. The objective is to raise learners' pragmatic awareness by studying the reasoning process through which implicatures are interpreted. This instruction would be of particular value to learners planning overseas residence, and is highly recommended for study abroad programs, but would also be of general interest to high proficiency learners.

Benefits of explicit pragmatic instruction in the curriculum

Research has shown that incorporating pragmatic instruction in the curriculum is generally beneficial to learners (Kasper, 2001a; Kasper & Rose, 1999), as well as being specifically beneficial to Japanese learners (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987). Although pragmatic competence cannot be taught directly, classroom instruction can be a means of providing opportunities for learners to raise their awareness of pragmatic areas (Kasper, 1997). Research also supports the view that, while it is acknowledged as being substantially more difficult to raise pragmatic awareness in EFL settings, results can be achieved in certain learning contexts (Kasper, 2001b).

The advantage of using *explicit* methods of pragmatic instruction has been confirmed in a number of studies (House, 1996; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, Kasper, Mui, Tay & Thananart, 1997). Takahashi (2001), for example, discusses the value of explicit instruction in terms of increased pragmatic awareness:

> Target pragmatic features are most effectively learned when they are taught explicitly with some forms of consciousness-raising techniques. Explicit pedagogical intervention is thus considered one of the ways in which the learners can most efficiently develop their pragmatic competence. (p. 75)

These pragmatics studies support the direction of the current study, which aims to raise the learners' pragmatic awareness by providing explicit instruction in target pragmatic features.

Approaches to teaching conversational implicature

Research has also been undertaken in the area of teaching conversational implicature. Two studies have found explicit instruction as being beneficial over implicit techniques with European learners (Bouton, 1994) and Japanese learners (Kubota, 1995). In another study, Bouton (1988) investigated non-native speakers' ability to interpret native speaker use of conversational implicatures. He compared interpretations from six cultural groups of non-native speakers with the interpretations provided by an American native speaker control group, and found that cultural background was a reliable predictor of the results. The German and Spanish learners were most likely to derive the same implied meanings as the American group, while the Japanese and Chinese learners were the least likely to derive the same meanings (p. 187). These

results clearly suggest that Japanese learners have the potential to benefit from instruction aimed at raising pragmatic awareness of native speaker use of conversational implicature.

Classroom procedure for instruction, analysis, and interpretations

The classroom procedure described in this paper was conducted on a trial basis with a group of sixteen high proficiency adult learners. The procedure involved four stages: the initial presentation of theory; analysis of model conversation responses in terms of Grice's maxims; interpretations of implicatures based on adherence or non-adherence to the maxims; and finally, group interpretations of a range of different social interactions. A ninety-minute time period was used, with about twenty minutes spent on each stage. Instruction was provided in English, and an emphasis was maintained on limiting the complexity of the theoretical concepts. The four stages employed in the procedure will now be described in detail.

Stage one: Theory presentation

There were three steps in the theory presentation. Firstly, Grice's *Cooperative Principle* was introduced and explained: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose and direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). The maxims (and associated sub-maxims) were then presented in terms of providing expectations for cooperative social behaviour which are taken to be mutually understood during conversations. The following version is taken from Verschueren (1999, p. 32), as derived from Grice (1975):

1. *The maxim of quantity*:
   (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
   (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. *The maxim of quality*: Try to make your contribution one that is true
   (i) Do not say what you believe to be false.
   (ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. *The maxim of relation* (later called *relevance*): Be relevant.
4. *The maxim of manner*: Be perspicuous
   (i) Avoid obscurity of expression.
   (ii) Avoid ambiguity.
   (iii) Be brief.
   (iv) Be orderly.

In the second step, the concept of conversational implicatures was explained. A good definition is provided by Yule (1996): "An additional unstated meaning that has to be assumed in order to maintain the cooperative principle . . . [so that] the hearer must assume the speaker means to convey more than is being said" (p. 128).

Finally, Verschueren's framework for interpreting two types of implicatures (based on adherence or non-adherence to Grice's maxims) was presented. Firstly, there are *standard conversational implicatures*: "implicit meaning that can be conventionally inferred from forms of expression in combination with assumed standard adherence to conversational maxims" (1999, p. 34). Secondly, there are *non-conventional conversational implicatures*: "implicit meaning inferred from

the obvious flouting of a conversational maxim in combination with assumed adherence to the cooperative principle" (1999, p. 34). While both forms are based on expectations that speakers recognize the value of social cooperation, this distinction provides a useful basis for practical instruction. Non-conventional implicatures include instances of non-cooperative behaviour and a range of other implicit meanings, which occur when a speaker chooses not to follow Grice's maxims.

Stage two: Gricean analysis of a model conversation

A series of responses in a model conversation was next used to demonstrate the application of Grice's maxims. Learners first worked in small groups attempting to apply the maxims, and a class discussion followed which considered the suggestions provided by each of the groups and attempted to derive a consensus analysis.

A sample model conversation derived from Verschueren (1999, pp. 32-41) is now provided to illustrate the teaching procedure. The setting is first introduced: two tourists are talking about visiting the northern Italian city of Como. The brief exchange ends with seven possible responses from the second speaker:

A: Go anywhere today?
B: Yes, we went down to Como.
A: Anything to see there?
B: 1. Yes.
2. It's got a big stone cathedral.
3. A city.
4. Perhaps not the most interesting of Italian towns.
5. Thousands of people. They had noses, eyes, ears, mouths, and arms.
6. If you keep your eyes open.
7. On a clear day you get a nice view of the Alps.

The seven responses are then discussed in terms of Grice's maxims. None could be considered as providing too much information, while Response 1 does not provide a sufficient response, and Response 3 is also questionable in terms of the quantity maxim. The accuracy of the responses cannot be determined without additional knowledge about the city of Como, so the quality maxim cannot be applied in this context. The relation maxim is complex and requires careful consideration. Responses 1 and 5 do not provide any form of meaningful information, and Responses 3 and 6 also appear to be inappropriate, since the information provided is self-evident. Finally, Responses 4 and 6 appear to be questionable in terms of the manner maxim, since they are unclear or ambiguous. Response 4 introduces a specific answer in an indefinite way (*"Perhaps…"*), while Response 6 has at least two interpretations, and is particularly unclear on account of the extent to which it also breaches the relation maxim.

Stage three: Interpretations of implicatures in the model conversation

Responses 2 and 7 do not contravene any maxims, so they are considered in terms of standard implicatures. They are similar in that they identify a single feature of interest about Como. Since the quantity maxim generally requires a full response (e.g., "We saw a cathedral, some museums, and a view of the Alps"), an implication is suggested that there is nothing else particularly worth seeing in Como. By communicating the singularity of

a given feature in a general question pattern, these responses imply that Como is actually somewhat limited in interest value. Response 7 further qualifies this implication by stating that good weather conditions are also necessary to enjoy the visit.

The other five responses breach the maxims in various ways, so they are considered in terms of non-conventional implicatures. Response 1 breaches both the quantity and relation maxims, since it does not even attempt to provide the type of information requested. This response could be considered as being somewhat rude in terms of lack of cooperation, and suggests that the speaker may be uninterested in the question, or may be opting out of the conversation entirely. Response 3 can be viewed in terms of a similar interpretation, although a further implication is suggested in an ironical sense. Since it is common knowledge that Como is a city, the speaker could be implying that there is nothing special to see there. Hence two interpretations are possible: either the brevity of the response serves to signal the speaker's disinterest, or a specific meaning is being implied through the intentional use of irony. Additional discourse markers, such as the tone of voice, would be required to distinguish between these interpretations.

Response 4 is questionable in terms of the manner maxim, since it is somewhat unclear ("*Perhaps*..."). The indefinite opening could be signalling the speaker's uncertainty, or serving a politeness function (e.g., so as not to offend somebody nearby). Additional discourse markers would again be required to distinguish the intended meaning. Response 5 breaches the relation maxim, since the information provided is entirely self-evident. This response could possibly be considered as an attempt at humour. Response 6 is ambiguous and irrelevant, and could be either an abrupt terminating statement or another ironical implicature, whereby it is suggested that you would need to look very hard to find anything of interest.

Stage four: Group interpretations of a range of social interactions

In the final stage of the teaching procedure, the learners studied various examples of native speaker conversations. In groups, they considered each exchange, discussed their analysis of the maxims, and provided interpretations of implicatures. A general classroom discussion followed which considered the various perspectives. In many of the interactions, several interpretations could be derived. Consequently, the teacher explained that the purpose was not to determine *correct answers* to each contextual problem. Rather, the objective was to demonstrate how implicit meanings are derived based on expectations for usage of the maxims. The teacher emphasized that several interpretations may be possible in any given context, and also that a degree of ambiguity is commonly associated with the usage of implicit meanings in conversations.

Classroom results, pedagogical difficulties, and potential extensions

A number of difficulties were encountered during the classroom practise, which suggest that this procedure would only be suitable for high proficiency learners. Firstly, there are conceptual difficulties both with the intrinsic complexity and the formulation of Grice's theory. The underlying presumption that speakers interact according to a principle of mutual cooperation is generally limited in practice according to each person's self-interest in participating in a social interaction. In addition, there are a number of other factors (including politeness strategies) that affect the form of social discourse, and which may counteract the significance of the Cooperative Principle.

Researchers have also taken issue with the original form of the maxims. Most notably, Sperber and Wilson (1986) argued that Grice's four maxims should be subsumed under a more general *Principle of Relevance*.

The ambiguity that results as a consequence of attempting to render implicit meanings into explicit interpretations would be a serious cause for concern in many classrooms. To reduce potential misunderstandings, it is suggested that the sample conversations should be carefully selected in order to reduce exposure to multiple meanings. It is also important for the teacher to stress that various interpretations may be possible in any context. A focus should consequently be maintained on practising the underlying reasoning process, rather than on attemping to derive *correct* solutions to each linguistic problem. This procedure would also be ineffective for teaching implicatures that cannot be derived from the Cooperative Principle. These include implicatures that are specific to particular situations and cultural contexts (e.g., see Wierzbicka, 1991, pp. 391-402).

Finally, teachers with advanced learners may wish to extend this procedure into a number of other interesting language domains. Areas suggested in the original theory (Grice, 1975, pp. 52-54) include the teaching of *tautologies* (in terms of flouting the quantity maxim), *irony* and *metaphor* (flouting the quality maxim), and *ambiguity* (flouting the manner maxim). Further developing Japanese learners' comprehension in these areas would also be of great value, particularly given the cultural differences in language usage.

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