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Scaffolding Pragmatic Listening with Gricean Maxims in Junior Middle School EFL

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Abstract

Listening comprehension in junior middle school English classrooms is often treated as the recognition of sounds, words, and literal sentence meanings. Such an approach, however, may not sufficiently equip learners to infer speakers' intentions when utterances are indirect, exaggerated, incomplete, or apparently irrelevant. Drawing on Grice's Cooperative Principle, this pedagogical article illustrates how the four conversational maxims (Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner) can be integrated into junior middle school listening instruction. Based on classroom observation records, teacher-student interaction excerpts, and listening tasks, this analysis shows how teacher-guided questioning, contextual reasoning, repeated listening, attention to intonation, and cultural explanation can help learners move from literal decoding to pragmatic inference. The article argues that conversational implicature theory is most useful when it is transformed into short, age-appropriate inferential procedures rather than presented as abstract linguistic knowledge. A teachable four-step inferential sequence is proposed: (1) identify the literal meaning, (2) notice the unusual feature, (3) connect with context and tone, and (4) infer the communicative intention. The article concludes with practical implications for classroom practice and suggestions for teachers who wish to incorporate pragmatic inference into their listening lessons.

Keywords

Conversational Implicature; Cooperative Principle; Pragmatic Inference; Listening Instruction; Junior Middle School EFL

1. Introduction

Listening is a major source of language input and an essential foundation for communicative competence. In many junior middle school classrooms, listening lessons nevertheless concentrate on pronunciation, vocabulary recognition, grammatical form, and answer checking. These elements are necessary, but they do not explain why learners may understand individual words and still miss a speaker's intention. Difficulties arise when a speaker uses exaggeration, gives more information than required, responds indirectly, or chooses an unusually obscure

expression. In such cases, successful comprehension depends on contextual and pragmatic inference as well as on bottom-up decoding.

Conversational Implicature Theory offers a useful framework for describing this inferential process. In Grice's (1975) account, conversational participants generally cooperate to make their contributions appropriate to the purpose of an exchange. The Cooperative Principle is associated with four maxims: Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner. When a speaker appears to depart from a maxim, the hearer may search for an additional meaning that makes the utterance relevant and rational in context. For language learners, noticing such departures can support the interpretation of indirect requests, polite refusals, figurative expressions, and implied evaluations.

Previous research has connected listening comprehension with contextual knowledge, strategy use, and pragmatic understanding (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Corsetti, 2014). Recent studies have further demonstrated that explicit meta-pragmatic instruction can improve learners' comprehension of indirect refusals and indirect opinions (Nguyen & Pham, 2022), and that dynamic assessment approaches can enhance listening inferential abilities, including conversational implicature (Geng & Meng, 2025). Systematic reviews have also emphasized the critical role of pragmatic competence in effective communication and intercultural understanding (Putri et al., 2024). Research on L2 pragmatic comprehension has consistently highlighted the importance of inferential strategies and the differential effects of instruction on various types of implicatures (Ravari & Rashidi, 2024). However, classroom-oriented discussions focusing specifically on junior middle school learners remain relatively limited.

This pedagogical article therefore addresses two questions: (1) How can the four Gricean maxims be operationalized in junior middle school listening lessons? (2) What forms of teacher guidance may help learners infer implied meanings? The article is intended as a practical resource for teachers rather than as a report of experimental findings.

2. Literature Review

Conversational implicature is not identical to the literal meaning encoded by an utterance. It is an inferred meaning that arises from the interaction between what is said, the context, shared knowledge, and assumptions about cooperative communication. The Maxim of Quality concerns truthfulness and adequate evidence; Quantity concerns the amount of information supplied; Relation concerns relevance; and Manner concerns clarity, brevity, order, and avoidance of ambiguity (Grice, 1975). In deliberate "flouting," a speaker openly appears not to follow a maxim, inviting the hearer to infer an additional meaning. This distinction is important in teaching because a seemingly unusual utterance should not simply be labeled "wrong"; learners need to consider why the speaker selected that form.

Listening comprehension involves both bottom-up and top-down processing. Learners decode sounds and words, but they also activate background knowledge, identify the situation, interpret relationships, and predict communicative purposes. Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) emphasize the role of contextualized materials and integrated listening practice, while Lu (2012) stresses systematic organization and supportive conditions for listening instruction. Corsetti (2014) further argues that strategy-based listening can create opportunities for learners to practice semantic and pragmatic inference. These perspectives are compatible with conversational implicature theory because both regard comprehension as an active process rather than passive answer selection.

Recent research has substantially advanced our understanding of pragmatic instruction in L2 listening. Nguyen and Pham (2022) examined the instructional effects on L2 pragmatic comprehension, comparing indirect refusals and indirect opinions. Their study found that while learners improved their comprehension of both types of implicatures, instruction produced a larger effect on indirect refusals, and interviews revealed more effective use of inferencing strategies after treatment. Geng and Meng (2025) utilized interactionist dynamic assessment to enhance five types of listening inferential abilities among Chinese EFL learners. Their results showed notable advancement in conversational implicature in the post-test, demonstrating that mediated instruction can positively influence listening inferential abilities. Putri et al. (2024) conducted a systematic review of pragmatic competence in second language acquisition, emphasizing its critical role in effective communication and intercultural understanding. Ravari and Rashidi (2024) explored interlanguage pragmatic learning strategies as predictors of Iranian EFL learners' comprehension of conversational implicature. The "Listening and Pragmatics" chapter (2024) further addresses the comprehension dimension of pragmatic competence, focusing on L2 learners' inferential skills in listening.

Several Chinese studies cited in the original thesis address related teaching issues. Wang Sihai (2005) emphasizes metacognitive strategies and contextual processing; Gong (2008) discusses classroom applications of conversational implicature; Yang Liya (2010) links pragmatic, cultural, and phonetic instruction; Gao (2011) highlights the value of implicature-based listening teaching; Li (2014) stresses contextual and cultural explanation; and Zheng (2016) examines implicit problems in listening tests. Yang (2003) examines the inferential mechanism of Gricean theory; Yang and Zhang (2004) relate conversational implicature to discourse intention and listening comprehension; and Wang (2011) argues that learners may need explicit guidance to connect linguistic form with contextual meaning.

Taken together, the literature suggests that pragmatic inference should be taught through contextualized examples and guided problem solving. The present article organizes classroom cases according to the four maxims and specifies teacher moves that support inference, with particular attention to age-appropriate

procedures for junior middle school learners.

3. Pedagogical Context and Data Sources

This article adopts a qualitative classroom-based pedagogical analysis. The materials are drawn from classroom observations, teacher-student exchanges, listening exercises, and selected Grade 9 materials published by the People's Education Press, as described in an undergraduate thesis. Observations were conducted over multiple lessons in Grade 9 classrooms, focusing on listening activities where the speaker's intended meaning was not fully recoverable from the literal words alone. The unit of pedagogical analysis is a listening dialogue in which the speaker's intended meaning requires pragmatic inference beyond literal decoding.

Four cases were selected for presentation because each foregrounds one of Grice's maxims: Quality, Quantity, Relation, or Manner. The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the literal content and the apparent maxim departure in each dialogue were identified. Second, the contextual clues, speaker relationship, tone, and likely communicative intention were examined. Third, the teacher's questioning and explanation were analyzed as inferential support. The goal is not to present numerical test scores or causal evidence of learning gains, but rather to illustrate feasible classroom procedures that teachers can adapt. The findings are therefore presented as pedagogical observations and practical teaching suggestions rather than as evidence of statistically measurable outcomes.

4. Classroom Cases and Pedagogical Procedures

4.1. Quality: From Exaggeration to Intended Meaning

The Maxim of Quality requires speakers to say what they believe to be true and what they can support with evidence. In ordinary conversation, however, speakers may use exaggeration or figurative language without intending to deceive. One listening item asks:

Woman: What did you do yesterday?

Man: One of my friends moved to a new house. It was a busy day, and I'm tired to death.

The intended answer is that the man helped a friend move. Some learners in the source classroom selected an option suggesting that the man himself had moved house, while others interpreted "tired to death" literally. The difficulty results from word-level processing: learners attach excessive weight to "moved" and "death" instead of integrating the whole exchange.

The teacher first asked whether the man was actually dying and then directed learners to connect the expression with the preceding event. The phrase "tired to death" was explained as an intentional exaggeration meaning "extremely tired." A transfer example followed:

A: What will you do if you fail the exam?
B: I'll eat my hat
The teacher-guided discussion encouraged learners to recognize that the speaker was expressing confidence rather than describing a real action. This procedure is pedagogically valuable because it teaches learners to test a literal decoding against contextual plausibility. The key question is whether an interpretation makes sense for this speaker in this situation.

4.2. Quantity: Interpreting Additional Information

The Maxim of Quantity concerns providing neither less nor more information than the communicative purpose requires. Additional information is not necessarily redundant; it may reveal an attitude or help the speaker manage responsibility. Consider the following textbook dialogue:
Jack: Turn off the lights, Julia. It saves electricity.
Julia: Oh, I usually do that. I was just in a hurry.
Julia's explanation goes beyond a minimal response to Jack's request. By stating that she usually turns off the lights and was merely in a hurry, she presents a reason for the omission and signals that she does not wish to be considered careless. The implicature can therefore be described as apology, self-justification, or an attempt to avoid blame.
The teacher in the source material used a sequence of questions: What extra information does Julia provide? Is it necessary for answering Jack's request? Why might she provide it? Such questions make the inferential process visible by comparing literal content with communicative need.A transfer item concerns Lily's trip to China:
Man: Lily is going back to China next month. She will not take her boyfriend Simon this time.
Question: Who will go to China next month?
The answer is Lily. The added mention of Simon is pragmatically meaningful even though it is not necessary to identify the traveler. It may draw attention to Lily's relationship or to a change in her travel arrangement. The example shows that learners should listen not only for the answer to the explicit question but also for information that appears unusually specific or unnecessary.

4.3. Relation: Understanding Indirect Replies

The Maxim of Relation requires relevance, but a response that appears off-topic may function as an indirect answer. The following exchange is used in listening practice:
Mother: It's eight o'clock. Please get up and give me a hand.
Peter: It's the weekend. Could I sleep a little longer ?
Mother: Do you remember that your cousins are coming ?
The mother does not directly say "No." Instead, she mentions the cousins, who

provide the contextual reason that Peter should get up. Her response is apparently indirect but relevant at the level of communicative intention: it rejects Peter's request and reminds him of his responsibility to prepare for the visitors.

The teacher asked whether the mother had answered directly, why she mentioned the cousins, and what the intonation suggested. Repeated listening helped learners attend to the tone of the response rather than treating the words as an isolated question. This case demonstrates that pragmatic listening requires the integration of discourse context, social relationship, and prosody. It also illustrates why answer checking alone is insufficient: learners need to understand how an indirect response performs the function of a refusal or reminder.

4.4. Manner: Explaining Obscurity, Politeness, and Face Management

The Maxim of Manner asks speakers to be clear, brief, orderly, and unambiguous. Speakers may nevertheless choose an obscure or unusually indirect form to prevent children from understanding, soften a request, or avoid direct criticism. In one exercise, a woman says:

Man: Let's get the children something.

Woman: Okay, but I veto I-C-E C-R-E-A-M.

Spelling out the word instead of pronouncing it directly is marked and non-standard in the immediate context. The likely intention is to prevent the children from recognizing the topic and asking for ice cream. The teacher compared the spelled-out form with the ordinary expression "I veto ice cream" and asked why the woman had selected the unusual form. Learners were thus encouraged to treat obscurity as a communicative clue.

A second example contains a highly indirect request: "Would it be too much trouble if I suggested that you could possibly make a little less noise?" The central request is "Please make less noise," but the lengthy framing softens the imposition. A final example indirectly evaluates a singer:

A: What did Jane sing last night?

B: She produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of Because You Loved Me.

The speaker avoids saying directly that Jane sang badly. The formal and elaborate wording conveys a negative evaluation while maintaining a surface level of politeness. These examples allow teachers to connect linguistic form with politeness, cultural expectations, and face management. Importantly, the goal is not to teach learners that indirectness always means criticism; rather, learners should examine the situation and the relationship between speakers before drawing a conclusion.

4.5. A Teachable Inferential Sequence

Across the four cases, a consistent instructional sequence emerges. First, learners identify the literal meaning. Second, they notice an unusual feature, such as

exaggeration, extra information, an apparently irrelevant reply, or an obscure expression. Third, they connect that feature with the context, tone, and relationship between speakers. Finally, they infer the communicative intention. This sequence turns a broad pragmatic theory into a manageable listening strategy.

Explanation should be gradual and age-appropriate. Learners may benefit from short dialogues, familiar situations, visual prompts, repeated listening, and focused questions. Definitions of the maxims should support, not replace, practice. Pragmatic inference should also be linked with intonation work, since stress, pause, and tone may signal irony, reluctance, politeness, or emphasis. Cultural explanation is important when a task depends on expectations about visiting, privacy, or directness.

5. Implications for Classroom Practice

The analysis suggests three practical implications for teachers.First, listening lessons should include an inferential stage after initial comprehension. Instead of moving directly from recording to answer checking, teachers can ask learners what was said, what sounded unusual, and why the speaker might have chosen that form. This inferential stage can be as short as five minutes but may significantly raise learners' pragmatic awareness.

Second, teachers should integrate pragmatic inference with other skills. Learners can retell a dialogue, role-play an indirect request, rewrite an indirect response in a direct form, or explain how a change in tone changes the meaning. Such tasks connect listening with speaking, reading, and writing, and provide opportunities for learners to practice both comprehension and production of implicatures.

Third, materials should be linguistically accessible and culturally explainable, with one dominant intended meaning. Overly complicated examples may test vocabulary or world knowledge rather than pragmatic competence. Teachers should select dialogues that are familiar in content but contain one clear maxim departure that learners can notice and interpret.

Additionally, teachers may consider using the four-step inferential sequence proposed in Section 4.5 as a classroom routine. With repeated practice, learners can internalize this sequence and apply it autonomously to new listening materials.

6. Conclusion

Conversational implicature theory provides a useful perspective for understanding why junior middle school learners may struggle with listening dialogues whose meanings extend beyond their literal wording. The four maxims help teachers organize common difficulties: Quality highlights exaggeration and figurative language; Quantity draws attention to additional information; Relation explains indirect replies; and Manner reveals the communicative value of obscurity and indirectness. In the classroom cases examined here, teacher-guided questioning, contextual analysis, repeated listening, intonation awareness, and cultural

explanation supported learners' movement from literal decoding to pragmatic inference.

The contribution of this article is pedagogical rather than empirical. The classroom procedures illustrated here are feasible for junior middle school EFL teachers to adapt, but they should be understood as teaching suggestions rather than as evidence of causal learning effects. Teachers who wish to implement these procedures are encouraged to observe their own learners' responses and adjust the level of scaffolding accordingly.

With a growing body of research demonstrating the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction in L2 listening (Nguyen & Pham, 2022; Geng & Meng, 2025; Putri et al., 2024), conversational implicature theory offers a productive way to develop both listening comprehension and pragmatic competence in junior middle school English education. By transforming abstract pragmatic theory into age-appropriate inferential procedures, teachers can help their learners become more attentive, thoughtful, and successful listeners.

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