

INFERENCE: PROCEDURES & IMPLICATIONS FOR TEFL

Part 2: Examples & Teaching Implications

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This paper is based on my talk entitled "Inference: How it Works", given at the 16th International Publishers' Exhibition, Athens, 9 May 1999, as well as RSA/Cambridge Diploma sessions on Discourse Analysis & TEFL I taught at PROFILE (1994-1999).

INTRODUCTION

In part 1 (issue 63) I discussed the clues given by speakers/ writers, and the clues and thinking processes used by listeners/ readers in order to infer successfully. In this part I will present and comment on examples of how those clues can be exploited for effective communication to take place. Then, I will discuss implications for the learning/ teaching of English as a foreign language.

IMPLICATURE & INFERENCE AT PLAY

In this section I will examine examples of the clues and thought processes employed by listeners/ readers in order to infer successfully, as well as examples of how speakers/ writers create style and effect. In my discussion I will be referring to the responses and comments of participants in the talk and sessions. Readers are invited to recreate the interactive conditions of those sessions by reading the examples and responding to the prompts & questions before reading the commentary.

Text 11. (from Levinson, 1983: 112)

A: *Where's Bill?*
 B: *There's a yellow VW outside Sue's house.*

- ⇒ Does B seem to be co-operative?
- ⇒ What is B's intended message?
- ⇒ How can A understand B's message?

Of course, B could have answered '*I think he is at Sue's, because his car is parked outside her house*'. Still, such a straightforward answer is only one option. B prefers to give a the facts and let him/ her draw conclusions. What is more, it is safer for B to give A the facts and let A draw his/her own conclusions. Let us follow A's (probable) train of thought:

I haven't received a straightforward answer, but still believe that B does want to answer my question. Let me see how I can use the clues that B gave me: I know that Bill owns a yellow VW and that he's a friend of Sue's. So I think that B wants to tell me that as far as he/she knows Bill is at Sue's

The clues used here are:

- Shared knowledge/ experience.
- Belief that the speaker wants to be helpful.
- Belief that the speaker has information that (as far as he/ she knows) is valid/ correct

Text 12. (adapted from Yule, 1996:20)

- ⇒ Look at the following question.
- A: *Where's the cheese sandwich?*
- ⇒ What does the speaker want to know?
- ⇒ What response do you expect?
- ⇒ Look at the answer.
- B: *He's sitting over there by the window.*
- ⇒ How did they manage to understand each other?

This is an exchange between two waiters. Referring to customers using their order is quite common in such contexts. What is more, we expect that A asked the question while ready to serve the customer. The clues used here are:

- Shared knowledge/ conventions
- Knowledge of context

It should be mentioned here that lack of knowledge of the 'restaurant' context would make it difficult for a reader/ listener of this exchange to understand that the 'cheese sandwich' is actually a customer.

Text 13. (from Levinson, 1983: 112)

- ⇒ What does Johnny's mother want?
- ⇒ How do we understand that?

Johnny: *Hey Sally, let's play marbles.*
 Mother: *How is your homework getting along, Johnny?*

Participants understood the mother's response (as indeed would Johnny) as a command for Johnny to finish his homework before doing anything else. Although the response is grammatically a question, it doesn't function as one. That is, the mother does not require a report on the progress of Johnny's homework, as it is clear that Johnny is not working on it right now. The clues used here are:

- Context (mother-child relationship)
- Co-text: Johnny's stated intention to play marbles.
- Knowledge of the conventions/ rules applying in that context (play is allowed only after schoolwork or house chores have been completed).

Text 14. (from Clark & Clark, 1977:97-98)

Patience walked into a room. The chandeliers burned brightly.

- ⇒ Where were the chandeliers?

Participants 'saw' the chandeliers in the room Patience walked into. What is interesting is that no explicit

connector is there to signal this. Participants were able to infer the location of the chandeliers combining the following clues:

- Proximity: the two sentences are one after the other, therefore readers expect a link.
- Time/ space sequence: like a camera we follow Patience into the room and with her see the chandeliers.
- The definite article (*'the chandeliers'*): the writers treats the chandeliers as 'given'. But what has already been introduced is the room; therefore readers are led to infer that there is a close link between 'room' and 'chandeliers'.
- Shared knowledge/ experience: chandeliers in a room are consistent with our experience. Readers would find it more difficult or even impossible to draw this inference if the second sentence was *'The crocodiles looked hungry'*, as this would contradict expectations of what a room may normally contain.

Text 15. (from Clark & Clark, 1977:97-98)

Mary got the picnic supplies out of the car. The beer was warm.

- ⇒ Where was the beer?
- ⇒ Where were the picnic supplies?
- ⇒ What did the picnic supplies include?

All participants understood that the beer was part of the picnic supplies. Actually, most participants did not even feel there was anything to infer, as the text seemed straightforward and explicit to them. This is an indication that in familiar contexts inference procedures are quick. Participants also 'saw' that the picnic supplies were in a picnic basket, which was in the boot of the car, and that the supplies also included sandwiches, soft drinks, fruit and dessert. It should be mentioned here that readers whose cultures are not familiar with the activity of picnicking would be expected to find the connection between 'beer' and 'picnic supplies' much less straightforward, even if they had the meaning of 'picnic' explained to them.

The clues used here are:

- Proximity.
- The definite article.
- Shared knowledge/ experience.

Text 16. (from Gabrielatos, 1994:15)

A: *Look at me! I'm fat and ugly.*
B: *Come on, you're not fat!*

- ⇒ What is the second speaker's intended message?
- ⇒ How is it expressed?

Superficially, A seems to be making a statement. Nevertheless, the fact that A says that in the presence of B leads B to infer that he/ she is invited to make a comment. Similarly, although B does not make a negative comment explicitly, A clearly receives the message that B thinks (or wants A to think) that A is ugly. Here the source of the insult (or joke) is the omission of *'and ugly'* in B's response. To return to A's prompt, what makes its function clear is that B

cannot avoid commenting on A's statement; even silence would be understood as an insult/ joke. This case illustrates how the Irony Principle (Leech, 1983) can be put to use (for a detailed analysis of the mechanisms of humour see Nash, 1985). It is interesting to notice that participants did not question for a moment the function of A's 'statement' as a prompt.

The clues used here are:

- Context: A's comment is made in the presence of B.
- Quantity Maxim and/or Irony Principle: B's response addresses only part of A's prompt.

Text 17. (from *Life the Universe and Everything*, Douglas Adams, Pan Books, 1982: 138)

⇒ How is style/ effect created in the following excerpt?

"That young girl" [the android] added unexpectedly "is one of the least benightedly unintelligent organic life forms it has been my profound lack of pleasure not to be able to avoid meeting."

Here the reader's attention is drawn by the flouting of the maxims of Quantity (wordiness of expression) and Manner (series of negatives). It is exactly because readers would need to make extra effort to untangle the web of negatives that this excerpt is effective. Expressing the content of the text in a concise and straightforward way (e.g. *'That young girl is one of the most intelligent organic life forms I have had the misfortune to meet'*) would diminish the effect on the reader.

A similar effect is produced by the wordiness and series of interlocking parenthetical comments/ explanations in the following text:

Text 18. (from *The Long Dark Tea-time of the Soul*, Douglas Adams, Pan Books, 1988: 120)

"You are a driver," he said, "and I use the word in the loosest possible sense, i.e. meaning merely somebody who occupies the driving seat of what I will for the moment call - but I use the term strictly without prejudice - a car while it is proceeding along the road, of stupendous, I would even say verging on the superhuman, lack of skill."

SUMMARISING COMMENTS

Decoding vs. interpretation. Understanding the conventional meaning of lexical and grammatical structures is only the first step towards successful interpretation of linguistic messages.

Following, breaking & bending the rules. Grice presented the Co-operative Principle and its Maxims as "guidelines for the efficient and effective use of language in conversation to further co-operative ends" (Levinson, 1983: 101). But following these guidelines (or 'rules') is only one option. Table 3 below outlines the options speakers/ writers have, as well as the potential consequences for verbal expression and communication.

ironic way 60% of the time, whereas analysis of the Longman Learners' Corpus showed that learners used this expression far less frequently and in only 12% of the cases was it used ironically.

Awareness of register and genre is also important, as use of words/ expressions which are too formal or too informal for the particular context can lead listeners/ readers to misread the learner's message or intentions. For example, the use of formal language in an informal context may be perceived by listeners/ readers as intended to create social distance, or to convey humour/ irony.

Listening & reading

Learners are aware of their linguistic shortcomings, and, consequently, lack confidence. As a result, they tend to pay more attention to the propositional level of the utterance. More simply, they are preoccupied with understanding the meaning of individual words. Therefore, learners may fail to work out intended implicatures, and, as a result, fail to understand the intended meaning of the speaker/ writer. Since communication depends on more than the meaning of lexis and grammatical structures, reading and listening lessons should help learners move beyond merely understanding isolated lexis/ structures (see also Gabrielatos, 1998: 52).

The main goal of learners is to be able to understand texts targeted at native speakers. But speakers/ writers, having a native-speaker audience in mind, will assume certain shared knowledge/ assumptions with their listeners/ readers, which learners may not have. Learners may be facilitated by the following:

- Knowledge of the learners' language/ culture on the part of the teacher will lead to informed decisions regarding the support learners need in order to work out implicatures successfully. Of course, teachers themselves should also be aware of cultural elements relevant to the target language.
- If the learners' level permits, authentic texts should be used. When specially constructed texts are deemed necessary, care should be taken so that they are not unnaturally explicit (i.e. containing only straightforward propositions).
- Questions in receptive skills lessons should not focus solely on facts/ ideas that have been explicitly expressed or conventionally implicated. Students need to be guided to identify and work out the speaker's/ writer's non-conventional implicatures.
- Effective listening skills development needs to incorporate awareness-raising on how stress, intonation and tone of voice can provide clues for the speaker's intended implicatures.

Lexical inference

In language learning, one very useful application of inferencing is understanding the meaning of unknown lexis in a text. This is an indispensable enabling skill as it not only increases the effectiveness of learners' receptive skills, but also helps learners develop their lexical competence independently (see also Gabrielatos, 1995; Nuttall, 1996: 62-76).

Using the text below, I will outline briefly the clues and thought processes that can be used in order for learners to

infer the meaning of 'cyanide'.

Text 18. (from The Guardian, 24 May 1994)

Woman freed after retrial on friend's death	
<p>A WOMAN who left cyanide in her kitchen cupboard which killed a party guest who thought it was sugar was freed yesterday after admitting manslaughter.</p> <p>Tricia O'Mahoney was jailed for life for murder in March 1991, but the Court of Appeal ordered a retrial after new evidence came to light.</p> <p>Yesterday she was jailed for four years at the Old Bailey - the time she had spent in custody - after Judge Neil Denison decided she had suffered enough.</p> <p>Mrs O'Mahoney, aged 41, pleaded guilty to manslaughter on the grounds that she was "grossly negligent" by leaving the poison in her larder among food. Her plea of not guilty to murder was accepted by the court.</p> <p>Glyn Cooper, aged 51, died at Mrs O'Mahoney's house in Streatham, south London, during a party while she was making him a cup of coffee. He picked up a jar of rat poison thinking it was sugar, said Rock Tansey QC, defending.</p> <p>"She had no motive or any reason to kill this man. She got on very well with him," he added.</p>	<p>⇒ <i>it can be found in a kitchen</i> ⇒ <i>it can kill</i> ⇒ <i>it looks like sugar</i> Learner need to use the cohesive ties indicated by 'who', 'her', 'which', 'who' and 'it'.</p> <p>⇒ <i>it shouldn't be in the kitchen</i> ⇒ <i>it's a poison</i> Learners need to identify and use the following clues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'by' as signalling cause, • 'the poison' as a given entity, which refers to 'cyanide', • 'larder' as a synonym for 'kitchen cupboard', and • 'food' as relating to 'kitchen'. <p>⇒ <i>it's rat poison</i></p>

I would like to stress the following:

- Learners should be alerted to the fact that clues may not be found in one place in the text only, and should be trained to look for clues throughout the text and combine them.
- The inference-steps leading to the final inference need not all be accurate. Skilled readers regard those inference-steps as working hypotheses, which can be discarded or refined in the light of new clues. In the example above the initial inference '*It is/ can be found in a kitchen*' was later discarded.

Speaking & writing

As regards oral production, Blum-Kulka & Olshtein (in Tarone & Yule, 1989: 107) suggest that learners operate along the lines of "the less confident you are that you can get the meaning across, the more words and contextual information you use". Tarone & Yule (1989: 113) conducted a study in which a 'speaker' had to give instructions to a 'hearer'. The subjects were either both native or both non-native speakers. Tarone & Yule reported that "typically the non-native speaker group provided more

detail than the native speakers seemed to feel necessary".

Apart from providing more information than needed/ expected, learners may opt to use neutral/ unmarked rather than idiomatic language, either because such language is beyond their linguistic ability or because they do not feel confident enough. Finally, learners may choose to simplify their message, or communicate part of the intended message when they are not confident that their linguistic resources are adequate to express the full message.

Such practice may prove problematic as the use by learners of more/less explicit or unidiomatic language, or the communication of more/less information' required in the particular context may be perceived by listeners (particularly those for whom English is a first language) as floutings of the maxims of Quantity and/or Manner. In such a case, listeners may be led to work out unintended implicatures.

The issues discussed above point towards caution in the teaching of certain "communication strategies", that is, strategies which help learners to compensate for their imperfect mastery of the language when faced with a communicative need (see Corder, 1983; Ellis, 1985: 180-188; Tarone, 1983). Communication strategies can be sub-categorised into achievement and reduction strategies. Achievement strategies aim at the communication of the whole message as perceived by the speaker. Relevant examples of achievement strategies are: circumlocution (i.e. 'describing' a lexical item) , paraphrasing and lexical substitution (using related lexis). Reduction strategies aim at either communicating an imperfect or simplified message or communicating a message other than the one intended initially, that is a message that the speaker can manage to communicate. By being over- or under-explicit, and by using words/ expressions which are loosely related to the ones that accurately express their intended message, learners may lead listeners/ readers to draw unintended inferences.

Blum-Kulka & Levenston (1983) provide an example from Serbo-Croat learners of English: "Serbo-Croat '*pametna*' is used where English uses either '*sensible*' or '*clever*'. Serbo-Croat speakers tend to use '*clever*', even when the context demands '*sensible*'. They will thus often give a connotation of '*cunning*' quite unwittingly when they use '*clever*' in the wrong context."

Another case in point is the following excerpt:

Text 20. (from the BBC video *Black Adder Goes Forth*, BBCV5714, 1995).

The way I see it, these days there's a war on, right? and, ages ago, there wasn't a war on, right? So, there must have been a moment when there not being a war on went away, right? and there being a war on came along. So, what I want to know is: How did we get from the one case of affairs to the other case of affairs?

This is said by a rather dim character in the series. The roundabout manner of asking the simple question "How did the war start?" is intended to stress this aspect of the character and create a humorous effect. Unfortunately, this is also an indication of the effect learners may create

unintentionally through uncritical use of certain communication strategies.

As regards written language, teachers need to ensure that learners do not regard explicit cohesive markers (e.g. *furthermore*, *nevertheless*) as the only or best option they have to help readers understand the relations between parts of their message. Learners should be made aware of the importance of information structure and assumed shared knowledge with the readers. Overuse of explicit cohesive markers may be perceived by readers as flouting of the Quantity maxim, resulting to the readers' working out unintended implicatures (e.g. be misled to believe that the writer wants to be ironic or humorous).

The following table outlines potential learner problems and proposed solutions.

Comprehension
<p>Problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners may understand the meaning of the words/ expressions but fail to understand the intended meaning. <p>Solutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Focusing not only on decoding of surface meaning, but also on interpretation. ⇒ Teaching of grammar & lexis in context and through texts rather than isolated sentences. ⇒ Using of authentic or authentic-like texts, and avoiding exposing learners only to texts where meaning is expressed (over) explicitly. ⇒ Informing learners of relevant cultural aspects. ⇒ Guiding learners to use their knowledge, experience & beliefs consciously and flexibly. <p>Problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners get discouraged by unknown lexis and give up easily. <p>Solution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Training in identifying available clues & using them flexibly.
Production
<p>Problems</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learners may communicate unintended messages through being over/under-explicit or using the wrong register, although they are grammatically accurate. Learners may communicate unintended messages through the use of communication strategies. <p>Solutions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⇒ Avoiding asking learners to be (over)explicit at all times. ⇒ Teaching learners the use as well as the meaning of lexis. ⇒ Training learners in understanding the amount of information the listener/ reader needs or expects. ⇒ Raising learners' awareness of the potential problems arising from the use of communication strategies and training them to check for and clarify misunderstandings.

Table 5. Summary of teaching implications

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