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Demystifying Students' Observance and Violation of Gricean Maxims in Online ESL Classes

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abstract

The Gricean maxim construct remains a focal point of linguistic research today. According to Bakoko & Pratiwi (2021), the Cooperative Principle is one of the central guidelines facilitating effective language learning. Language teachers must understand how students communicate and the issues they encounter. This study examines conversations between teachers and students in online ESL classes, focusing on students' observance and violations of Gricean maxims and the implicatures drawn from their utterances. Using a qualitative research design, the researcher transcribed five recorded synchronous ESL discussions in a higher education institution. The transcribed conversations were analyzed to determine observance or violation of Grice's maxims. Findings indicate that students violated all Gricean Maxims-Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner—during interactions. The maxim of Manner was the most observed, while the maxim of Quantity was the most frequently violated. Interestingly, the maxim of Quality showed no violations across the 48 conversations analyzed. The study suggests that implicatures resulting from violations could be leveraged to enhance pedagogical strategies.

1. Introduction

The When students write or speak, their primary goal is to convey information. Whether they are understood or not, they strive to communicate effectively. However, they often make linguistic errors—both major and minor—that lead to misunderstandings. Fortunately, a set of conversational principles known as "Grice's Maxims of Conversation" can help students improve their communication skills and avoid miscommunication.

Paul Grice proposed four conversational maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner. These maxims describe the intuitive principles that guide students in structuring their discussions to ensure effective communication. Grice's Cooperative Principle, a fundamental concept in pragmatics, emphasizes the importance of cooperation in conversation. However, its application can be problematic due to varying interpretations of the term "cooperation" within different disciplines (Davies, 2007). A thorough analysis of Grice's writings reveals that his primary concerns were the distinctions between sentence meaning and speaker meaning, systematicity in language, and the role of rationality in human communication.

Research on Gricean maxims continues to be relevant in linguistic studies. Bakoko & Pratiwi (2021) emphasized that understanding the Cooperative Principle enhances language learning and motivates learners to develop their English proficiency. Similarly, Guo (2020) highlighted Grice's view that communication naturally follows principles of authenticity, informativeness, relevance, and clarity to ensure successful interactions.

Despite its theoretical significance, the application of Grice's Cooperative Principle remains widely debated, especially in analyzing conversational exchanges. Several studies have examined violations of Gricean maxims in different linguistic contexts. For instance, Mukaro (2013) analyzed violations of conversational maxims in Shona discourse, categorizing them into maxim clashes, opting out, and flouting. Similarly, Ngenget (2017) explored how speakers of Manado Malay use implicatures in daily interactions, revealing that violations of Gricean maxims are common in natural conversation. Jafari (2013) examined Wilde's play The Importance of Being Earnest, demonstrating deliberate violations of maxims to create humor and layered meanings. Fahmi (2018) identified sociocultural and contextual factors influencing maxim violations in English conversations among Indonesian students, with the maxim of Quantity being the most frequently violated.

Furthermore, Marlisa & Hidayat (2020) analyzed instances of maxim flouting in an interview with Jackie Chan on Good Morning America, revealing that both the host and guest frequently violated Quantity and Manner maxims for entertainment purposes. Ayunon (2018) investigated Facebook conversations and found that online discourse often involves maxim violations, particularly for humor and sarcasm, demonstrating the role of context in implicature generation.

These studies collectively indicate that Grice's maxims, while descriptive of natural conversation, can also serve as a prescriptive framework for improving communication. This research investigates how students in online ESL classes observe or violate Gricean maxims and examines the pedagogical implications of these conversational patterns.

By understanding how students adhere to or deviate from Gricean maxims, educators can develop strategies to enhance students' conversational skills, ensuring clarity, coherence, and engagement in ESL learning environments.

Research Questions

- 1. How do students' utterances in online ESL classes adhere to Gricean maxims of:
 - o Quantity?
 - o Quality?
 - o Relevance?
 - o Manner?
- 2. How are the Gricean maxims violated in online ESL classes?
- 3. What implicatures arise from these violations?

2. Method

This In order to address the research questions, the researcher employed an exploratory research design. As the term implies, exploratory research aims to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. This approach primarily focuses on gathering either primary or secondary data through unstructured formats or informal procedures, which are subsequently interpreted to derive meaningful insights (Bus, 2008).

The researcher gathered unfiltered, first-hand information regarding social interactions by observing individuals in their natural settings, listening to their conversations, and analyzing the documents they produce (Taylor, 2016). In this study, the conversations analyzed were authentic dialogues between teachers and students, shared during online ESL classes.

2.1 Participants

The corpus of transcribed conversations used in this study was sourced from five recorded online ESL classes. These participants were enrolled in five ESL classes, each focused on purposive communication subjects. The sample consisted of 5 English teachers and 200 higher education students from a state university in Pampanga, Philippines.

The selection of the number of classes adhered to the recommendations of Cameron (2001), who suggested that the required amount of data is determined by the researcher's objectives, available resources, and the types of claims the researcher intends to substantiate.

2.2 Data Collection

The study focused on conversations occurring naturally within online ESL classes, where the teacher would pose a question to the class, and students were free to respond. The data collection process involved several key steps:

- 1. The researcher sought permission from university administrators and the five English teachers to conduct the study.
- 2. The researcher requested that the five English teachers record their synchronous classes, which were subsequently transcribed for data analysis.

2.3 Ethical Considerations

The researcher adhered to ethical guidelines throughout the study. Prior to the commencement of data collection, the researcher obtained informed consent from all participants. The confidentiality of the research data was ensured, biases and misleading information were avoided, and all relevant works cited in the study were properly acknowledged (Karakose, Yirci, & Kobacas, 2014).

2.4 Data Analysis

After transcribing the conversations from the five online ESL classrooms, the researcher analyzed the exchanges to determine whether any utterances violated Grice's Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relevance, and Manner. Each utterance was examined according to the criteria set forth by Grice (1975), as summarized in Table 1 below.

Maxim

Violating the Maxims

• Circumlocution or failure to be concise• Being uninformative•

Speaking too briefly• Speaking too much• Repeating words
unnecessarily

• Lying or stating something believed to be false• Using irony or
making sarcastic statements• Denying facts• Distorting information

Maxim	Violating the Maxims		
Relevance	 Making the conversation irrelevant to the topic Abruptly changing the topic Avoiding certain topics Hiding facts Incorrect causal relationships 		
Manner	 Using ambiguous language Over-exaggerating Using slang in front of people who do not understand it Speaking too quietly 		

3. Findings and Discussion

This presents analyses and interprets the data gathered based on the specific problems of the study.

Maxim of Cooperative Principle Frequency Percentage				
Quantity	10	30.30%		
Relevance	4	12.12%		
Quality	1	3.03%		
Manner	18	54.54%		
Total	33	100%		

Table 2. Observance of the Maxims

Table 2 presents that the maxim of Manner was the most observed among the four maxims with a 54.54 percent or 18 instances out of 48 conversations in the synchronous ESL discussions. It was followed by the maxim of Quantity with 30.30 percent or 10 cases out of the 48 identified conversations. Next is the maxim of Relevance which garnered 12.12 percent or four instances. The maxim of Quality was the least observed with a 3.03 percentage or one example out of the 48 conversations in the synchronous ESL discussions.

Maxim of Quantity

This category refers to the amount of information offered, with the speaker ensuring that his contribution is as informative as is necessary for the current aims of the exchange and that it is not more informative than is essential. The following conversations illustrate responses that observe the maxim of Quantity:

Conversation #4

Teacher: Let me hear first what comes to your mind when you hear the word interview or job interview?

Student: "They are asking questions about yourself and what job you're applying for in the company, as well as the job you're aiming to work for."

Conversation #8

Teacher: "When we say, remain composed and keep a good body posture, why do you

think we should remember this tip?

Student: "So that, ma'am, you will look good and also, you won't look pressured about the job interview."

Conversation #9

Teacher: "Why do we have to smile and be calm during job interviews?"

Student: "When you smile, ma'am, it's possible that you can hide your nervousness while doing a job interview. Because when you smile, your face doesn't move. Your pressure won't show."

Conversation #11

Teacher: "Why do we have to pause before answering?"

Student: "To determine if there's a follow-up question from the interviewer. For example, if they ask 'how you feel' and they have a follow-up question that you didn't hear, you might not understand each other."

Conversation #14

Teacher: What have you learned from this discussion?

Student: "What, ma'am, always be calm and maintain a steady posture, and not to move too much during the interview. Also, the golden rule is to answer only the question asked."

Conversation #30

Teacher: "Can you please differentiate a resume from a cover letter?"

Student: "In the resume, ma'am, you put your name and your educational background. In the cover letter, you put your achievements."

Conversation #34

Teacher: "What was our lesson last meeting?"

Student: "Our last meeting was about writing, technical writing, and also speech."

Conversation #38

Teacher: "So what is the difference between semantics and pragmatics?"

Student: "The difference between semantics and pragmatics, ma'am, is that semantics deals with the meaning of words without considering the context, while pragmatics deals with the analysis of meaning in relation to the relevant context."

Conversation #39

Teacher: I would like to ask what have you learned in our discussion for today. Student: "The different types of figurative language: simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole, allusion, onomatopoeia, and alliteration."

Conversation #43

Teacher: Can others give examples?

Student: "Last meeting, we discussed it had something to do with literature and grammar. From what I remember, literature should not overpower grammar. And one example is that we can incorporate literature when teaching grammar."

Maxim of Quality

Conversations in this category are required to be truthful because the information presented should not be false, and speakers should not say anything without sufficient evidence. The following exchanges demonstrate the speakers' attempt to be truthful by speaking truthful things:

Conversation #46

Teacher: What was the moral of the story?

Student: "For me, the morale of the story is that it's not bad to dream sometimes. Because the parents in the story said that she'd get into big trouble one day, but in fact, through her dreams, she could help people too."

Maxim of Relevance

According to the Maxim of Relevance, presenters must deliver pertinent information to the current engagement. Everything you submit should be related to the problem you are dealing with. This is evident in the following conversations:

Conversation #27

Teacher: Give me an example of what you will put in your personal background. Student: "I think you should put your achievements and the jobs you want to apply for."

Conversation #31

Teacher: "How was your weekend?"

Student: "It's okay, ma'am. I had a lot of activities to pass."

Conversation #36

Teacher: "What do they mostly do in public speaking?"

Student: "For example, those who are running for election, ma'am, they persuade people

to vote for them."

Conversation #47

Teacher: What was the moral of the story?

Student: "You need to always trust yourself and don't always trust others, like not believing everything they say because sometimes their judgment may break what you want to achieve."

Maxim of Manner

According to Grice's definition of the maxim of Manner, communicators should be perceptive by avoiding obscurity, ambiguity, and providing information in a concise and organized manner.

Conversation #3

Teacher: Are you ready, class?

Student: Yes po. (Yes)

Conversation #7

Teacher: "When we say, remain composed and keep a good body posture, why do you

think we should remember this tip?"

Student: "So, ma'am, you will look more confident."

Conversation #10

Teacher: "Why do we have to smile and be calm during job interviews?"

Student: "Because it will lessen the nervousness you feel."

Conversation #12

Teacher: "Why do we have to pause before answering?" Student: "So you can think first and not blank out."

Conversation #13

Teacher: "Why is it important to maintain eye contact with your interviewer?"

Student: "So they'll know you are interested in what is being discussed."

Conversation #20

Teacher: Do you hear me clearly, class?

Student: Yes. ma'am.

Conversation #22

Teacher: What do you think is the purpose of a resume?

Student: "To see your background and also your experience."

Conversation #23

Teacher: Give at least one of your strengths. Student: "My strength is my family, ma'am."

Conversation #24

Teacher: Give at least one of your strengths.

Student: "My trust in God."

Conversation #28

Teacher: Have you thought of where to apply?

Student: "Not yet, ma'am."

Conversation #29

Teacher: "What job are you applying for in Jollibee?"

Student: "Technician."

Conversation #33

Teacher: "Are you ready for another lesson?"

Student: Yes po, ma'am.

Teacher: "What was our lesson last meeting?"

Student: "Our last meeting was about writing, technical writing, and also speech."

Conversation #37

Teacher: Can anyone enlighten us about the past lesson?

Student: "Good morning, ma'am, as far as I know, our past lesson was about semantics

and pragmatics."

Conversation #40

Teacher: Can somebody tell what we have discussed last time?

Student: "Ma'am, it's all about language arts."

Conversation #41

Teacher: What is sentence or grammar structure? If you still remember?

Student: "We discussed grammar structure, the difference between literature and

language, and we gave some examples."

Conversation #42

Teacher: Am I audible?

Student: Yes po.

Conversation #45

Teacher: What happened in the video class, what have you noticed?

Student: "Ma'am, it's about saving someone's life."

Conversation #48

Teacher: What was the moral of the story?

Student: "The moral lesson is, don't stop dreaming."

Table 3. Violations of the Maxims

Maxim of Cooperative Principle	Frequency	Percentage
Quantity	8	53.33%
Relevance	6	40%
Quality	0	0%
Manner	1	6.67%
Total	15	100%

Table 3 displays the violations of the maxims of the cooperative principle in ESL synchronous classroom discussions. The maxim of Quantity was the most violated among the four maxims with a 53.33 percent or 8 instances out of 48 conversations in the synchronous ESL discussions. It was followed by the maxim of Relevance with 40 percent or six instances out of the 48 identified conversations. Next is the maxim of Manner, which garnered 6.67 percent or 1 instance. The maxim of Quality garnered no violations out of the 48 conversations in the synchronous ESL discussions.

Violation of Maxim of Quantity

This happens when the speaker's contribution is not as informative as required. Examples of these violations are:

Conversation #2

Teacher: "Let us first have the recap; what is our last topic? Hello? Anyone from the class?"

Student: "About sa job interview po" (About job interview)

Conversation #5

Teacher: "What is your biggest weakness?"

Student: "Sir, yung mga bagay po na hindi ko kayang gawin." (Sir, the things I cannot do)

Conversation #15

Teacher: "What have you learned from this discussion?"

Student: "Before and after po magstart yung interview magbigay po ng greetings and simple handshake" (Before and after the interview starts, give greetings and a simple handshake)

Conversation #16

Teacher: "What have you learned from this discussion?"

Student: "I learned what are the dos and don'ts in an interview"

Conversation #19

Teacher: "What will be your preparations?" Student: "Practice our English grammar."

Conversation #21

Teacher: "What do you think is the purpose of a resume?"

Student: "About information of yourself, ma'am."

Conversation #25

Teacher: "Will you share one characteristic of yours that you consider as your

weakness?"

Student: "Communication, ma'am,"

Conversation #44

Teacher: "Can somebody in the class tell who are the characters in the story?" Student: "Ma'am the main character is Julia, the girl who wants to dream."

Violation of Maxim of Quality

This is evident when the speaker does not tell the truth or does not present sufficient support for his or her claim. No conversation was found to have violated the maxim of Quality.

Violation of Maxim of Relevance

This happens when the speaker's response is not relevant to the topic of conversation. Examples are:

Conversation #1

Teacher: "How are you feeling today, class?"

Student: No response.

Conversation #6

Teacher: "Are we clear about that?"

Student: No response.

Conversation #17

Teacher: "Do you think you are now ready for a job interview?"

Student: "Maybe po" (Maybe)

Conversation #26

Teacher: "Are you familiar with cover letter?"

Student: (No response)

Conversation #32

Teacher: "Are you all doing great?"

Student: "Late po, ma'am" (Late, ma'am)

Conversation #35

Teacher: "Is there anyone who has experienced public speaking?"

Student: (No response)

Violation of Maxim of Manner

This happens when the speaker does not speak clearly and does not avoid ambiguity and obscurity. This can be seen in these conversations:

Conversation #18

Teacher: "Do you think you are now ready for a job interview?"

Student: "Yes mam, medyo kinakabahan pa din po" (Yes ma'am, I'm still a bit nervous)

Discussion

Generation of Implicature

Ayunon (2018) cited Grice who mentioned that not everyone follows the maxims. When people do not follow the maxims, it may result in the formation of an implicature.

Implicature emerges as a result of failure to follow the maxims. In this scenario, speakers deliberately choose not to follow one or more maxims in order to create an implicature. When a speaker breaks one of the cooperative maxims, he or she has an intrinsic desire for the recipient to grasp and discover the hidden meaning behind the words. This means that when a speaker breaks one of the maxims, he or she is not attempting to fool, deceive the listener, or be uncooperative, but rather to prompt the listener to look for meaning beyond the semantic level.

The maxim of quantity was the most violated maxim because the students' responses were very short and they lacked details. The maxim of relevance was the second most violated because the students' responses were deemed irrelevant and mostly, they provided silence when asked during the synchronous discussion. The violation of the maxim of quality was not observed because it pertains to the truthfulness of the students' responses. This may be due to the fact that students value integrity in academic discussions. The maxim of manner was once violated due to the vagueness of the student's response.

Conversation #18

Teacher: "Do you think you are now ready for a job interview?"

Student: "Yes mam, medyo kinakabahan pa din po" (Yes ma'am, I'm still a bit nervous)

Conversation #32

Teacher: "Are you all doing great?"
Student: "Late po, ma'am" (Late, ma'am)

In conversation 18, the student provided a contradicting answer by saying yes, that he or she is ready for the job interview and at the same time he or she feels nervous about it. The contradicting ideas formulated in the answer can present vagueness. While in conversation 32, the student may have misheard the teacher's question, hence he or she said "late." The teacher could assume in this instance, through the student's answer, that the student did not clearly hear the question.

Moreover, the silence given by the students in their violation of the maxim of relevance could mean something. According to Alerby et al. (2003), silence as a part of conversation can, for some people, be uncomfortable, as they do not know what the silence means. Silence can, so to say, be 'used' in various ways. Irrespective of the reason for the silence, one can emphasize that a non-message is also a message—the silence tells us something. This line of reasoning can lead one to an interpretation and conclusion that silence becomes a language when the ordinary vocabulary is not enough, or when one favors silence above the spoken word. In conversations 1, 6, 26, and 35, the researchers interpret it as a "no" to the questions of their teachers. These conversations can fall into the generation of generalized conversational implicature, which arises when utterances produced by the speaker give implied meaning based on context (Rahayu et al., 2016).

Pedagogical Implications

Many of these maxims are frequently ignored by students without realizing it, obstructing their communication efforts. As a way of addressing this phenomenon, English language teachers can make their students actively employ these maxims as guiding principles by orienting them to the value of cooperation in conversations and communication. Students can be actively reminded to adhere to these maxims when trying to impart information to others in order to ensure that their communication is as successful and free of issues as possible.

Summary

- 1. In exchanging thoughts in conversations, the participants have violated one or more of the Gricean Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner. The maxim of Manner was the most observed among the four maxims in the synchronous ESL discussions. The maxim of Quantity was the most violated, while the maxim of Quality garnered no violations out of the 48 conversations in the synchronous ESL discussions.
- 2. Gricean maxims were violated in online ESL classes because:
 - Expressions were not informative.
 - The speaker did not present sufficient support for their claim or thesis statement.
 - The speaker did not speak clearly.
 - The speaker was sometimes ambiguous.
- 3. Implicatures generated by these violations may be considered useful to improve pedagogical activities. The maxim of Relevance focuses on trying to be pertinent and saying things that are directly related to the discussion. In the classroom setting (whether physical or virtual), the maxim of Quality must be upheld. Sentences should be concise and to the point. Additionally, when explaining a concept, the teacher should provide concrete examples and illustrations within the students' vocabulary or use real-life situations to ensure they understand the meaning of the concept.

4. Conclusions

In light of the findings of this study, the researchers concluded that:

- 1. It is natural for students to violate Gricean maxims, especially the maxim of Manner and the maxim of Quantity, in ESL classes.
- 2. Gricean maxims were violated in online ESL classes because both teachers and students used English as non-native speakers, which may have led to communication challenges.
- 3. Implicatures generated by these violations may be leveraged to improve communication pedagogy and strategies for better understanding in the classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions drawn, the researchers recommend the following:

1. ESL teachers should provide good examples of conversations that adhere to the Gricean maxims. This can be done through role-playing, dialogues, or analyzing real-world conversations to demonstrate proper use of the maxims.

- 2. ESL classroom activities should include practices focused on colloquial expression of thoughts, with an emphasis on the maxim of Manner and Quantity. These activities can help students practice clear and concise communication.
- 3. Maxims should be integrated into classroom discussions and activities. Teachers should guide students in applying the maxims to improve their conversational skills, particularly in real-life contexts or more casual discussions.
- 4. Communication should be emphasized as the backbone of the teaching-learning process. ESL teachers can foster better communication by helping students understand the importance of following these maxims for effective interaction.

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