



## AURAL PRAGMATIC COMPREHENSION

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**Abstract:** Overall comprehension is closely related not only to the knowledge of words and syntax, but also the pragmatic concerns of the discourse. This study is an attempt to explore the basic constructs of aural pragmatic comprehension in second language (L2) learning. Taking pragmatic comprehension as the recognition of speech acts and conversational implicatures, this study compares pragmatic comprehension levels and the performances in oral and written production using a hierarchical regression analysis. The results indicate a significant relationship between writing performance and pragmatic comprehension ( $p < 0.01$ ) and a positive relationship, though not statistically significant, between oral performance and aural pragmatic comprehension, all of which propose an intimate link between linguistic production and pragmatic gain. Additionally, writing appears to be a source of both bottom-up and top down processing that indicates interactive processing of comprehension.

**Keywords:** Aural pragmatic comprehension, speech acts, conversational implicatures.

**Özet:** Tümüyle anlama, sadece sözcük bilgisi ya da sözdizimi ile değil, dilin edimsel yönü ile de yakından ilgilidir. Bu çalışma, ikinci dil öğreniminde edimsel anlamının temellerini araştırmaya çalışmaktadır. Bu çalışmada, edimsel anlama, söylem ve konuşmada sezdirimlerin anlaşılması olarak ele alınmış, edimsel anlama ile yazma ve konuşma edimleri arasındaki ilişki aşamalı regresyon çözümlemesi ile araştırılmıştır. Çalışmanın sonuçları yazma edimi ve edimsel anlama arasında istatistiksel olarak anlamlı ( $p < 0.01$ ) ve konuşma edimi ve işitsel edimsel anlama arasında ise olumlu fakat istatistiksel olarak anlamlı olmayan bir ilişki göstermiştir. Bu durum dilsel üretim ve edimsel kazanç arasında sıkı bir ilişkiyi önermektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** İşitsel edimsel anlama, söylemler, konuşma sezdirileri.

### Introduction

An abiding and still highly controversial issue in language teaching relates to the aspects of language to be involved in language teaching in order for learners to attain somewhat native-like proficiency. In teaching a foreign or second language (L2), it has been long observed that while pragmatic aspects of language remain untouched, primary emphasis is laid on the syntactic structure and word-restricted decontextualized meaning in the target language. As reported in world-wide studies (Schultz, 1996; Borg, 1999) as well as in local research in the Turkish setting (Saraç-Süzer, 2007), explicit grammar teaching is highly prioritized and language teachers generally rely on grammar instruction rather than focusing on pragmatic meaning. It is obvious that overall instruction should be closely related not only to the knowledge of words and syntax, but also the pragmatic concerns of discourse. Therefore, we cannot rule out the possibility that disregarding pragmatic aspects of language, specifically speech acts and conversational implicatures, causes violations in mutual communication.

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Comprehension of natural discourse is affected by contextual knowledge, which is conventionally of two sorts that the listener makes use of to interpret the utterances. Linguistic knowledge refers to discourse preceding language to be interpreted. Situational context includes the knowledge of participants, the subject matter, physical context, and the knowledge of the world which covers the experiences in the world they live in and shared by the members of the interaction. As the utterances speakers produce while communicating are somewhat incomplete and telegraphic, both linguistic and situational context contribute to the communication to reach the correct interpretation (Fromkin, et al., 2003). Without understanding the linguistic and situational contexts, linguistic meaning will be ambiguous and misleading, therefore a communication breakdown probably occurs. A listener needs to evaluate meaning considering all these factors that affect comprehension in an attempt to find out what is missing and what is implicitly given. In other words, linguistically encoded meaning is not always the communicated meaning. Looking in depth, literal or conceptual meanings of the utterances may lose their importance in communication.

When individuals pursue actions oriented towards reaching a mutual understanding, the utterances they exchange may be used to perform “different acts” in certain contexts on the basis of mutual comprehension. The same set of words might have different meanings depending on the context and the speaker’s intention. A simple statement ‘the room is too hot’ could be an indirect command “open the door” or “fetch me a cold drink” The utterance “Your hair is so long” may be a compliment or an insult or may simply mean “have your hair cut” (Jucker & Taavitsainen, 2008). Furthermore, a speaker’s correction in one setting may be understood as an advice or a warning or even an insult somewhere else. A correction may impose either companionship or power in different cultures (Doğançay-Aktuna, & Kamışlı, 1995). Although affectionate expressions usually protect hearer’s public face, they may be face threatening in a different context with different interlocutors (Erbert, & Floyd, 2004). On any occasion, the action performed by producing an utterance will consist of three related acts as classified by Austin (1976). First, Locutionary Act, which is the basic act of the utterance, producing a meaningful linguistic expression. We produce an utterance with some kind of function in mind, which is the Illocutionary Act. The Illocutionary Act is performed via the communicative force of an utterance. We might utter a word to make a statement, an offer or an explanation or for some other communicative purpose. This is known as the illocutionary force of the utterance. The third dimension is the Perlocutionary Act, the effect an utterance with a function has on the hearer, which is a perlocutionary effect (Yule, 1996:48-49). Illocutionary acts can be extended to Grice’s (1975) notion of implicature with respect to the indirection they both contain. Hence, a single utterance may perform an illocutionary act involving an implication. Therefore, speech acts are likely to cause problems as the same utterance may perform different acts in different contexts.

Conversational implicatures in naturally occurring discourse may also pose difficulties for L2 comprehension. Grice’s (1975) theory of *conversational implicature* aims to explain how we manage to communicate despite nonliterality and indirectness in discourse. Speakers in an interaction are supposed to be co-operating in a conversation for a successful communication. They are expected to obey several rules to achieve maximum communication, as theorized by Grice (1975) in the form of conversational maxims. The listener presumes that the speaker is being cooperative and is speaking truthfully, informatively, relevantly, perspicuously, and appropriately. When these maxims are flouted, it is likely to have a communication breakdown or misunderstandings. The speakers’ intention may remain implicit. They may not prefer stating their intention clearly, which give rise to implicatures. As the message cannot

be transmitted, they need to make some inferences or create presuppositions out of the implied meaning that play a role in the interpretation of discourse.

Though there has been great deal of study on understanding cognitive processes underlying comprehension, three major processes are mentioned: Bottom-up processing, Top-down processing and Interactive processing. 'Bottom-up' view of comprehension is activated by the new incoming data. As in reading, the listener constructs meanings in discourse starting with the smallest meaningful units, such as sounds or phonemes, and words at the bottom, then he or she goes to larger units such as phrases, clauses and sentences at the top. Thus, phonemic units are decoded and connected together to construct words, words are connected together to construct phrases, phrases are connected together to form utterances, and utterances are connected together to form complete, meaningful text. Sequentially, incoming sounds trigger hierarchically organized schemata in listener's mind - the phonological, the morphological, lexical and syntactical knowledge and meaning as a last step-. 'Top-down' processing refers to prior knowledge and real life knowledge as part of the process of comprehension, involving predictions, facts, propositions, and expectations of the listener. Briefly, it is listeners' interpretation and background knowledge (Carrell 1988; Tsui & Fullilove, 1998; Fang, 2008). According to Carrell & Eisterhold (1983), the listener reconstructs a message that has been encoded by a speaker as a graphic display. This reconstruction is a cyclical system or sampling, predicting, testing and confirming like a psycholinguistic guessing game as Goodman (1988 p. 12) says while describing "reading". The listener makes general predictions based on "a higher level, general schemata, and then searches the input for information to fit into these higher order schemata" (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). In this reconstruction process, the listener employs prior knowledge of the context within which the listening occurs to understand what he/she hears. Interactive processing has been shown to contain both top-down and bottom-up processing operating interactively. Both are essential to an adequate understanding of a spoken discourse. Comprehension is considered to be a complimentary combination of both. The term *interactive approaches* consists of two conceptions. The first is the general interaction that takes place between the listener and the text. The second is the interaction of a number of component skills operating interactively (Grabe, 1993). In other words, both identification skills and interpretation skills are equally important for fluent comprehension.

Several aspects of pragmatic comprehension have been reported to cause difficulties in L2 listening in many studies. For example, Bouton (1994) reported that there was a difference between native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) interpretations of implicature, which developed through time and greatly diminished due to the extended period of residence in the target community. Garcia (2004) investigated speech act recognition levels of low and high ability L2 learners (NNS) and native English speakers (NS) using them as her control group. Each group's ability to recognise indirect speech acts are measured in a corpus of conversations in academic settings. Via a listening comprehension task based on the authentic conversations, the participants are required to identify requests, suggestions, corrections and offers. Her research focused on whether different proficiency levels demonstrate different degrees of pragmatic awareness and the extent to which non conventional linguistic features and contextual knowledge account for the variability in identifying speech acts. Her results showed that contextual knowledge and linguistic features such as specified agent, lexical markers, false starts and use of modals may have interacted with speech act type to account for the performance variability, which implies that language teachers should raise English language learners' awareness of how pragmatic meaning is expressed.

Studies in comprehension have also incorporated modes of processing in comprehension.

Some of these studies observe that skilled readers/listeners are those who are better able to engage in top-down processing whereas others maintain that they are better able to engage in bottom-up processing (Tsui and Fullilove, 1998). In one such study, Kasper (1984) examined 48 face-to-face dialogues (role plays) between German English as a foreign language learners and NSs of British English. Her analysis of the learners' inappropriate responses to NS utterances led her to posit that, among other things, (a) learners rely more on bottom-up (data-driven) rather than top-down (frame-driven) processing of input and (b) they have problems in activating frames relevant in the given context (p. 16). Kasper's study clearly pinpoints the significance of the contextual awareness that leads to pragmatic interpretation of discourse. Referring to the recognition of illocutionary speech acts and conversational implicatures as pragmatic comprehension, the present study focuses on pragmatic concerns in listening comprehension.

## **Aim**

Being limited to the illocutionary force of the utterances, this study concerns the difficulty L2 listeners may face due to pragmatic value of the utterances, roughly stemming from the fact that what is said does not always correspond with what is meant. Beyond literal meaning of the words and phrases, the meaning of the utterances may not be understood well as speakers' intentions, feelings and thoughts are not always explicitly stated. Therefore, comprehension requires an additional effort to decipher the encoded or the invisible intended meaning. Pragmatic comprehension is multifaceted. This study specifically scrutinizes the degree to which the participants could recognise illocutionary force of indirect speech acts and conversational implicatures, taken as pragmatic comprehension. It equally lays emphasis on the question why aural pragmatic comprehension in L2 is so challenging and to what extent pragmatic comprehension is related to linguistic knowledge as well as oral/written performance. Thus, this study focuses on the following research questions:

- To what extent do the students recognise intended illocutionary force of the speech acts and conversational implicatures, referred to as pragmatic comprehension in L2 listening?
- Does intensive language instruction have an effect on aural pragmatic comprehension?
- Is aural pragmatic comprehension associated with grammatical awareness, oral performance and writing performance levels of L2 learners?
- Does any possible association between these variables account for the type of processing in comprehension?

## **Methodology**

### **Instruments and Procedure**

Two sources of data were evaluated in this study. First, grammatical knowledge, oral and written test scores of the students were elicited from the Exemption Exam conducted and prepared by the Testing Office of the Preparatory School. The Preparatory School provides one year language instruction that comprises teaching four language skills including grammar. At the beginning of the academic year, students are placed at Elementary, Pre-Intermediate or Intermediate level depending on their placement test results and attend a one year intensive English Program. While the elementary program consists of 27 hours per week, pre-intermediate and intermediate programs contain 24 hours class tuition per week. All programs continue throughout the academic year and students who successfully meet their course

requirements take the proficiency test given at the end of the academic year. Similarly, the students who newly enrolled in the school take the same exam with a score above 60 out of 100 in the placement test. Thus, the proficiency test serves as an Exemption exam delivered to the newcomers. The two tests are proved to be equivalent or the same by the school authorities, as both are prepared based on the same curriculum at the end of the academic term.

The exam the participants of this study took is referred to as “A Stream Proficiency Test” by the department, as different tests are administered to different departments. This is the version delivered to the students majoring English. The Exemption exam is a three part exam aiming to measure overall linguistic proficiency. The first part includes 100 multiple choice questions that primarily probe basics of English grammar. Some questions are contextualized in reading texts. The second part of the exam involves an interview and a writing exam. In the interview, it is reported that the students were given the chance to pick out among a set of topics. In the interview, they are given a topic to write about. Measurements of grammatical knowledge and reading, oral and written performances are all synchronously made. However, testing pragmatic comprehension was performed one month later.

Following Garcia (2004), as this study concerns an analysis of participants’ pragmatic performance, the second type of data was from a pragmatic listening comprehension task using a multiple-choice questionnaire, which is a commonly used method for investigating comprehension of pragmatic meaning (Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Garcia, 2004). The questionnaire has 10 items that ask participants to identify types of speech acts in eleven authentically recorded dialogues from “Interactive Listening Booth Version 2.0.” (2005). This coursebook contains authentic material presented in a computer programme in a compact disc containing two software utilities. Each dialogue was first elaborated in terms of speech acts. Later, as the boundary between illocutionary speech acts and conversational implicatures is vague, the dialogues are re-considered for conversational implicatures as Grice's notion of implicature can be extended to illocutionary acts. Accordingly, it is seen that four of the items (Items 6,7,8, and 10) in the questionnaire may be taken as conversational implicatures. Therefore, it is believed that the questionnaire tested both speech act recognition and conversational implicatures, two of which are taken as pragmatic comprehension.

Out of eleven dialogues, nine dialogues were conversations between two close friends; (office mates, roommates) and one dialogue was between a customer and a waitress. One dialogue was a conversation between a customer and a salesperson. A set of pragmatic listening comprehension items that included speech act interpretation and identification was written for each dialogue. Speech act identification items asked what the speaker was trying to do (Appendix I). The answer choices for these items were different speech act types used in the instrument. The participants were not instructed in the definitions of these speech act types; they were asked to perform the task based on their own aural understanding.

## **Participants**

All participants (25) were considered to be “late bilinguals” as all started to learn English as a foreign language after the age of 12 when the critical period for acquiring a language was completed. The mean age of the participants was 22 years. Participants of the study consisted of two sub groups: graduates of the preparatory school (11) and matriculates (11). Three students succeeded in the exam in the summer school. All started the department at the same

time. All the students had to achieve the exemption exam before they attend the English Language Teaching department where they will study English as a major.

### Data analysis and results

In our analysis, first, descriptive statistics were calculated for the variables. When the means of the scores are compared, the levels of performance on the listening task with regard to pragmatic comprehension were found to be low out of 100, which denotes that the students are less able to identify the intended illocutionary force of indirect speech acts and conversational implicatures in spoken discourse, when compared with the mean scores of their linguistic knowledge and oral performance. In the group that studied English for one-year and took the exemption exam, pragmatic comprehension scores were relatively higher than those who passed the exemption exam (Table 1).

**Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Two Groups.**

	APC		GK		OP		WP	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<b>Exemption Exam Group</b>	50.92	2,43	61.07	5.32	71.78	12.49	60.35	17.80
<b>Preparatory School Group</b>	60.27	1,55	66.90	6,26	68,63	12,46	68,18	13,46

Note: APC= Aural Pragmatic Comprehension , GK= Grammatical Knowledge, OP= Oral Performance, WP= Writing Performance M= Mean, SD=Standard Deviation

Considering the two groups in our study, first, the scores of those who completed the preparatory year and passed the exemption exam were not significantly different from the scores of those who achieved the exam without attending the preparatory year and started their first year in the department. The students who passed after the summer school were not included in the analysis as they took a different version of the proficiency test. Taking the attendance of the exemption exam, as a controlling variable and pragmatic comprehension as the dependent variable, the variables were assessed stepwise. The analysis indicated that linguistic knowledge was not found significantly correlated with pragmatic comprehension. To our surprise, writing and oral performance cumulatively explained 37 percent of the variance in the scores, which is pretty high, but, specifically, writing was found to have a causal effect on pragmatic comprehension although it was expected that oral performances would have an effect on the pragmatic comprehension.

Having found that the scores showed normal distribution, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted in order to see whether pragmatic comprehension is related to linguistic knowledge and the levels of writing and oral performances of the students. Hierarchical regression analysis is a statistical device for the investigation of relationships between multiple variables. It seeks to ascertain the causal effect of more than one variable upon the dependent variable. Block variables are analyzed one by one and the variables included into the analysis become controlling variables for the next level. With the analysis, the variance is predicted in the scores of the dependent variable as related to block variables and all the blocks (Table 2).

**Table 2. A Hierarchical Regression Analysis**

Block/Variable	B	SHB	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$	R <sup>2</sup> <sub>total</sub>	Binary Correlation	Partial correlation
<b>Block I</b>				<b>0,01</b>	<b>0,01</b>		
<b>APC</b>	<b>0,34</b>	<b>0,84</b>	<b>0,08</b>			<b>0,08</b>	<b>0,12</b>
<b>Block II</b>				<b>0,02</b>	<b>0,03</b>		
<b>GK</b>	<b>0,05</b>	<b>0,08</b>	<b>0,15</b>			<b>0,16</b>	<b>0,17</b>
<b>Block III</b>				<b>0,36**</b>	<b>0,39</b>		
<b>WP</b>	<b>0,08</b>	<b>0,02</b>	<b>0,62**</b>			<b>0,56</b>	<b>0,60</b>
<b>OP</b>	<b>0,04</b>	<b>0,03</b>	<b>0,24</b>			<b>0,12</b>	<b>0,19</b>

\*\*p <.01

Note: APC= Aural Pragmatic Comprehension , GK= Grammatical Knowledge, OP= Oral Performance, WP= Writing Performance

The group variable included in the analysis at the first stage accounts for only 1 percent of the variance of the dependent variable, which means there was not a statistical difference between the groups. Linguistic knowledge variable explains 2 percent of the variance of the dependent variable. They were not found to have significant effects on pragmatic comprehension ( $p > .05$ ). However, the variables writing and oral performance included in the analysis in the third level were seen to account for 36 percent of the variance and were found to have significant effects on pragmatic comprehension. The writing performance variable was found to have a positive and significant effect on pragmatic comprehension ( $p < .01$ ), while it is found that there is a positive, but insignificant relationship between pragmatic comprehension and oral performance of the participants ( $p > .05$ ).

## Conclusion

Non literal meaning and indirectness in discourse may cause misunderstandings even in one's mother tongue. Recognizing them in a foreign or second language setting requires both linguistic and pragmatic awareness. Linguistic knowledge can be usually taught via explicit instruction and tested easily, whereas teaching pragmatic aspects of language in the classroom is quite challenging. In the present study, first, we tested pragmatic comprehension levels of freshman students, who either newly enrolled in the faculty or completed one year preparatory school. The probable differences between groups were considered in the study. Later, we investigated whether pragmatic comprehension of spoken discourse is related to linguistic knowledge, which is taken as the knowledge of vocabulary, word formation and sentence structure. Finally, the influence of oral and written performance on pragmatic comprehension is also included in the study. The degree to which the participants could recognise illocutionary force of indirect speech acts and conversational implicatures is referred to as pragmatic comprehension.

The results of the study primarily showed that there was no significant difference between the two groups. Pragmatic comprehension levels of the students are relatively low when compared with other aspects of linguistic knowledge and their oral and written performances. In addition, the recognition of illocutionary speech acts and conversational implicatures were found correlated with writing performance scores. Pragmatic comprehension was not found related to linguistic knowledge and oral performance. The results confirmed the view that understanding indirectness in speech acts and conversational implicatures as well as the

mismatch between what is uttered and how it functions is not an easy task for foreign language learners.

Concerning why writing performance significantly contributes to pragmatic comprehension, it is pretty unexpected to find such a correlation between writing, a productive language skill and listening, a receptive language skill that requires decoding. High scores in writing mean a good command of vocabulary and an awareness of micro discourse structure that help the listener recognise cohesion and coherence as well as unity in any text written and spoken. Hence, this correlation seems to propose an awareness of micro textual structure or specifically 'units of talk' (Yule, 1996) in the text. Such knowledge might have helped the listener to decode the spoken text by dividing it into information units as the listener realizes signals that stress directions, relations, transitions, marking "information structure" within the discourse. Therefore, such a listener with high writing score might have already developed upper level discourse decoding strategies. With these results, we might claim that the students make use of bottom-up processing since linguistic knowledge triggers bottom up processing.

Regarding the positive, but insignificant relationship between pragmatic comprehension and oral performance of the participants ( $p>0.05$ ), it is in conformity with the view that oral skills are often found associated with aural skills (Murphy, 1991). Writing is often regarded as the visual representation of speech. As speaking and writing are active or productive skills, this proposes an association between performance of productive skills and pragmatic comprehension. Putting linguistic knowledge into practice seems to have a favourable effect on pragmatic comprehension. As an extension of focus on form instruction (Schulz, 1996), this suggests that learners in this study are aware of each individual linguistic unit and form in listening and move from the smallest units to larger parts of language to decode oral discourse as they did in the process of writing, all of which take us to bottom up processing.

Given that writing is cultivated or accomplished with world knowledge, a part of pragmatic competence, which might empower context elaboration of spoken discourse, the listeners in this study might have relied on a frame-driven or macro structural understanding associative of top down processing. It is probable that high writing scores indicate an acquaintance of text types or genres, which leads to a situation where the macro structure of the texts may be well predicted by the listeners. At this standpoint, writing appears to serve as the igniting source of both bottom-up and top down processing that adds up to an interactive processing of comprehension. Interactive process at work combines comprehension starting from bits and pieces in discourse and awareness at macro discoursal level.

As expected, the recognition of speech acts and conversational implicatures in aural discourse is relatively lower than other aspects of their linguistic knowledge. This would probably have an impact on oral performances of the learners since they are unlikely to respond appropriately to what they hear, leading to a communication gap. Moreover, what is evident in the insignificant difference between groups is that one year intensive language instruction does not seem to affect aural pragmatic comprehension, which might stem from either inadequate emphasis or the lack of needed focus on pragmatic aspects of language learning during the period of instruction. Notably, the learners are in need of awareness-raising instruction on pragmatic aspects. Hence, first a systematic instruction on speech acts might activate learners' awareness of how explicit and/or implicit meanings are expressed. In the same vein, the link between written performance and aural pragmatic comprehension has implications for the view that practice makes perfect, thus, we may conclude that learners

should be encouraged to keep practicing through structured written or oral production tasks and hands-on in-class activities.

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## Appendix I

### Sample Dialogue

#### TALK 1. HONESTY (Session 4, Dialogue)

Kate: How are things going with you and your roommate?

Bill: Not very well. We're supposed to share the groceries, but I end up feeding him three meals a day. My grocery bill is huge, you know. I really can't afford it any longer.

Kate: I know how you feel. I used to have a roommate like that. He never offered to reimburse me for anything.

Bill: I'm really fed up with his freeloading, but I just don't know how to tell him that he should come up with half the grocery bill, because sometimes he treats me to a meal in a restaurant.

Kate: Well, honesty is the best policy. Maybe you just want to have a heart-to-heart, friend-to-friend talk with him. If he refuses to mend his ways, then ask him to move out. You can't let him wear out his welcome.

### Sample Questionnaire Item

#### 1. HONESTY (Session 4, Dialogue)

Kate says "Maybe you just want to have a heart-to-heart, friend-to-friend talk with him. If he refuses to mend his ways, then ask him to move out".

She is

- a. convincing
- b. advising
- c. warning
- d. requesting