

## An Empirical Study of Pragmatic Failure by Kurdish EFL Learners in the Performance of Conversational Implicature

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### **Abstract:**

This study investigates the pragmatic failure of Kurdish EFL learners in the performance of conversational implicature. This study is based on a quantitative research method, and an MCQ is used as a tool to collect the necessary data. 35 fourth-year students (24 female, 11 male) from the English Language Department, Cihan University/Sulaimaniya participated in this study. It is found that the main reason of pragmatic failure is because of the learners' limited language proficiency and that they cannot fully recognize when the relevance maxim is violated. It is also found that they do not quite understand the act of face management. The results demonstrated that Kurdish EFL learners lack the pragmatic knowledge needed to perform conversational implicature. To avoid future pragmatic failure the learners need to be more proficient in the target language with a deeper insight of the socio-cultural norms of the target language.

**Key Words:** Pragmatic Failure, Kurdish EFL learners, Conversational Implicature, Performance.

### **الملخص:**

تبحث هذه الدراسة الفشل البراغماتي في أداء المعاني الضمنية في الحوار من قبل الأكراد المتعلمين اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية. تستند هذه الدراسة إلى منهج بحث كمي ، وتستخدم أسئلة متعددة الإجابات كأداة لجمع البيانات الضرورية. شارك في هذه الدراسة 35 طالباً في السنة الرابعة (24 إناث ، 11 ذكور) من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة جيهان / السليمانية. لقد وجد أن أسباب الفشل البراغماتي ترجع إلى الكفاءة اللغوية المحدودة للمتعلمين وأنهم لا يستطيعون إدراك متى يتم انتهائكم مبدأ الصلة. وقد أيدوا أنهم لا يفهمون تماماً فعل إدارة الوجه ، ولكن عندما يكون العاملان الآخرين أقل حضوراً ، حقق المشاركون مستوى أعلى. تظهر النتائج أن المتعلمين الكرد يفتقرن إلى المعرفة البراغماتية الضرورية لأداء المعاني الضمنية في الحوار. لتجنب الفشل العملي في المستقبل ، يحتاج المتعلمون إلى أن يكونوا أكثر كفاءة في اللغة الهدف مع نظرة أعمق للمعايير الاجتماعية والثقافية للغة الهدف.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الفشل البراغماتي ، الأكراد المتعلمين اللغة الإنجليزية لغة أجنبية ، المعاني الضمنية في الحوار ، الأداء.

### **پوخته:**

ئەم توپۇزىنەمەيە لىكۆلەنەمە لە شىكىتى پرەگماتىكى فىرخوازانى كورد دەكەت لە جىيەجىنەردىن ئىمپەلىكەيشنى گفتۇگۇدا. نەم توپۇزىنەمەيە لەسەر بىنماى شىوازىكى توپۇزىنەمە چەندايەتتىيە، وەك ئامرازىك بۇ كۆكىنەمە زانىارىيە پۇيىستەكەن پەرسىارى ھەلبىزاردەن بەكارهاتووه. لەم توپۇزىنەمەدا 35 خوينىدەن كارى قۇناغى چوارم (24 لە رەگەزى مى، 11 لە رەگەزى نىر) لە بەشى زمانى ئىنگلەزى، زانكۆزى چىھان/سالىمانى بەشداربۇون. دەردىكەمۇتى كە ھۆكار مکانى شىكىتى پرەگماتىك بەھۆزى سۇورداربۇونى تواناى زمانى فىرخوازانەمەيە و ناتوانان بە تەھاوايى بىزانن كەمە ماكسىمى پەيۇمنىدىدارىتى پېشىل دەكەنەت. ھەرەوھا دەردىكەمۇتى كە ئەوان بە تەھاوايى لە كردى بەرپۇبرىنى دەمچاۋا تىنگەن، بەلام كاتىك دوو فاڭتەرى كۆتايى كەمەن ئامادەن بەشداربۇون ئاستىكى بەرزىتىان بەدەستەتىننا. ئەنچامەكەن دەرىدەخەن كە فىرخوازانى كورد ئەم زانىارىيە پرەگماتىكەمەيان نىيە كە پۇيىستەن بۇ ئەنچامەدەن ئىمپەلىكەيشنى گفتۇگۇيى. بۇ ئەمە لە داھاتوودا شىكىتى پرەگماتىكى روونەدات، فىرخوازان پۇيىستە شارەزاتر بن لە زمانى ئامانجدا بە تىگەيشتىكى قۇولۇت لە نزەرمەكەن كۆمەلەيەتى-كۇلتۇرە زمانى ئامانج.

کلیه وشه: شکستی پر اگماتیک، فیرخوازانی کورد، ئیمپلیکیشنی گفتوگو، جئیه جینکردن

## 1. Introduction

Learning a language entails being able to communicate clearly and fluently. This includes understanding the grammar rules and vocabulary required to express a concept without making errors, as well as the ability to communicate successfully with others. Even the most capable students, however, may encounter difficulties in understanding from time to time. The reason for this is that they do not act in an anticipated manner in a certain scenario or do not follow the rules that are intended to be applied in that situation. This has to do with pragmatics, which, according to writers like Bouton (1994), Kasper (2001), Takahashi (2001), Yoshimi (2001), isn't frequently taught in foreign language classes or is not included in most course materials. Even if it is, textbooks rarely reflect how the language is used in real life. Then it is expected from the students to start registering examples of implicature when they encounter them in any medium. For example, whether watching a movie or TV show, viewing YouTube videos, reading books, articles, essays, journals, and so forth, or just conversing with a native speaker. So this paper tries to investigate the students' ability to recognize implicature and what might be the reasons when they fail to do so. First of all, we will start with the literature review, after that we will go into details about the methodology, then we will discuss the results and finally, we will finish with the conclusion. This study tries to answer two questions and they are as followed:

- 1- What is the level of Kurdish EFL learners' performance of conversational implicature?
- 2- What might be the reasons for Kurdish EFL learners' pragmatic failure?

## 2. Theoretical background

Pragmatics is a linguistic field that studies language in interaction. Since language can and is used in different ways and situations, there are various definitions of pragmatics. To better understand the notion of pragmatics, some selected definitions will be discussed which are the best representations of pragmatics. Moreover, the main focus of this article would be discussed which is implicature and what is related to it.

### 2.1 The scope of pragmatics

In comparison to other branches of linguistics such as phonetics, morphology, syntax, and semantics, pragmatics is a relatively recent field. According to Leech (1983) pragmatics was not a well-established field in the 1960s, and it dealt with challenges that other linguistic fields couldn't address. Nonetheless, in the 1970s, language usage and context gained greater traction, and pragmatics became a recognized branch of linguistics. Regardless of this acknowledgment Crystal points out that "pragmatics is not a coherent field of study since it overlaps with many other linguistic areas and consists of various aspects of language use" (2010, p. 124). Furthermore, because pragmatics includes a wide variety of language features, linguists define it according to their goals and interests most of the time, thus there are various definitions for pragmatics. In the following, two commonly used definitions of pragmatics will be offered.

The first definition to be discussed is Yule's, who took both of these aspects into consideration and argued that pragmatics is the study of the invisible meaning of what is said or (written) by the listener or (reader)" (2020, p. 150). From this definition, one can get a good sense of pragmatics as it is learned that for a good communication to take place both the speaker (writer) and the hearer (reader) must have a lot of shared assumptions and expectations, because from a pragmatic perspective "more is always communicated than is said". He then continued by emphasising the importance of context stating that "the meaning of the text is not in the words alone, but in what we think the writer intended to communicate in that context" (2020, p. 151). Yule then broke down the notion of context into two parts, first the "physical context" which is the location where the words are encountered, and second, we have "linguistic context" which is the surrounding words, also known as "co-text". Yule stated that in order to understand what is meant both of these parts are important.

Then there is Crystal's (1987) definition of pragmatics, which emphasizes the importance of the speaker in the conversation. He claimed that pragmatics is the study of language from the perspective of users, particularly the choices they make, the limits they face while using language in social interactions, and the impact their language usage has on other participants in the communication process. This definition of Crystal is heavily criticized by Thomas (1995), who pointed out that in Crystal's definition the "main focus is on the producer of the message while interaction contains other important aspects as well" (1995, p. 2). Thomas also highlighted that Crystal's definition "takes a social view by defining pragmatics as the speaker's meaning and overlooking hearer's interpretation or utterance interpretation" (Thomas, 1995, p. 2).

As mentioned above, knowledge about pragmatics is an essential aspect in the process of learning a certain language, the learners have to be well informed and taught about the pragmatics of the target language so that they can communicate successfully. And implicature, naturally being an essential part of pragmatics, is important in the process of learning and teaching pragmatics. Therefore implicature and some related terms would be discussed in the following.

## 2.2 Implicatures

Davis defined implicature as "meaning one thing by saying something else" (2016, p. 1). So because it examines the meaning in interaction, pragmatics is concerned with "what is said" as well as "what is meant". Furthermore, because individuals do not always mean what they say or, on the contrary, mean much more than what they say, investigating meaning in interaction is often challenging. Furthermore, knowing exactly what a speaker does or doesn't express is difficult. Grice was the first to distinguish between "what is said" and "what is meant" in the 1950s. In his thesis, Grice introduced the idea of implicature, claiming that implicature is "the conveyed meaning of the speaker" (1975, p. 43). The expressed or underlying meaning forces the listener to undergo a process in order to determine the actual meaning of the utterances by analysing what is expressed and what is implied. In determining what the speaker intends, assumptions, common previous knowledge, and contextual elements are all important.

Grice presented two different types of implicature, he firstly mentioned "conversational implicature, (which) always depends on the context and the shared background knowledge of the speakers" (1975, p. 50). Then he mentioned "conventional implicature, (which) remains the same

regardless of context" (Grice, 1975, p. 50). In other words, "conversational implicature" is explicated locally, for example, in the question-answer pair 'did you invite Bella & Cathy? – I invited Bella.' the speaker who answers the question can be seen to convey more than he is saying in his answer (Yule, 1996, pp. 40-42).

"Conventional implicature" is triggered by particular expressions, like the words 'but' and 'even' for instance, which add the implied meanings to the utterances (He wanted to invite Bella and Cathy, but I invited Bella) (Yule, 1996, p. 45). In contrast to Yule and Grice, McNamara and Roever (2006) claimed that, unlike speech act interpretation, context and social conditions do not play a significant role in implicature interpretation. They did, however, acknowledged the importance of prior knowledge and shared personal experience. They also asserted that "implicature is primarily based on Grice's maxims of conversation since the interpretation process happens in the hearer's mind" (2006, p. 59).

According to Grice, communication is typically not made up of "disconnected remarks", but rather relies largely on joint efforts; he stated "a conversation has a purpose that the participants recognize and accept" (1975, p. 45). As a result of this mutually agreed-upon strategy, some specific remarks made during a conversation are deemed unsuitable. In fact, "participants usually implicitly agree on the direction and goals of the conversation and have the same assumptions of how the conversation may or may not be carried out" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Grice created the cooperative principle to describe this agreement: "Make your conversational contribution such as 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, 1975, p. 45). Grice's four maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner form the basis of a successful interaction.

These maxims, should be considered by all participants in every conversation, so one should try to be as informative as possible (maxim of quantity), speak truthfully (maxim of quality), be relevant (maxim of relation) and speak briefly and orderly without obscurity (maxim of manner). Speakers naturally follow these maxims which form the underlying presumptions or guidelines in order to make a conversation as cooperative as possible.

Despite the notion that all participants in a conversation must collaborate, Grice (1975) admitted that this is not the situation for each and every speaker and that some speakers may not always comply with these maxims. Grice argued that there are many times that the "speakers can either fail to observe or deliberately violate a maxim", in order, "to imply more than is said by using an implicature" (1975, p. 49). Next, it will be discussed when and how miscommunication happens in a conversation.

### **2.3 Pragmatic failure**

Thomas was the first to use the term 'pragmatic failure' in 1983. Since then, "pragmatic failure has become the core of cross-cultural pragmatics" (Tang, 2013, p. 75). Thomas stated that pragmatic failure is broadly defined as the "inability to understand what is meant by what is said" (1983, p. 92). According to Thomas, there are two types of pragmatic failure, pragmalinguistic failure, and sociopragmatic failure, where the former refers to "when the pragmatic force mapped by S onto a given utterance is systematically different from the force most frequently assigned to it by native

speakers of the target language, or when speech act strategies are inappropriately transferred from L1 to L2" (Thomas, 1983, p. 99). The latter, however, "refers to the social conditions placed on language in use" (Thomas, 1983, p. 99). Moreover, Thomas argued that "while pragmalinguistic failure is a linguistic problem that is caused by differences in the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force, (whereas) socio-pragmatic failure stems from cross-culturally different perceptions of what constitutes appropriate linguistic behaviour" (Thomas, 1983, p. 99); thus, sociopragmatic decisions are far more closely linked to social behaviours than linguistic decisions (Thomas, 1983). To put it shortly, pragmatic failures are mostly caused by the imposition of a culture's social rules on the communicative behaviours of another, when alternative, more appropriate social norms would be more appropriate (Thomas, 1983).

It is essential to recognize the more important role of sociopragmatic failure over the pragmalinguistic failure since the former focuses more on the knowledge of "when to say what and whom to say it to", to which many factors influence such as "the size of imposition, cross-culturally different assessments of relative power or social distance, and value judgments. Also, misunderstanding caused by sociopragmatic failure is more detrimental" (Hashimian, 2012, p. 26). More clearly, Tang (2013) argued, sociopragmatic failure is a by-product of improperly adopted language forms because speakers who do not know common protocols, labelling rules, or social customs in the culture of listening to people during their communication. That means sociopragmatic failure occurs if speakers and listeners fail to adopt appropriate communicative strategies or language forms because of the cultural or social differences between the two parties.

Al-Saidi and Rashid (2015) elaborated more by stating that "potential areas of misinterpretation and failures are more likely to occur if we fail to fully understand our interlocutor's intention in the process of cross-cultural communication" (2015, p. 125). Most importantly, the fact of the hearers' inability to understand the literal meanings of the speakers' utterances and words does not cause us to fail to understand what they say, but the challenge lies in the correct interpretation of the speakers' intentions, the misunderstanding or lack of it is what caused this failure (Miller1974 cited in Thomas 1983).

### **3. Methodology**

This study adopts a descriptive research design and applies a quantitative data analysis method to analyse and interpret the collected data. The quantitative data analysis method is used to "establish the relationship between variables and look for and sometimes explain the causes of such a relationship" (Fraenkel, Norman, & Hyun, 2012, p. 11).

#### **3.1. Participants**

Thirty-five fourth-year students (24 females, 11 male) from the English Language Department, Cihan University/Sulaimaniya participated in this study.

#### **3.2. Instrument**

In order to collect the data, we used a shortened version of a questionnaire developed by Samaie, M., & Arianmanesh, M. (2018) following Holtgraves (1998, 1999), who defined and subdivided the

conversational implicature into four categories: Indirect refusals, Negative opinions, Disclosures, and Topic changes. The internal consistency of the whole measure was (0.82), this result shows that the measure yields a high estimate of reliability.

### 3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

The instrument was distributed to students in the same class, and they allocated almost 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. The collected data were analysed by SPSS 26.

## 4. Findings

The results of this study are grouped according to the subtypes of conversational implicature as mentioned by Holtgraves (1998). So the results will be shown as groups, then the items with the highest percentage of incorrect answers will be later analysed in the next section to clarify what might be the reasons for the pragmatic failure.

### 4.1. Indirect refusal

The items (1, 4, 5, 11, and 15) are indirect refusal items.

Table 1: Situation 1

	Frequency	Per cent
Valid	2	22.9
	3	11.4
	4	65.7
	Total	100.0

Table 2: Situation 4

	Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	51.4
	2	34.3
	3	8.6
	4	5.7
	Total	100.0

Table 3: Situation 5

	Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	37.1
	2	37.1
	3	5.7
	4	20.0
	Total	100.0

**Table 4: Situation 11**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	16	45.7
	2	3	8.6
	3	1	2.9
	4	15	42.9
	Total	35	100.0

**Table 5: Situation 15**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	27	77.1
	2	1	2.9
	3	2	5.7
	4	5	14.3
	Total	35	100.0

As shown from the above tables it can be seen that the results of indirect refusal items are somewhat mixed, with item 15 having the highest percentage of the correct answer with 77.1%, and item 11 also has a low percentage of the correct answer with only 45.7%.

#### **4.2. Negative opinion**

The items (8, 9, 13, and 14) are negative opinion items.

**Table 6: Situation 8**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	12	34.3
	2	15	42.9
	3	4	11.4
	4	4	11.4
	Total	35	100.0

**Table 7: Situation 9**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	20	57.1
	2	12	34.3
	3	1	2.9
	4	2	5.7
	Total	35	100.0

**Table 8: Situation 13**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	1	2.9
	2	12	34.3
	3	1	2.9
	4	21	60.0
	Total	35	100.0

**Table 9: Situation 14**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	8	22.9
	2	8	22.9
	3	18	51.4
	4	1	2.9
	Total	35	100.0

As shown from the above tables it can be seen that the results of negative opinion items are more consistent than the previously mentioned subtype, with item 13 having the highest percentage of the correct answer with 60%, and item 8 having the lowest percentage with 42.9%.

#### **4.3. Disclosures**

The items (2, 3, and 6) are disclosures items.

**Table 10: Situation 2**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	6	17.1
	2	3	8.6
	3	3	8.6
	4	23	65.7
	Total	35	100.0

**Table 11: Situation 3**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	9	25.7
	2	1	2.9
	3	24	68.6
	4	1	2.9
	Total	35	100.0

**Table 12: Situation 6**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	2	5.7
	2	4	11.4
	4	29	82.9
	Total	35	100.0

As shown from the above tables it can be seen that the results of disclosure items are much better than the two above subtypes, with item 6 having the highest percentage of the correct answer with 82.9%, and item 2 having the lowest percentage with 65.7%.

#### **4.4. Topic changes**

The items (7, 10, and 12) are topic changes items.

**Table 13: Situation 7**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	2	5.7
	2	1	2.9
	4	32	91.4
	Total	35	100.0

**Table 14: Situation 10**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	29	82.9
	2	5	14.3
	3	1	2.9
	Total	35	100.0

**Table 15: Situation 12**

		Frequency	Per cent
Valid	1	31	88.6
	2	2	5.7
	3	1	2.9
	4	1	2.9
Total		35	100.0

As shown from the above tables it can be seen that the results of topic change items are the best, with item 7 having the highest percentage of the correct answer from all other items with 91.4%, and item 10 having the lowest percentage with 82.9%.

## 5. Discussion

As it can be seen from the results of the MCQ test that the learners had a problem with negative opinion as they scored the lowest marks in this subtype, the next subtype with the lowest marks was indirect refusal, but fortunately, the next two subtypes a positive change can be seen as the learners scored the highest in topic change with disclosure coming second.

As for what contributes to the pragmatic failure of the learners, one can argue that the most relevant contributor is the proficiency of a learner as "a higher proficiency level indicated better comprehension of conversational implicature" (Köylü, 2018, p. 397). This proficiency doesn't come easy as it takes a lot of time and effort from the learners, according to Ishihara and Cohen (2010), it takes "over 10 years to acquire native-like pragmatic ability, even in a second-language setting" (cited in Araujo, 2020, p. 102). Also, another important aspect that makes it very difficult for the learners to get to a higher proficiency level is learning about the proper social norms (or sociopragmatic) of the target language despite having sufficient linguistic abilities (pragmalinguistic) in the same target language. Riley (1984) elaborated more on this by stating that the principles of grammar are stable and have been thoroughly explained so that a teacher can confidently correct any syntactic, morphological, lexical, and phonological mistakes. However, because they are descriptions of how humans adjust linguistic behaviour to suit the circumstances, the socio-pragmatic norms are anything but stable, and the process of explaining them has only just begun.

As for why the learners' scores varied, the contributing factor to this is the maxim of relevance, as according to Sperber and Wilson (2012) who claimed that a relevance principle guides interpretation, the most relevant interpretation of a statement is one that requires the least amount of effort and provides the largest number of contextual implications. This becomes obvious when we look at situation 5 (item 5) where most of the students got the statement uttered by Stephanie as one that holds a literal meaning (62.8%) because the answers they chose felt more relevant to her statement, whereas only (37.1%) of the students understood that this statement conveys another meaning which is to indirectly refuse the invitation.

Another reason that could lead to pragmatic failure is the misunderstanding of the act of face management, Holtgraves (1998, p. 1) elaborated more on this by stating that "face management is assumed to be a major motivation for violating the relevance maxim, and thus it should serve as a frame for interpreting the violation." This is seen when we look at situation 8 (item 8) where most of the students (57.1%) didn't get that what Elena was saying is that she didn't like the gym because that felt more face-threatening, thus only (42.9%) of the students understood the conveyed meaning of her statement.

In the cases of disclosure and topic change, although there were violations of relevance maxim most of the students seemed to be able to understand the conveyed message in those situations (items) because they were more familiar with these kinds of relevancy violations and could recognize them. Another reason that most of the students understood the implicature regarding disclosure and topic change is that in these two cases they didn't have to deal with face management, so it was easier for them to get the right answers. This shows that a good amount of Kurdish EFL learners still fail to

understand that language has more than one usage and even more interpretations, and that they don't have enough socio-pragmatic knowledge which affects their understanding of the language.

Aside from the possible contributors to pragmatic failure mentioned previously, some other reasons are mentioned that could lead to pragmatic failure in a conversation, and they are as in the following:

- 1- Negative Pragmatic Transfer: according to Ishihara (2018) negative pragmatic transfer is a possible cause of pragmatic failure, in which speakers rely on pragmatic norms from their first (or another) language in an intercultural interaction in an L2 where the norms of the two languages are not shared.
- 2- Too Many Words: In order to achieve the same pragmatic act, the non-native speaker utilizes more words than the native speaker. In this situation, pragmatic failure might be caused by excessive use of words, resulting in a lack of appropriateness, prompting the listener to react with impatience. (Blum-Kulka, Olshtain 1986)
- 3- Contextual Explicitness: This happens when the background, preconditions, explanations, and justifications relating to the context in which the action is set are elaborated by the non-native speaker, who provides more than is required for the occasion. (Blum-Kulka, Olshtain 1986).

## Conclusion

The current study is an empirical investigation of Kurdish EFL learners' pragmatic failure in conversational implicature performance, as well as some ideas regarding why this pragmatic failure occurs. The learners' low level of competency is one of the greatest causes to Kurdish EFL learners' pragmatic failure; another factor is that they cannot identify the violation of the relevance maxim, also they have a difficulty in understanding the act of face management.

The consequences of pragmatic failure might vary from inappropriateness to full communication breakdown. Because the causes of intercultural pragmatic failure are frequently compounded, language teachers may need to thoroughly watch learners' language behaviour and language learning background in order to pinpoint probable sources of pragmatic failure. Grammatical errors might be looked down upon and be neglected but interactants' pragmatic errors might be seen as an indication of bad intentions or flawed personalities, and could even propagate cultural stereotypes.

Pragmatic awareness-raising exercises may be helpful when a negative transfer or cross-linguistic effect is a primary source of possible pragmatic failure. Instead of seeking to overcome learners' resistance or forcing them to accept L2 norms, teachers should use culturally sensitive teaching tactics and refrain from punishing students who choose not to talk in a target-like manner.

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