

## How Spoken and Written Questionnaires Vehicle Comprehension

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### Abstract

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This study examines the influence of task medium on the pragmatic comprehension of EFL learners. Students of an English language tertiary programme in Saudi Arabia each completed a pragmatic comprehension task using two different mediums (spoken and written mediums). Although participants could interpret implicit utterances in both tasks, they had lower overall scores when they completed the task through the oral medium. The results showed that participants scored significantly higher on the pragmatic reading task than the pragmatic listening task for all the variables examined. These findings suggest that the medium employed in pragmatic comprehension tasks can influence how well EFL students perform in these tasks and that listening tasks are not necessarily the best medium for assessing pragmatic comprehension.

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**Keywords:** Pragmatic Listening Task; Pragmatic Reading Task; Pragmatic Comprehension; Proficiency; Saudi Arabia

### Introduction

This article focuses on the influence of the medium used in pragmatic comprehension tasks on English language learners' comprehension of implied meanings. In addition to the relative difficulty of interpreting implied meaning in the target language, the mode of the task adds another layer of difficulty. Data of pragmatic comprehension has been collected by spoken and written means. While pragmatic comprehension is an important aspect of language learning, far too little attention has been paid to the medium used to examine foreign and second language learners' pragmatic comprehension. The mediums used to collect data in pragmatic comprehension studies include video-based and audio-based listening tasks (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Carrell, 1984; Garcia, 2004; Niezgodna & Roever, 2001; Schauer, 2006; Taguchi, 2003, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d, 2011; Yamanaka, 2003) and reading tasks (Bouton, 1992, 1994a, 1994b; Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Gibbs, 1983; Gibbs & Moise, 1997; Holtgraves, 2007; Takahashi & Roitblat, 1994).

It has been claimed that listening-based tasks provide contextualized and authentic situations (Taguchi, 2005). On the other hand, researchers have carefully designed reading tasks and argued for their validity (Bouton, 1992; Cook & Liddicoat 2002; Gibbs, 1983; Holtgraves, 2007; Takahashi & Roitblat, 1994). As for the degree of authenticity mentioned in the literature, a mode itself cannot determine the task authenticity. Depending on situations, both listening and reading tasks can carry a certain degree of authenticity. Yet, there has been no study which has employed more than one medium to the same group of participants to investigate the medium effect on implicit pragmatic comprehension. This is an important gap as both methods have been subject to criticism. Reading-based written questionnaires have been frequently used to collect data in interlanguage pragmatics including comprehension of implied meanings, but they have been criticized as not accurately reflecting natural speech (Beebe & Cummings, 1996). Listening-based spoken tasks have also been used, but some studies have hinted at an added layer of difficulty when examining learners' pragmatics.

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Generally, some studies on foreign language listening claim that listening is more stressful, difficult, and challenging for L2 learners (Chang & Read, 2006; Graham, 2006), especially for learners of lower proficiency levels. In pragmatic studies specifically, the difficulty involved in listening has been hinted at but not explored; for example, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) state that the listening component of their video task might be challenging for the participant in their study. To better understand the influence of the medium on English language learners' pragmatic comprehension, it is imperative to develop a study that employs more than one medium with the same group of learners. Therefore, this paper aims to look at L2 learners' pragmatic comprehension of non-literal utterances in both a listening task and a reading task and to explicitly investigate the effect of data collection mode on the results.

## Background

### Interlanguage Pragmatics and Listening Comprehension

While hardly commenting on the medium effect, inter-language pragmatics researchers have used listening as a medium to examine not only pragmatic awareness but also comprehension of implied meanings. To put it briefly, the former deals with pragmalinguistic forms (Thomas, 1983), and the latter with the interpretation of speakers' non-literal meanings (Taguchi, 2012). Focusing on different characteristics of pragmatics, a group of studies have attempted to examine pragmatic awareness using listening tasks (Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Carrell, 1984; Garcia, 2004; Niezgodna & Roever, 2001; Schauer, 2006). When examining ESL and EFL learners' pragmatic awareness, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) comment that while their listening-based task provides clear situations, it can be more challenging for learners than written scenarios. Participants in their study were asked to decide if an utterance was grammatically correct or pragmatically appropriate. It was found that proficiency level interacted with the learning context to influence awareness of errors in grammar and pragmatics. Learning context played an important role in pragmatic development and residency in the target community had an effect on learners' pragmatic awareness. Niezgodna and Roever (2001) and Schauer (2006) used the same instrument. Consistent in their findings was that ESL learners rated pragmatic errors as more severe than grammatical errors. However, unlike Schauer (2006) and Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998), Niezgodna and Roever (2001) concluded that learning context is not the most important factor accounting for learners' pragmatic awareness. Pragmatic listening tasks were also used in Taguchi's series of research on pragmatic comprehension. However, while some studies (e.g. Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei, 1998; Carrell, 1984; Niezgodna & Roever, 2001; Schauer, 2006) focus on the recognition and perception of L2 pragmatic features, Taguchi (2003, 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008d, 2011) focuses on examining learners' interpretation of speakers' implicit utterances.

Unlike pragmatic awareness studies, studies that have used a listening task to investigate learners' interpretation of implied meanings are scarce. Most of them have been conducted by Taguchi to explore the L2 pragmatic comprehension of Japanese learners of English. Taguchi (2005, 2007, 2011) designs different listening tasks to measure L2 learners' interpretation of intended meanings in the target language, claiming that the listening component can increase the authenticity of the task. However, distinct from the 2005 study, a slightly different pragmatic listening task is employed in Taguchi's (2007, 2008a, 2008d, 2011) subsequent studies. Instead of answering a multiple-choice question for each item, participants were required to answer a yes-no question after listening to each dialogue (Taguchi, 2007, 2008a, 2008d). More recently, Taguchi (2011) has developed a listening task that has 16 items assessing more conventional implicatures and 16 items for non-conventional implicatures. Seemingly, these changes in the pragmatic listening tasks can be attributable to the scope of investigation of the study and/or the participants. Another possible motivation for the change is to generate more authentic data; to this end, Taguchi (2011) states in recent research that 'conventional and nonconventional implicatures were taken from corpora of naturalistic conversations' (p. 920). In her series of studies, Taguchi (2005, 2007, 2008d, 2011) generally found an influence of L2 general proficiency on the comprehension of implicit utterances in English and Japanese and that implicature type influenced L2 learners' responses. Because these studies have used different listening comprehension tests and yet have similar general results, we can assume that non-conventional implicatures are more difficult for L2 learners than the conventional implicatures. In addition, more careful and explicit attention to understanding the medium effect on the comprehension of different characteristics of L2 pragmatics is needed.

### Interlanguage Pragmatics and Reading Comprehension

Written questionnaires, which require language learners to read scenarios and provide answers to questions about interpreting implied meanings of different conventionalities, have also been used by researchers to investigate language learners' pragmatic comprehension and processing.

Loosely, two types of studies can be distinguished in this area: those that investigate learners' comprehension processes (Holtgraves, 2007; Takahashi & Roitblat, 1994) and those that investigate learners' comprehension of implicatures of different conventionalities (Bouton, 1992; Cook & Liddicoat, 2002). Building on Grice's (1975) study, in which four maxims are identified—those of *quantity*, *quality*, *relevance*, and *manner*—Bouton (1992) used a multiple-choice questionnaire with 33 items. Each item contained a description of a situation followed by a short dialogue hosting an implicature. It was revealed that after spending some time in the target language community, the non-native speakers were able to interpret most of the implicatures in ways similar to American native speakers, even though they had some difficulty interpreting some items. Recently, Cook and Liddicoat (2002) employed a reading-based task to investigate ESL learners' comprehension of different request strategies: *direct requests*, *conventional indirect requests*, and *non-conventional indirect requests*. The written task consisted of 15 scenarios followed by the request strategy; participants chose an answer from four possible responses. Similar to Taguchi (2003, 2005, 2007, 2008a, 2008d, 2011), an important finding in Cook and Liddicoat's study was that conventionality influenced comprehension: non-native speakers of English were found to perform less well on non-conventional indirect requests than on direct and conventional indirect requests. More recently, Zughaibi (2013) used a reading-based task in order to investigate the relative effects of proficiency and contact on the pragmatic comprehension of EFL. The task included 32 test items; 16 more conventional implicature items (MCI) and 16 less conventional implicature items (LCI). Each item contained a description of a short dialogue hosting an implicature followed by a multiple-choice question. The findings showed that both proficiency and contact relate positively to the accuracy of comprehension of non-literal meanings and that conventionality influenced comprehension. In summary, different mediums have been used to investigate English language learners' pragmatic skills. The use of listening tasks has been claimed to increase the authenticity of the task, yet they have also been argued to be more challenging than reading-based tasks. On the other hand, reading-based tasks, which have also been used in interlanguage-pragmatics, have been argued to be less authentic. This study aims to compare EFL learners' responses in two pragmatic comprehension tasks and addresses the following research question: Does the medium affect learners' pragmatic comprehension?

## Methods

### Participants

The participants in this study were 83 undergraduate males studying a four-year bachelor degree in English at a university in Saudi Arabia. They were selected on a voluntary basis from the fourth year of study and they were expected to have high proficiency in both reading and listening. Proficiency was not considered as a variable in this study, though the study sample was exclusively selected from the fourth, and last, year of the four year program. Students at the fourth year of study have already completed 16 language skills courses and 10 courses in literature and linguistics. In all these courses students have to read and write English texts, communicate English and participate in many oral and written academic activities. The study included only male participants due to the sex-segregated nature of the institution, which made female participants unavailable. Participants had an age range of 20 to 26 years and. They had started their formal English learning during intermediate school, and almost none had spent time abroad.

### Pragmatic Tasks

In order to investigate the medium effect on learners' pragmatic comprehension of implied meanings in English, this study used a listening and a reading task. The reading task was identical to the listening task in terms of design, except that instead of listening to conversations, participants read conversations and answered the questions following each conversation in their answer sheet. There is a well-established series of instruments that have been used to investigate pragmatic comprehension of implied meanings in English. This study adapted Taguchi's (2003) instrument. The listening pragmatic test originally designed by Taguchi (2003) consists of two categories of implied meanings: 'more conventional implicatures' (MCIs) and 'less conventional implicatures' (LCIs). While the former are operationalized as indirect speech acts, the latter are operationalized as non-conventional implicatures. The test has a total of 32 multiple-choice questions: 16 items are MCIs and 16 items are LCIs. To assess more conventional implicatures the task employed indirect speech acts of request and refusal as two types of more conventional implied meanings. An example of MCIs category is "Yeah I came to talk about our exam next week. *I was wondering if I could take the exam earlier, like this week*". To assess less conventional implicatures, the task were divided into two categories: bridging and flouting implicatures.

The former (Bridging implicatures) observe the maxim of relevance but require the listener to use bridges to make the utterance relevant. The latter (Flouting implicatures) deviate from the maxim of relevance at the surface level but observe the maxim at the underlying level and this requires the listener to use more extensive inferencing to interpret the utterance.

Consider Taguchi's example for a bridging implicature:

Ben: Good morning, honey. I can't believe I fell asleep in the middle of the movie last night. Did you watch it till the end?

Barabara: Yeah, I did.

Ben: How was it? Did you like it?

Barbara: Well, I was glad when it was over.

Barbara's answer to Ben might imply that she did not like the movie. Ben is more likely to understand the implicature because he slept in the middle of the movie. Vocabulary items used in conversations and multiple-choice options were taken from Longman's 2000 defining words. These words are identified as basic English words, common and frequent. Few changes have been made to the task. Cultural aspects in the test items were modified to ensure the task was relevant to the Saudi students. This included, for example, an item that was originally about committing the offence of drunk driving, which was changed to the offence of exceeding the speed limit while driving, since the former is not as common a phenomenon in the Saudi context as the latter.

#### Procedures

Participants completed the pragmatic listening task (PLT) first. Upon arriving at the classrooms on campus where the task was arranged, they were instructed on how to complete the task and practiced on one item. The PLT consisted of dialogues between two people, as mentioned above; following each conversation, the participants answered a multiple-choice question written on the answer sheet. The participants were required to complete the task in less than 30 minutes.<sup>ii</sup> Students listened to the recording once and had 10 seconds to circle an answer for each written multiple-choice question following each conversation. Before the test items, they practised on one item and the answer was provided for them in the answer sheet. The students completed the pragmatic reading task (PRT) one week later. Before they started the task, they were informed on how to complete it and practiced on one item. These dialogues were the same as in the PLT, but randomized to reduce the sequence effect that potentially arises from giving the same task. All participants completed the task in an equal time frame as in the PLT. The participants had about 30 minutes to complete the overall task, which was found to be appropriate when piloting the task. While some ordering is necessary if two tasks are to be administered to the same group of participants, the ordering cannot be dismissed. The reading task was administered after the listening task. In order to control for this, half of the participants are given the tasks in the reverse order. While half of the participants completed the PLT first and the PRT second, the order was reversed for the other half of the participants.

#### Analysis

The variables of interest were the accuracy scores for interpreting implied utterances in both pragmatic tasks: the pragmatic listening task (PLT) and the pragmatic reading task (PRT). This included separate scores for more conventional implicatures and less conventional implicatures. Each accurate response was given one score. Prior to the statistical analyses, underlying assumptions (i.e., normality) were checked. PLT and PRT scores were compared using a paired-sample t-test.

#### Results

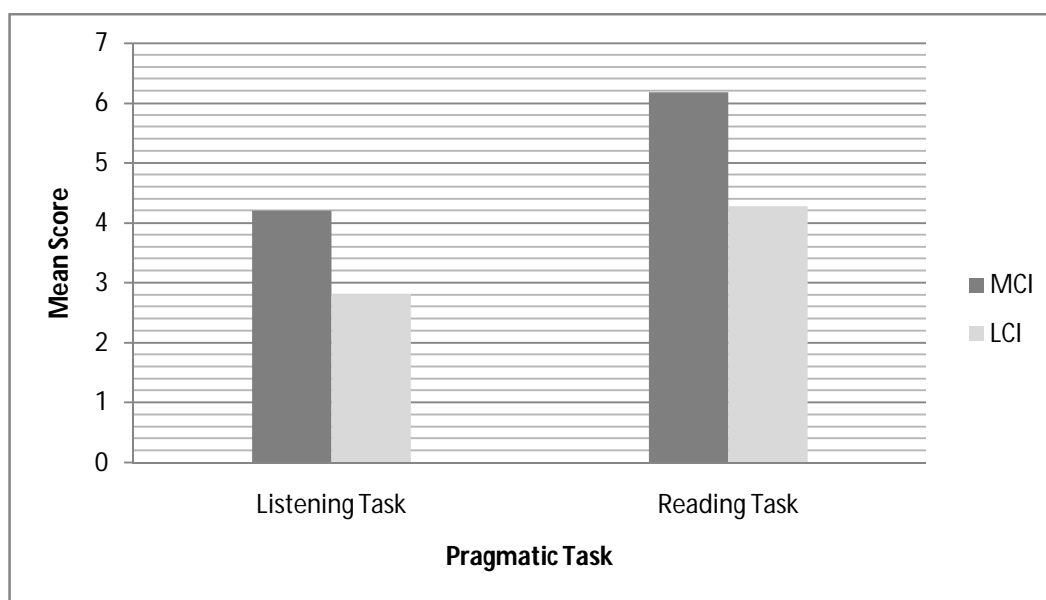
I first offer descriptive statistics on which the subsequent analyses of the effect of the medium are based. The descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum scores) for comprehension on the two pragmatic tasks are presented in Table 1. In each task, the independent variables were the accuracy scores in all implied meaning items, accuracy scores in more conventional items, and accuracy scores in less conventional items.

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Pragmatic Listening Task and the Pragmatic Reading Task (n=83)**

	Type	Number of items	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
PLT	Total	32	7.01	3.00	1	16
	MCI	16	4.20	2.02	0	10
	LCI	16	2.81	1.50	0	6
PRT	Total	32	10.45	5.67	1	28
	MCI	16	6.18	3.55	0	15
	LCI	16	4.27	2.65	0	13

Note. MCI= more conventional implicature; LCI= less conventional implicature

As shown in Table 1, the participants had a low total mean score of 7.01 out of 32 in all items of the PLT and a small standard deviation of 3.00. This means they had low comprehension accuracy scores for implicatures and small within-group variation. Despite the apparent difficulties interpreting implied meanings in English in this task, participants were able to comprehend MCIs more accurately than they were able to comprehend LCIs. Participants had a mean score of 4.20 out of 16 (SD = 2.02) for MCIs compared to their mean score of 2.81 out of 16 (SD = 1.50) for LCIs. Thus, similar to Taguchi's (2003) findings, L2 learners find the more conventional implicatures easier to comprehend than the less conventional implicatures. While some findings from the PRT were similar to those of the PLT, there were some differences. Participants generally performed better in the PRT than the PLT (see figure 1 below).



**Figure 1: Comparison of the Pragmatic Listening Task and the Pragmatic Reading Task (MCI = more Conventional Implicature; LCI = Less Conventional Implicature)**

To give specific details about the PRT, the total accuracy scores for the PRT, as well as accuracy scores in all categories, were higher than the accuracy scores in the PLT with a total mean score of 10.45 (out of 32<sup>iii</sup>), compared to 7.01 (out of 32) in the PLT. As found in the listening task, the participants of this study seemed to have difficulties interpreting implied meanings in the PRT, though comprehending the MCIs was easier than the LCIs. Their mean score for the MCIs was 6.18 (out of 16, SD = 3.55), while it was 4.27 (out of 16, SD = 2.65) for the LCIs. Again, the conventionality of implied meaning in these items affected their comprehension as it did in the PLT. To answer the research question and determine whether the medium of the pragmatic task has an influence on the results, paired-sample t-tests were conducted for the PLT and PRT scores (Table 2). The t-tests revealed that participants scored significantly higher on the PRT than the PLT in in both item categories (MCI and LCI): total score:  $t(82) = -6.199$ ,  $p < .001$ ; MCI:  $t(82) = -5.721$ ,  $p < .001$ ; LCI:  $t(82) = -4.883$ ,  $p < .001$ . The eta-squared (total score = 0.32; MCI = 0.29; LCI = 0.22) statistics indicated a large effect size.

**Table 2: Paired-Sample T-Test Results for the Comparison between the Pragmatic Listening Task and the Pragmatic Reading Task**

Variable	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Effect Size</i>
Total score	-6.199	82	.000	0.32
MCI	-5.721	82	.000	0.29
LCI	-4.883	82	.000	0.22

## Discussion

An important issue that emerges from the data is the effect of the medium on the participants' pragmatic comprehension of non-literal utterances. It has been argued that listening tasks are relatively better instruments to investigate pragmatic comprehension because they are likely to increase the authenticity of the task (Taguchi, 2005). Although the pragmatic reading task (PRT) seems less authentic than the pragmatic listening task (PLT), the evidence from our study suggests that PRT can produce a more accurate measurement of pragmatic comprehension because it seems to result in a range of different responses with learners who have less exposure to listening to native speakers. There are potential general and specific reasons for such a finding. Participants' results indicated better performance in the PRT than the PLT. Generally, studies have shown that listening is more difficult and stressful for foreign language learners because it sometimes requires learners to rapidly interpret information, and this is sometimes challenging (Chang & Read, 2006; Graham, 2006). Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) speculate that the listening comprehension part of their video-based pragmatic task might be intrinsically more challenging than the written form of the task, suggesting that 'proficiency' should not be treated as a single construct, but divided according to, at least, skills.

However, some degree of caution is warranted. Whether this is an inherent feature of listening or a feature specifically related to the learning experiences of this group of students is unclear. The study was conducted in an EFL context, and limited previous exposure to native speakers' speech might have contributed to the low accuracy in the PLT responses. Most of the teachers at the institution are non-native speakers of English and they speak in different accents and dialects of English. Most of those teachers do not use native speaking modals when they are teaching listening. The faculty during the study included 10 teachers from India, 5 teachers from Bangladesh and 10 teachers from different Arab countries. This is one of the first studies to investigate L2 learners' pragmatic comprehension of non-literal utterances with both a listening task and a reading task. The findings demonstrate that performance is not identical in the two mediums and that reading tasks may be much more useful for understanding more difficult aspects of pragmatic comprehension. As the results in this study show, students scored higher in the reading task compared to their scores in the listening task. The findings of this study show that using a listening task is not necessarily the best choice for at least some groups of EFL learners. It is possible that a listening-based questionnaire might be a better measure when learners have had more exposure to listening to English speakers. It is also possible that different teaching and learning contexts might influence the results.

## Conclusion

The findings of this research have several implications for teaching pragmatics in EFL contexts. The findings have shown an overall weakness in pragmatic comprehension among these Saudi EFL learners, as revealed in the overall lower mean scores on the PLT and PRT (see Table 1). Their scores are lower than those that have been achieved by other EFL learners (e.g. Taguchi, 2003). Previous research has shown that formal instruction about pragmatics can be effective (Bouton, 1994a; House, 1996). Further, the participants in this study had distinctly lower accuracy in comprehension of less as compared to more conventional implicatures. Taken together, these results suggest that the comprehension of LCIs is difficult to achieve without explicit attention. Taguchi (2003) suggests that when teaching LCIs, the focus should be on the analysis of the features related to language and context. While such comprehension might be revealed through more exposure to the target language, there is less consistent evidence to support the idea that learners can resolve the ambiguities on their own. Therefore, the context of learning, including the nature of the programme in which the learners are enrolled, should be built into studies of the influence of variables such as the medium on the comprehension of implicit meanings. Future research should employ standardized language proficiency scores of the participants as this might be helpful to determine a level range and if there was much proficiency difference the analysis should be conducted separately across groups. The institution in which data was collected separates male and female student campuses.

The study was conducted in the male student campus and did not cover the female student campus. The researcher had no access to the female student campus for some cultural and religious limitations. I believe a study on female students' pragmatic understanding in reading and listening will unfold many other explanations for the varied levels of performance and learning preference of both groups. The study shows that male students enrolled at the institution scored higher in their pragmatic reading skills which can be utilized in advancing their knowledge of English language through exposing them to different reading skills and different texts across the curriculum. Teachers of this group can use the reading skill competency that the students have mastered to strengthen other language skills such as writing and speaking. On the other hand, the low score in the students' pragmatic listening tests raises many questions on how listening is being taught and how to improve it. Listening teachers need to expose the students to real oral situations and conversations by native speakers, introduce students to important factors of clear pronunciation such as intonation, stress and syllabification, and stress the importance of interaction in English. Teachers also can introduce film and online resources in their listening classes and encourage students to practise listening and speaking on a daily bases.

### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>Written approval was granted by Naoko Taguchi , for which I am extremely thankful.

<sup>ii</sup>In contrast to Taguchi (2003), the participants had ten seconds between the end of one conversation and the announcement of the next conversation number to answer the multiple-choice question, as only accuracy, not speed, of comprehension was evaluated in this research. Ten seconds was found to be sufficient when piloting the task, but one might expect differences in accuracy rates between this study and other studies, for example Taguchi (2003), in which participants could finish the task at their own pace as computer software was used to count the speed of comprehension as well.

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