Journal of English Language, Literature and Education ISSN: 2710 - 4923 (Online)
Vol. 7 Issue 2 (April - June 2025) PP. 95 - 105 ISSN: 2663 - 3485 (Print)

Teaching 'Misunderstanding of Communication' in the EFL Classroom: The Gricean Approach

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Abstract

When humans communicate, there is possibility that communication can be misinterpreted and misunderstood. It happens due to social, cultural and contextual variety of people. Through the pedagogical method of using Facebook fads this research evaluates different reasons for miscommunication. It is also evident in this paper that how students make sense of a variety of memes and fads make them relevant to a variety of situations. In this study different methods are employed to analyse the fundamental reason for misinterpretation while having a conversation. It includes context, idioms and embedded intent. This research is closely linked with Thomas's (1983) idea of pragmatic failure. It also complements the study of Grice (1975) when one talks about conversational excellence. This study accentuates the contextual significance in communication. The study also emphasises the potential of memes to connect classroom learning with authentic communication. Therefore, the educators can improve students' practical capability and prepare them for real-life cross- cultural interactions by incorporating memes into EFL instruction. Finally, this study provides the growing discourse on digital literacy in language education, providing pragmatic insights for teaching communication skills in a globalised world.

Keywords: Misunderstanding in communication, Facebook memes, EFL classroom, Multimodal artifacts, Cooperative principle

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.54692/jele.2025.0702277

Introduction

Communication is a foundational element of human interaction. However, it is often filled with misunderstandings. The dissension between what implicitly understood and what is explicitly stated can lead to misinterpretation, confusion and even conflict. This difference between what is implied and what is said originates from multiple linguistic factors, including ambiguity, pragmatics, speaker intention and cultural context (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 2000). Such misinterpretations are quite evident on digital platforms for instance Facebook (Shifman, 2014).

The research is significant because it illustrates innovative methods that how memes can be used as tool to teach students. It is absolutely indispensable for students to learn that how a certain meaning is understood, contrived and thrived especially when different memes are taken as multimodal artifacts (Shifman, 2014; Dynel, 2016). Basically, different learners comprehend words differently right according to their social, political, cultural, racial and ethnic backgrounds. Since they do not belong to a unified community, they cannot understand unified meaning. Similarly, their understanding to memes also becomes versatile (Jenkins, 2009; Godwin-Jones, 2019). This paper highlights the link of memes with communication to enhance understanding process (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Literature Review

Communication and misunderstanding are part and parcel when we get expose to different cultures. Grice (1975) accentuated the idea that literal understanding is not sufficient instead contextual understanding is the key to master communication. It seems evident because Thomas (1983) had long before established the idea that until and unless a person understands embedded meaning hidden deep in context, he cannot understand the true meaning of any conversation. He called it pragmatic failure since the listener makes out nothing during communication (Byram, 1997).

The specific use of memes is increasing in digital media (Warschauer, 1997; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Multiple artefacts, align with these principles by combining text and imagery to convey meaning in an engaging way has become culture in digital media (Shifman, 2014). Their cultural relevance and humour make them effective tools for providing pragmatic awareness and critical thinking (Dynel, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). This paper recommends that analysing fads helps students understand how context, tone and culture

influence interpretation (Jenkins, 2009; Zappavigna, 2012).

However, cultural specificity may also have challenges for EFL learners (Varis & Blommaert, 2015). Contextualisation and scaffolding are absolutely necessary to ensure accessibility (Godwin-Jones, 2019). Humour in fads can enhance motivation but it should be accompanied by critical investigation to prevent superficial interaction (Dynel, 2016; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Studies present their potential for teaching cultural references, idiomatic expressions and discourse analysis (García-Sánchez & Luján-García, 2016; Thorne et al., 2015). However, challenges such as cultural misinterpretation and the ephemeral nature of memes require careful selection and adaptation (Shifman, 2014; Varis & Blommaert, 2015).

Research Methods

In this study, the researchers used qualitative methods to collect and analyse the data. This method is applied in order to obtain more in-depth, comprehensive information from the data. Creswell (2009) defined it as an approach in which the inquirer often makes knowledge claims based primarily on constructivist perspectives (i.e., the multiple meanings of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed with an intent of developing a theory or pattern) or advocacy/participatory perspectives (i.e., political, issue-orientated, collaborative, or change-orientated) or both. The researchers collected open-ended, emerging data with the primary intent of developing themes from the data.

The researchers focused on the documentation method (Moleong, 2006) to collect the data. The writers collected the data by surfing for image memes relevant to the topic on Facebook and selected 20 representative memes. Those memes, then, are divided into three different types based on different linguistic and paralinguistic factors (e.g., the speaker's intention, the use of idiomatic expressions and the contextual use of words) that can create misunderstandings in communication.

When a speaker's purpose is not understood, a misunderstanding occurs if the speaker uses idiomatic expressions unfamiliar to the listener and/or a word with multiple meanings in the context. These categorisations are useful for both students and teachers to comprehend the nature of miscommunication that can takes place in real-life conversations.

Findings

Speaker's Intention

Misunderstandings occur when the listener fails to understand the speaker's intended meaning. It happens due to different factors such as sarcasm, tone or implied meaning. Communication is not just about speaking words but also about how the words are delivered. For example, a phrase like "Great job!" can be understood as an actual praise or sarcastic criticism, based on the speaker's tone and context. It helps students to comprehend the significance of tone and context in presenting meaning. Examples (1) and (2) shows misunderstandings that appear when the listener fails to understand the hidden meaning of the speaker's phrases. In example (1), a housewife is asking her husband to take on more domestic chores. The husband replies by suggesting they switch the subject of the conversation. However, the wife does not understand his intention. Instead of finding that he wants to change the topic, she understands his request literally, focusing on the grammatical subject. Eventually, she repeats the same phrase but changes it into a passive sentence, just altering the subject's position without pointing the underlying issue.



Fig.1: Miscommunication due to misinterpreted speaker intent.

Similarly, example (2) highlights a scenario where a son misinterprets to grasp the intended meaning of his father's response. The son asks his father, "Dad, I want some money for a new pair of glasses." The father responds sarcastically, "Do I look like a bank?" Instead of understanding the sarcasm and comprehending that his father is conveying he cannot or will not give the money, the son understands the question literally. He replies, "I don't know; I can't see anything," which shows a humorous twist to the situation.

These examples highlight the significance of tone, context and shared understanding in effective communication. Misunderstandings often take place not from the words themselves but from the laxity to understand the speaker's hidden emotions or intentions. These interactions can lead to humour, confusion or even conflict, relying on the context and the connection between

the individuals involved.



Fig.2: Miscommunication due to misinterpreted speaker intent.

The Use of Idiomatic Expressions

When idiomatic expressions are used misunderstandings arise and the perceiver is unfamiliar with their figurative meaning. Idioms, such as "it's raining cats and dogs" or "break a leg" convey meanings that cannot be deduced from the literal interpretation of the words. Memes that highlight these misunderstandings can be an important resource for teaching idiomatic language in the EFL classroom. By exploring examples where idiomatic expressions lead to confusion, students can learn to recognise and interpret these phrases in context.

Following examples (3) and (4) highlight misunderstandings that occur from the use of idiomatic expressions unfamiliar to the perceiver due to divergence in linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In example (3), a girl needs help from a friend by saying, "Can you help me get a stain out of my dress?" Her friend does not hear her clearly and replies with the idiomatic expression, "Come again?" These two words literally mean to come again physically, but idiomatically, these words are used to ask someone to replicate or clarify what they have just pronounced. The first girl does not understand the idiomatic meaning and interpret the expression literally. She responds, "No, this time it is mine," supposing that her friend is asking to come back some other day. It is evident that misinterpretation causes ambiguity especially when certain idioms are not being understood in their contextual essence.



Fig. 3 Miscommunication caused by the use of idiomatic expressions.

Moreover, following example also illustrates how words are misunderstood in certain situations. Here, the denotative meaning is taken which caused miscommunication. The girl does not make out anything from the sentence when a person tells to a lady that his father worked for the half of his life to manage the food on the table. Now, it is completely an idiom "to put or manage food on the table" which means that the person worked very hard to support his family. Whereas, the lady misinterprets the idiom and gets surprised that how it is possible for a person to spent half of his life putting food on the table. Therefore, this misinterpretation took place because the lady did not understand an iota of the implied meaning, which ultimately led to complete failure of communication.



Fig. 4 Miscommunication caused by the use of idiomatic expressions.

The above interactions vivify that when perceiver lacks idiomatic knowledge, contextual and linguistics knowledge then such misunderstandings in communication are not only meant to be but they ought to be. Such misinterpretations are common in multilingual or cross-cultural interactions, where people draw literal interpretations rather than understanding the implied metaphorical or idiomatic meaning. Therefore, it becomes essential for speakers to keep in mind the audience's linguistic background or idiomatic expressions to avoid such confusion. On the contrary, listeners can develop a better familiarity with common idioms to understand the metaphorical or idiomatic use of it.

Contextual Use of Words

Miscommunication often takes place when a word with different meanings is used in a certain context that differs from its expected meaning. This modulation is known as polysemy; it

arises when a single word has several meanings and interpretations. For instance, the word "bank" can refer to the side of a river or a financial institution. It completely depends on the context in which it is used. Communication become confused when listener understands the word quite differently from the intended meaning of the speaker. Therefore, analysing fads can help students understand how context shapes meaning in the EFL classroom.

Examples (5) and (6) highlight misunderstandings that arise when a word with different meanings is used, and the perceiver fails to understands the contextual meaning rather focusing on the literal interpretation. In example (5), a client asks a waiter, "Will my pizza be long?" In this context, the word "long" is used contextually to ask about the time it will take for the pizza to be ready. However, the waiter misinterprets the question and understands "long" in its literal sense, referring to the actual length of the pizza. The waiter replies, "No, sir, it will be round," absolutely missing the customer's intended meaning and creating confusion.



Fig. 5 Miscommunication caused by the contextual use of a word.

Similarly, example (6) shows a situation where miscommunication occurs from the misinterpretation of a particular word due to its contextual use. In this example, a situation is explained where a boy and girl meets for the first time. The girl seems to be very curious and asks the boy about the idea of having a flawless date. Here, the boy is completely alien of this word in the prevailing context. He misinterprets the implied meaning and says that he is only familiar with traditional method of Roman Calander date i.e "DD/MM/YYYY. Further, he argues that other formats are quite confusing for him. This particular interaction of the boy and girl demonstrates that a single word can have multiple meanings and interpretations.



Fig. 6 Miscommunication caused by the contextual use of words.

Above examples prove this to be true that having diverse social, political, cultural and linguistic milieu, it becomes almost impossible to have any meaningful conversation. Therefore, it is pertinent to be familiar with contextual understanding to avoid any ambiguity in communication.

Discussion

The research propagates the notion that memes and fads can be utilized for teaching purposes. It also accentuates that social, cultural and contextual understanding is prerequisite for a meaningful and effective communication. Since words do not possess concrete meanings, there true understanding gets compromised when one lacks these prerequisites. This paper highlights the importance of having proper understanding of idioms, embedded meaning and above all contextual interpretation. It is made clear in this study that multiple memes and fads can act like a learning model for the people who lack proper understanding when certain words, idioms, and memes are discussed.

For instance, figure 1 and 2, the husband tries to change the subject and the father sarcastically responses to the son, illustrate how misunderstandings take place when listeners fail to understand the speaker's implying emotions. It completely aligns with Thomas's (1983) concept of pragmatic failure, which illustrates how misunderstanding frequently occurs from the perceiver's inability to correctly interpret sarcasm, tone or implied meaning. It is manifested in this research that memes depicting these situations help students as a learning tool to serve as valuable tools for teaching students to understand the significance of context and tone in communication, a point also highlighted by Jenkins (2009) and Zappavigna (2012), who claimed that digital media, such as fads, can improve pragmatic awareness.

It can be seen in the use of idiomatic expressions how linguistic and cultural differences can lead to misunderstanding when perceivers interpret idioms literally rather than figuratively. The result is similar to García-Sánchez and Luján-García's (2016) research, which shows the challenges EFL learners encounter while using idiomatic language. The examples in this study discussed earlier which was "Come again?" and "put food on the table", illustrate how idiomatic expressions can create hurdles in communication when listeners lack the necessary cultural and linguistic knowledge. Dynel (2016) also highlights that humour in digital communication often takes place from linguistic misinterpretations, making fads an effective teaching tool for idiomatic

language. Moreover, as Varis and Blommaert (2015) presents, the cultural specificity of fads needs careful scaffolding to make sure the accessibility for EFL learners.

The study completely complements the Levinson's (2000) idea that how a certain context distorts meaning and ultimately exploits the whole communication process. A good and balanced communication is rare when speaker or listener belong to different backgrounds. Their selection of words and sentence structure will be altogether different from each other. Under such circumstances misinterpretations are destined to take place. For instance, the gentleman in a restaurant who asked the waiter that how long would it take to prepare his pizza, the waiter misunderstood him completely. Similarly, when a boy and girl meet for the first time a girl enquired about the idea of a perfect date, again the boy misinterprets the meaning and responds in a different context. This paper also vivifies the idea of Byram (1997) who articulated the substantiality of teaching pragmatic understanding to counter these problems for effective communication.

Conclusions

The paper concludes that Facebook fads and memes can be a beneficial source to get familiar with specific use of words. It provides necessary data and information to comprehend discrepancies of a meaningful conversation. It also accentuates the proper understanding of idioms, pragmatic and contextual use of language to understand other people to the best possible level. The balanced understanding of these domains can be massively fruitful for educational purposes. This study is also special because it propagates the use of digital platforms for learning and language comprehension. Students can learn and use the certain words in different contexts to become proficient in English language.

Furthermore, this research closely aligns with the findings of Godwin-Jones (2019), who accentuated the dire need for a close examination of digital fads and memes before making them an active part to employ them in classrooms. Finally, this paper shows the importance of cultural awareness because meaning cannot be understood without having proper knowledge of contextual situation. It is also promoted that teachers can help their students to understand these complexities so that they can avoid miscommunication and misinterpretation.

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