The Process of Korean Learners of English in Understanding Conversational Implicatures

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Abstract
The ability to interpret implicatures is clearly a necessary skill for understanding everyday utterances in English. Previous research on NNS interpretation of English implicatures investigated their ability to understand implicatures rather than their process of understanding implicatures. The present study attempts to examine the procedure of how Korean learners of English understand implicatures. The hypothesis proposed in the present study is that, even when NS and NNS agree on the meaning of a given implicature, their respective approaches for computing its meaning may differ. The participants, 14 NS from the United States and 23 NNS from Korea, were given an instrument consisting of 10 multiple-choice items, in which they were asked to choose the response that best describes the implicature in a given utterance, and then provide a step-by-step explanation of each response. Findings supported the hypothesis as NNS patterns of explaining certain types of implicatures differed from those of NS. Also the reliability of multiple-choice items for assessing comprehension of implicatures is called into question as 22.3% of correct NNS responses provided explanation that suggests that they did not, in fact, understand the implicatures. (185 words).

Key words: conversational implicature, ILP (interlanguage pragmatics), maxim, Pope Q

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I. Introduction

Although the field of interlanguage pragmatics (ILP) is relatively new, it has generated a plethora of research in second language acquisition (Roever, 2006). Kasper and Rose (2002) define ILP as the non-native speaker's knowledge of the target language pragmatic system and the ability to use it. One interesting topic of ILP that has received much attention from researchers is implicatures. Most previous implicature research has focused on the outcome of implicature interpretation, i.e. can NNS correctly interpret implicatures? (Bouton 1988, Moon 2009)

The purpose of this study, however, is to focus on the process itself, i.e. how do NNS arrive at their interpretation of implicatures? Furthermore, most implicature studies use selected response (multiple-choice) questionnaires, which raises concerns over whether participants did in fact understand the implicature. In an study about the research methods employed in ILP studies, Kasper and Dahl (1991) called for the need for a better assessment tool to measure pragmatics data. Also, Kasper and Rose (1999) mentioned the need for studies with a cognitive view in order to look not only at the differences between NS and NNS, but at the process of how learners acquire second language pragmatics. This study will address this issue by asking participants to explain their choices following each multiple-choice item. This may shed some light on the various strategies NNS employ in processing implicatures. It may also provide ESL/EFL instructors with a better understanding of their students' pragmatic interlanguage when it comes to interpreting English implicatures.

The following hypothesis is proposed for this study: Even when NS and NNS agree on the meaning of the implicature for a given utterance, their respective approaches for computing the implicature will differ. This hypothesis is based on two assumptions: (1) For each of the implicatures used in the present study, there was an interpretation that a majority of NS agreed on; and (2) speakers can articulate the reasoning behind their interpretation in the form of relatively discrete steps.