

## The Relationship Between EFL Students' Implicature Competence and Their English Academic Success Across Genders

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### Abstract

Implicature, a fundamental aspect of pragmatics, plays a significant role in effective communication. Investigating the implicature competence in the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the present paper explores the relationship between implicature competence and the English academic success of EFL students across genders. The study included 60 EFL learners aged between 13 and 22, male and female students enrolled in Jahad Daneshgahi Department of Foreign Languages in West Azerbaijan, Urmia. To investigate the relationship, a quantitative correlation design was employed, utilizing MCDCT (Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test) to measure the implicature competence of the students. The results revealed a positive correlation between implicature competence and the academic success of EFL students. However, the correlation was more significant in male students than their female counterparts. These findings emphasize the importance of explicit teaching of pragmatics along with other linguistics skills in EFL curricula.

**Keywords:** *Implicature Competence, Academic Success, MCDCT, Gender*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past years, language teachers and researchers have developed various methods for teaching a foreign language. Recently, significant attention has been paid to communicative teaching, focusing on the use of language in different social discourse contexts. The terms 'discourse analysis' and 'pragmatics' are really popular in this case. 'Discourse' is defined mainly as "the language in its contexts of use" (Flowerdew, 2012, p. 1). The term 'context' refers to the setting in which particular utterances are exchanged, helping to determine their interpretations. According to Flowerdew (2012), "In considering the language in its contexts of use, the concern is also with language above the level of the sentence" (p. 1).

The main purpose of discourse analysis is to investigate the functions of language; it means how meaning is conveyed through language in different contexts. "Discourse analysis is not just the study of language, but a way of looking at the language that focuses on how people use it in real life to do things" (Jones, 2012, p. 2). For Brown and Yule (1983), "the analysis of discourse is necessarily the analysis of language in use. As such it cannot be restricted to the description of linguistic forms independent of the purposes or functions which these forms are designed to serve in human affairs" (p. 1). It is essential to study the underlying meaning in an utterance since it helps us to communicate effectively and understand one another in a better way. "Discourse analysis can help us to understand how the societies in which we live are put together and how they are maintained through our day-to-day activities of speaking, writing, and making use of other modes of communication" (Jones, 2012).

Pragmatics, an important subfield in linguistics, focuses on how language is used in different contexts and illustrates the relationship between language use and language form. According to Levinson (1983), pragmatics is the "study of meaning as communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a hearer (or reader)".

Similarly, Lyons (1977), defines pragmatics as "the study of how speakers of a language use sentences to accomplish their communicative purposes".

Pragmatics deals with different aspects of non-literal meaning such as speech acts, conversational implicatures, and cooperative principle (Flowerdew, 2012). Understanding implicatures is essential for effective communication and plays an essential role in foreign language learning contexts (Sperber & Wilson, 1975). In pragmatics, implicature is something that the speaker or writer implies even though it is not stated. Grice (1975) outlines two categories of implicature: conventional and conversational. Conversational implicatures are the primary subject in pragmatics. Implicatures serve different goals: communication, maintaining good social relations, and misleading without lying. Grice was the first to conduct research and study cases in which what a speaker means differs from sentences used by the speaker. He introduced the terms 'implicate' and 'implicature' for what the speakers uttered is distinct from what they implied.

Grice (1975) developed his theory and elaborated that conversational implicatures are built on specific rules or maxims. He introduced the term 'Cooperative Principle' for these rules. That is how interlocutors attain effective communication and work cooperatively together by being relevant, telling the truth, and trying to be brief and clear. "Make your contribution such as it is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1989, p. 26). He clarifies that individuals do not always adhere to these rules and here is where implicatures are contributed. When a speaker or writer violates one of the maxims, the listener or reader concludes the speaker or writer is making an effort to be cooperative and searches for meaning at a deeper level. In other words, the listener or reader is making an inference to understand the intended meaning. In everyday conversations, inferences give meanings to utterances, which are called

implicatures (Levinson 1983). Therefore, implicatures allow for more effective communication by context, inference, and shared knowledge between the speaker and listener. Grice (1989), stated that there are different ways in which these inferences and meanings can be invoked, which he formulated as four maxims of conversation:

**Maxim of Quantity:** Information

Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

**Maxim of Quality:** Truth

Do not say what you believe to be false.

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**Maxim of Relation:** Relevance

Be relevant.

**Maxim of Manner:** Clarity

Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief (avoid prolixity).

Be orderly (pp.26–27).

On the other hand, academic success involves attaining academic goals and acquiring knowledge and skills. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, academic success is defined as "the attainment of good results in one's academic studies, typically measured by grades, test scores, and other forms of assessment." Teachers play a vital role in facilitating academic success by providing students guidance, feedback, and resources. It is commonly measured through examination and assessment. A study by Lizzio and Wilson (2013) found that self-efficacy, motivation, and time management skills are significant predictors of academic success.

The understanding of conversational implicatures by learners has been investigated in some studies (Roever, 2006, 2013; Tagouchi 2002, 2005, 2007,

2008, 2013). The findings of these studies have shown that implicature comprehension depends on various factors such as cultural background, language exposure, and proficiency level.

In one of the most recently conducted studies by Ciftlikli and Demirel (2022), the relationship between students' implicature comprehension and their reading achievement success was investigated. 122 first-year university students were tested by administering a multiple-choice test on implicatures and a reading test. The goal of this study was to find whether there is a relationship between students' implicature competence and their reading achievement success. The results gathered from the tests revealed that students' comprehension of implicatures is positively related to their achievement in reading comprehension.

Mappaita (2022) researched the types of interventions used by teachers in the classroom. This study used a qualitative method, and the results revealed that the teacher's most frequent type of implicature was the specific conversational implicature, which depends on the context. Another research was carried out by Mohammed (2022) to uncover the main reason for failure in interpreting conversational implicatures. Thirty-five fourth-year university students took part in this study. In the end, the results suggested that the main reason is learners' limited language proficiency and pragmatics knowledge.

Nassar (2021) investigated the factors behind misunderstanding conversational implicatures, and it was revealed that factors such as socio-cultural knowledge and indirectness are the main reasons for misinterpretation of conversational implicatures. Chen and Lin (2021) investigated the effects of peer collaboration on EFL learners' comprehension of implicatures. 33 Taiwanese EFL which consisted of 11 individuals and 11 pairs were asked to report their cognitive process while performing a multiple-choice discourse completion test. The results

indicate that there is no significant difference between individual and pair groups. However, it is discovered that negotiation and scaffolding in pair working facilitate pragmatics development in students.

The effects of explicit teaching of conversational implicatures on developing students' language proficiency and pragmatics knowledge are examined by Abdelhafez (2016). The instruments of this study include a pragmatics test and a language proficiency test. The results revealed a significant impact of instruction on developing students' pragmatics knowledge and language proficiency. In addition, it was also revealed that there is a positive correlation at the level of .730 between pragmatics competence and language proficiency.

Despite all these studies, not enough attention has been paid to implicature competence in academic settings. Thus, the present paper addresses the relationship between implicature competence and academic success among Iranian English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how implicature competence influences language learning outcomes in academic contexts, this will help develop better language teaching methods and instruction suitable for EFL learners.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### ***Participants***

The participants were chosen from Jahad Daneshgahi Department of Foreign Languages in Urmia. A total of 60 (30 male and 30 female) EFL students, based on convenient sampling, took part in the present study. They were chosen from three different levels of proficiency: 19 intermediate level, 27 upper-intermediate level, and 14 advanced level. Additionally, their ages were between 13 and 22.

### ***Instruments***

A Multiple-Choice Discourse Completion Test (MCDCT) consisting of 20 items is adapted (AlSmari, 2020) to measure the implicature competence of the EFL students. The items in the test are dialogues that resemble real-life conversations and are followed by a question asking the students the meaning of the reply that appears to violate the maxim of relation. The content validity of the MCDCT was claimed to be examined by five university professors, two of whom were native English speakers and the test's reliability was calculated to be .81.

The other instrument in the study is the score each student has obtained at the end of the course as their final achievement. This score consists of class activity, midterm and final exam scores assessed by their classroom teachers.

### ***Design and Procedure***

A quantitative correlation design was employed to address the research questions of the present paper. A multiple-choice discourse completion test papers were distributed by teachers to students at the beginning of the class. The test involved 20 items, and the students took it in about 20 minutes. After that, the papers were collected and then graded by the researcher. In the final step, the data collected from the MCDCT test and the students' scores which were given to them by their teacher at the end of the term were entered into the computer. The statistical calculation ran by the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was utilized to explore the relationship between the variables.

## **RESULTS**

All the data which includes students' Test Scores and Term Scores were analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Specifically,

descriptive statistics such as frequencies, mean, and standard deviation are computed to present the subjects' responses to the MCDCT items and their overall performance in the class concerning gender. Then, the Pearson Correlation was conducted to determine the relationship between EFL students' implicit competence and academic success.

The results indicated that female students outperformed male students in MCDCT with an average score of 49.17 compared to 42. Female students have also achieved higher average scores than their male counterparts at the end of the term with 85.90 compared to 83.07. The average Test Score is 45.58 and the average Term Score is 84.48 (See Tables 1 & 2).

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for Test Scores and Terms Scores across gender

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Test Score	Male	30	42.00	21.399
	Female	30	49.17	17.074
Term Score	Male	30	83.07	7.547
	Female	30	85.90	6.635

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for Test Scores and Terms Scores in total

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Test Score	60	45.58	84.48
Term Score	60	19.530	7.189

To address the first research question "Is there a relationship between male EFL students' implicature competence and their English academic success?" the following correlation is calculated.

**Table 3.** The correlation of Test Scores and Term Scores in male students

		Test Score	Term Score
Test Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.595
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.001
	N	30	30



Term Score	Pearson Correlation	.595	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.001	
	N	30	30

The coefficient of .595 indicated a positive correlation between the two variables, which means that as one variable increased, the other variable also tended to increase. The significance .001 also indicates a 0.1% chance that the null hypothesis is true; in other words, it provides evidence against and rejects the null hypothesis. To address the second research question, "Is there a relationship between female EFL students' implicature competence and their English academic success?" the following correlation is calculated.

**Table 4.** The correlation of Test Scores and Term Scores in female participants

		Test Score	Term Score
Test Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.363
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.049
	N	30	30
Term Score	Pearson Correlation	.363	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.049	
	N	30	30

The coefficient .363 shows a positive relationship between the two variables, but it is worth noting that in comparison to male EFL students, the relationship is a bit weaker. The significance of 0.49 indicates a 4.9% chance that the null hypothesis is true.

Also, in the analysis of results, it was found that for both the 'Test Score' and 'Term Score' variables, the significance values were calculated as 0.157 and 0.128, respectively. The

values surpassed the common threshold of 0.05, suggesting no statistical significance. Therefore, the evidence suggest that gender doesn't seem to differ in the performance of EFL learners.

## DISCUSSION

This study attempted to uncover whether there is a relationship between Iranian EFL students' implicature competence and their academic success. The results obtained from Jahdad Daneshgahi institution located in West Azaerbaijan Urmia city have revealed that there is a positive correlation between implicature competence and academic success of both male and female EFL learners. However, it was shown that this correlation was a bit stronger in male students than in their female counterparts. In addition, several studies are also in align with the current study. For instance, the research conducted by Samaie and Arianmanesh (2018) shows that EFL university students at two different proficiency levels differed significantly. This underscores the importance of considering proficiency when assessing implicature skills.

The findings of this study are also consistent with the results of the recently conducted study by Ciftlikli and Demirel (2022) which revealed that there is a positive relationship between students' implicature knowledge and their achievement in reading skills, confirming the role of implicature competence in EFL context.

In an experimental study conducted by Abdelhafez (2016) the effects of conversational implicature instruction on developing students' pragmatics competence and language proficiency were investigated. The findings of this study showed positive results for teaching conversational implicatures in the class and found a significant correlation between pragmatics competence and language proficiency, once again confirming the importance of pragmatics knowledge in learning a foreign language

The studies above are in alignment with this study and this might indeed be a reason for teachers, students and even textbook authors to tailor this aspect of the language in their curriculum. Based on the findings of this study, several pedagogical implications can be drawn for language instruction. These implications are intended to guide instructors, curriculum designers, textbook authors, and policymakers in improving language education.

Teachers need to incorporate implicature knowledge into teaching activities to enhance students' ability to understand and produce language. These activities can be designed to help students recognize and understand the implied meanings in both written and spoken language. This can be best achieved by using authentic materials such as news, articles, or videos containing implicative examples. Teachers can also explicitly explain implicature and encourage students to practice using it in context.

According to Kasper and Rose (2002), explicit instruction on pragmatics improves learners' pragmatic competence. Similarly, Bardovi-Harlig and Mahan-Taylor (2003) argue that incorporating authentic materials with implicature examples can help learners develop their pragmatic competence. Therefore, language teachers should consider incorporating implicature knowledge into their teaching materials and activities.

Textbook authors should also consider integrating explicit instruction and exercises related to implicature competence into their EFL materials. As our research has shown a positive correlation between implicature competence and English academic success among EFL students, this linguistic skill deserves dedicated attention in language learning resources. By incorporating pragmatic language activities, examples, and explanations related to implicature, textbook writers can better prepare students to navigate real-world communication situations and enhance their overall language proficiency.

Furthermore, it is recommended that language learning programs and curricula prioritize the development of implicature knowledge alongside other linguistic skills. Curriculum developers should consider revising and enriching EFL programs to include a dedicated focus on implicature competence. This can be achieved through the inclusion of implicature-focused activities in materials, as well as through the integration of implicature into language proficiency tests and assessments.

However, this study has several limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, this study adopted a quantitative design, providing valuable insights into the correlation between EFL students' implicit competence and academic success. This approach may not capture the full complexity of the phenomenon, as it may overlook qualitative aspects of language use and differences in individual students' comprehension abilities.

Secondly, this study was conducted in a single geographic location, which limits its generalizability to other educational settings. Regional distinctions can impact the language learning experiences of EFL students and, consequently, their implicature competence.

Thirdly, the sample size was rather small and only included a small group of participants, which may not represent the larger population. In addition, the participants were chosen based on convenient sampling, it was not randomized and may not accurately represent the target population. It is worth noting that in this study, cultural and contextual factors that may influence the EFL students' implicit competence are not considered.

Fourthly, the research focused on mostly teenage students chosen from a language institution. Different results may be obtained from school and university students. In addition, this study's participants were mostly in intermediate and

upper intermediate levels. Therefore, the conclusion drawn from this study does not apply to all types of students.

Lastly, a single instrument is used to measure the implicature competence of students. The use of one instrument may only partially capture the complexity of implicature knowledge. Alternative or complementary tools could provide a more comprehensive view of implicature competence.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this study attempted to uncover the relationship between EFL students' implicature competence and their academic success and the thorough analysis of results revealed that there is a positive relationship between EFL students' implicature competence and their English academic success in both genders and the null hypotheses are rejected indicating that implicature competence of male and female EFL students are correlated with their academic success.

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