Non-Observance of Grice's Conversational Maxims in Discourse of Humor and its Role in EFL Learners' Text Comprehension: A Mixed-Methods Study[1]

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Abstract

Grice's conversational maxims have been one of the most influential pragmatic theories up to now. The primary purpose of this study was to measure the comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners in terms of English humor based on Grice's non-observed conversational maxims. Moreover, this study intended to find which of Grice's non-observed conversational maxims make it difficult for EFL learners to comprehend the discourse of English humor. Using a mixed-methods design, 300 participants were selected from different age groups. The selected participants were 129 females and 171 males whose ages varied from 19 to 37. In the final phase of the study, four students were selected based upon their willingness and availability to take part in a qualitative phase. Results showed that among the four Grice's non-observed conversational maxims, the quantity maxim (.75) had had the highest mean score, resulting as the easiest maxim and the quality maxim (.41), which had the lowest mean score, was the most challenging maxim. The results of the qualitative data confirmed the quantitative results. Quantity was found to be the easiest maxim in the English Humor Comprehension Test (EHCT), and Quality was the most challenging maxim.

Resumen

Las máximas conversacionales de Grice han sido de las teorías pragmáticas más influyentes hasta ahora. El propósito principal de este estudio fue medir la capacidad de comprensión de los estudiantes iraníes avanzados de inglés como lengua extranjera en términos de humor en inglés según las máximas conversacionales de Grice no observadas. Además, este estudio pretendía encontrar cuáles de las máximas conversacionales de Grice no observadas dificultan que los estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera comprendan el discurso del humor en inglés. Utilizando un diseño de métodos mixtos, se seleccionaron 300 participantes de diferentes grupos de edad. Los participantes seleccionados fueron 129 mujeres y 171 hombres cuyas edades variaron de 19 a 37. En la última fase del estudio, se seleccionaron ocho estudiantes en función de disponibilidad para participar en una fase cualitativa. Los resultados mostraron que entre las cuatro máximas conversacionales de Grice no observadas, la máxima de cantidad (.75) tenía la puntuación media más alta, resultando como la máxima más fácil y la máxima de calidad (.41), que tenía la puntuación media más baja, era la más máxima más difícil. Los resultados de los datos cualitativos confirmaron los resultados cuantitativos. La cantidad se consideró la máxima más fácil en la prueba de comprensión del humor en inglés, y la calidad fue la máxima más desafiante.

Introduction

Grice's conversational implicature has been one of the most influential pragmatic theories up to now. According to Grice (1975), utterances can make meanings by implicating some assumptions to a particular utterance. Grice (1975) calls the implicated information "implicatures" (p. 45). The theory of implicature is concerned with how meaning can be transmitted by what is said and how it is said (Levinson, 1983).

Grice (1975) believes that people communicate with each other to share two-sided information and they use utterances to maintain social relationships. As a result, cooperative principles were proposed as necessary for people who tend to produce and analyze conversations logically. According to Grice (1975), in order for the speaker and the listener to understand what each other means, they should work cooperatively and use four maxims in the conversation: quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. The addressee will not comprehend the utterances if these utterances ignore one maxim. The maxims are called cooperative principles.

Humor is a familiar phenomenon that the majority of people experience daily, however, it is difficult to grasp or explain. Humor is defined as a dynamic and complicated path of communication that performs a host of significant social functions. The ability to understand and create humor is an essential ability for English proficiency (Strawhorn, 2014). As Mark Twain is reported to have said, "English humor is hard to appreciate, though, unless you are trained to it" (Twain, as cited in New York Evening World (1907), p. 2).

Besides linguistic competence, humor competence is considered another "human" capacity (Raskin, 1985). A mastery of linguistic competence in a foreign language does not necessarily mean a mastery of humor competence. A speaker may be linguistically proficient, but he or she may not easily comprehend humor

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in a foreign language. Applied linguistics seems to reconsider the humor role in EFL contexts. Schmitz (2002) believes that that the use of humor can make classes more pleasurable as well as improve students' proficiency and their humor comprehension ability in foreign language courses. For example, according to Deneire (1995), the use of humor in English in EFL classes can lead to a thought-provoking understanding of humor. Although research recommends the integration and the use of humor in EFL classes, teaching humor has remained a challenge for EFL teachers. Some difficulties that EFL learners may encounter in comprehending humor seem to be the lack of vocabulary and background knowledge of the culture (Jaroenkitboworn, 2015).

It may be said without skepticism that humor research cannot be seen as a novel consideration since there has been previous research on it. For example, Mulyani (2010) studied the disregard of maxims in the film *Forest Gump*. Kheirabadi (2013) investigated the violation of Grice cooperative maxims in Iranian jokes. While these kinds of research mostly focused on the violations of maxims, disregarding, infringing, opting out, and suspending a maxim seem not to have been taken into consideration.

According to Raskin (1985), although humor is a global phenomenon that occurs universally, what is seen as funny and how a person uses humor, when, where, with whom, and in what circumstances differ from one culture to the other and even among people within the same culture. Most of the time, when EFL learners encounter English jokes in their books or the media, they just shrug their shoulders showing a lack of understanding, or they may think they got the joke, but it was not funny. This may happen because each culture has its own style of humor, and, as a result, both the forms and functions of humor differ from those of EFL learners' native language. Humor often involves wordplay and very colloquial expressions. Also, rules to the conditions under which humor may be used might be entirely unexpected.

Grice (1975) proposed the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims to clarify the way people interpret conversational implicature. The principle of cooperation includes four maxims, namely the maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner. These maxims tend to describe logical principles which people observed by obeying the cooperative principle. Observing these principles leads to efficient communication. The quantity maxim shows the amount of contribution in a conversation. The quality maxim indicates a valid and truthful contribution in a conversation. Grice (cited in Thomas, 1995, p. 63) suggests that that a conversation is expected to be original and to show facts. The relevance maxim shows that the speakers' contribution is relevant to the conversation and he believes that speakers should "be relevant" and talk about the things which are related to the topic of the conversation. Finally, the manner maxim indicates that speakers should present the meaning orderly, precisely, in a clear way, and avoid ambiguity.

According to Thomas (1995), people might break a maxim when they are unable to speak clearly or when they intentionally tell a lie. The non-observance maxim types can be classified as follows:

<u>Flouting a Maxim</u>

Flouting a maxim is when a speaker disregards a maxim without the purpose of misleading or deceiving. The speaker may cause the addressee to search for a meaning that may be different from the represented meaning. This extra meaning is called "conversational implicature", and the process through which it is made is called "flouting a maxim" (Thomas, 1995).

For example:

> *Rachel: Wow! How are you?!*
> *Ross: Good-good, I'm-I'm married. (Shows her his ring).* (Thomas, 1995, p. 65)

In this conversation, on the one hand, it is clear that Ross' answer flouts the quantity maxim. He gave some unnecessary extra information to Rachel's question, which was irrelevant to the question. On the other hand, it seems he also flouts the relevance maxim.

<u>Violating a Maxim</u>

According to Grice (1975), violation occurs when a speaker intentionally breaks or forgoes to observe a maxim in a conversation to make the addressee misunderstand the utterance. If a maxim is violated, the speaker is liable to misguide the listener. For example, if a person is not a doctor, but he says that he is a doctor, he violates the maxim of quality—in other words, he is lying.

Infringing a Maxim

Infringing a maxim occurs when a speaker breaks a maxim with no purpose of creating an implicature and with no purpose of misguiding. To put it another way, the speaker's inability to give his or her intention causes the violation of a maxim (Thomas, 1995). For instance, he does not need no money (double negative).

Opting out of a Maxim

Opting out of a maxim happens when a speaker is unwilling to cooperate in the way that the maxim necessitates to be supported. Therefore, the speaker intentionally opts out of a maxim to obey the rules of a community (Thomas, 1995). As an example, the minister is asked a question about the speech he gave in Parliament: "*Well, to be honest, I can't tell you this matter as it was told me in confidence*'." (p. 74). The minister, in this example, opts out of the quantity maxim to keep confidentiality. He states openly that the maxim cannot be observed.

Suspending a Maxim

Suspending a maxim occurs when a speaker hides the truth due to the cultural code (Thomas, 1995). This kind of non-observance rarely happens. As an example, in India: Saying the name of a deceased person may draw evil spirits out and cause bad luck.

Significance of the study

This study integrated linguistics and applied linguistics. At one pole, it analyzed humor linguistically in terms of Grice's conversational maxims; at the other, it measured EFL learners' comprehension of humor. Grammar and vocabulary knowledge is sometimes not sufficient for EFL learners to decide on the appropriateness of word use or allow them to understand something humorous. This may happen because of teachers' and learners' reliance on textbooks. Lessons are organized based on textbooks, which provide learners with very little pragmatic information and insufficient material. Therefore, the teachers' role is to present learners pragmatic information and provide them adequate textbook material. This can guide EFL learners to make a decision about the appropriateness of a sentence use.

Purpose of the study

This study tries to support the learning experience of EFL learners by investigating how their ability to use their previous knowledge can help them understand humor and enable them address humor when facing it in the learning process. The results of the study can also suggest platforms to use to help EFL learners and teachers develop the principles of language communication based on Grice's conversational maxims combined with humor.

To investigate the problems stated above, the researcher formulated the following research questions:

Q1. *Do any of Grice's non-observed conversational maxims bring about the difficulty for EFL learners to comprehend English discourse of humor?*
Q2: *What are the perceptions of EFL learners about Grice's non-observed conversational maxims in the discourse of humor?*

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 300 Iranian EFL learners from different age groups 129 females and 171 males whose ages varied from 19 to 37 (M=25.67, SD=7.11). All of the participants were native Persian speakers, and their only language learning experience was through the language institute. Out of 300 participants, eight EFL learners were chosen for the qualitative phase based upon their willingness and availability.

Instruments

This study used two tests: the Preliminary English Test (PET) and the English Humor Comprehension Test (EHCT) (Amirsheibani et al, 2000, see Appendix). The reliability of these tests was calculated with Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) analyses and turned out to be .85 for PET total reading test and .92 for EHCT.

Since this investigation examined the types of non-observance of Grice's maxims and described the variations of maxims which were not observed in the discourse of English humor, jokes from popular humor sources were selected. Therefore, the English source of the data was *1001 jokes* from the book

Quirkology: The curious science of everyday lives by Richard Wiseman (2007) and *Humor Times* (www.humortimes.com) which is an online monthly magazine that reviews the news in the United States using political satire. It seems that in humor and jokes, the speaker fails to observe a maxim not to mislead or deceive the addressee. In fact, the speaker makes the hearer look for a meaning which is different from the expressed meaning. In other words, in humor, the maxims are often flouted and humor normally relies on maxim flouting (Dynel, 2008). On the other hand, according to Freud (1960), the famous philosopher and psychologist who pioneered the study on humor, jokes can be classified into two main types: tendentious and non-tendentious. The former has a character of hostility concerning derogatory attitudes, ridicule and aggression whereas the latter, which is void of hostility, is more playful, not aggressive or "innocent", in his term. As a result, at one pole, the selected humorous texts are samples of the flouting of the Grice maxims; at the other, the humorous texts were non-tendentious, playful on words and English structure without targeting any particular social group.

Procedure

First, the researcher obtained signed consent forms from the participants and their instructors in agreeing to participate in the study. Second, one of the critical factors in choosing appropriate humorous texts is the difficulty in understanding humor, particularly at elementary levels. Therefore, based on the nature of the study, the participants were selected from a group of intermediate EFL learners. To ensure the intermediate level of the participants, PET test (Cambridge ESOL Examinations, 2003) was given. For the main phase of the study, the sample was taken from a group of students who were easy to reach or contact. The sample consisted of 300 intermediate EFL learners who had enrolled in regular English classes in an English Institute in Tabas, Iran. Finally, eight EFL learners were chosen for the qualitative phase. The number of participants in the qualitative phase was limited in order to produce deep descriptions and to permit in-depth analysis of the individual participant's data. The students were selected based upon their willingness and availability to take part in the qualitative phase and to reflect and share their experiences for the purposes of the research.

Data Analysis of Quantitative Phase

Descriptive analysis was used to analyze the frequency and percentage of the overall population in Grice's non-observed conversational maxims. In this phase of the study 300 students participated.

To find the most difficult maxim from the viewpoint of Iranian students, the descriptive statistics of the four maxims in the EHCT were analyzed. Table 1 shows the ranking of the sub-constructs of EHCT according to the participants' perceptions from the most difficult to the easiest.

Sub-Constructs	Number of participants	Mean
Quality	300	.41
Manner	300	.52
Relevance	300	.57
Quantity	300	.75

Table 1: Ranking of the Sub-Constructs of EHCT

Results showed that among the four Grice's non-observed conversational maxims, Quantity (.75) had the highest mean score as the easiest maxim and Quality (.41) had the lowest mean score making it the most difficult maxim.

The results of the descriptive analysis for different sub-constructs of Grice's non-observed conversational maxims are presented in this section. The Maxim of Quantity was measured through seven questions in the test. The responses can be seen in Table 2.

	True		False	
	F	%	F	%
Q1	253	84.33	47	15.66
Q5	241	80.33	59	19.66
Q14	262	87.33	38	12.66
Q21	185	61.66	115	38.33
Q22	218	72.66	82	27.33
Q23	193	64.33	107	35.66
Q24	145	48.33	155	51.66

Table 2: Frequencies and Percentages of the items of the Maxim of Quantity in EHCT

As Table 2 indicates, most participants selected the wrong items for question 24. Therefore, Question 24 (f=155, p=51.66%) was the most difficult item. Moreover, the majority of the participants selected the correct items for Question 14 (f=262, p=87.33%). Therefore, it the easiest question within the quantity maxim.

The Maxim of Manner was measured through five questions in the test. The responses can be seen in Table 3.

	True		False	
	F	%	F	%
Q2	159	53	141	47
Q3	166	55.33	134	44.66
Q8	147	49	153	51
Q9	210	70	90	30
Q11	103	34.33	197	65.66

Table 3: Frequencies and Percentages of the items of the Maxim of Manner in EHCT

As Table 3 indicates, most participants selected the wrong items for question 11. Therefore, Question 11 (f=197, p=65.66%) was the most difficult item. Moreover, most of the participants selected the correct item for Question 9 (f=210, p=70%).Therefore it is the easiest question for the Maxim of Manner.

The Maxim of Quality was measured through seven questions in the test. The responses can be seen in Table 4.

	True		False	
	F	%	F	%
Q4	140	46.66	160	53.33
Q6	148	49.33	152	50.66
Q7	213	71	87	29
Q10	131	43.66	169	56.33
Q18	118	39.33	182	60.66
Q19	147	49	153	51
Q25	83	27.66	217	72.33

Table 4: Frequencies and Percentages of the items of the Maxim of Quality in EHCT

As Table 4 indicates, most of the participants selected the wrong items for question 25. Therefore, Question 25 (f=217, p=72.33%) was the most difficult item. Moreover, most of the participants selected the correct item for Question 7 (f=213, p=71%). Therefore, it was the easiest question within the Maxim of Quantity.

The Maxim of Relevance was measured through five questions in the test. The responses can be seen in Table 5.

	True		False	
	F	%	F	%
Q13	183	61	117	39
Q15	191	63.66	109	36.33
Q16	154	51.33	146	48.66
Q17	242	80.66	58	19.33
Q20	141	47	159	53

Table 5: Frequencies and Percentages of the items of Maxim of Relevance in EHCT

As Table 5indicates, most of the participants selected thewrong items for question 20. Therefore, Question 20 (f=159, p=53%) was the most difficult item. Moreover, most of the participants selected the correct item for Question 17 (f=242, p=80.66%). Therefore, this was the easiest question in Maxim of Relevance.

Data Analysis of Qualitative Phase

The explanatory design was employed to collect qualitative data. In this design, first, quantitative data are collected and analyzed. The results of the quantitative phase are used to inform the qualitative phase. Therefore, data collection happens at two phases: In In the quantitative phase and qualitative phase. In mixed-methods design, the two phases are related. Typically, the focus is put on the quantitative phase with a smaller focus on the qualitative phase (Creswell & Clark, 2011). Therefore, the research load is was placed on the quantitative phase.

In order to identify the perceptions of EFL learners about Grice's conversational maxims in a discourse of humor, the think-aloud method was used. In this method, participants are asked to say aloud what is in their mind as they complete a task. Previous studies have established this method has a sound theoretical basis and provides the researcher with valid data about participants' thinking (Ericsson & Simon, 1993). In this section, students' think aloud responses are presented for eight items of the English version of the test.

1)
Alex and John are talking on the phone.
Alex: Where are you, John?
John: In my clothes.
Which one is correct?
    a. The answer is not informative enough for Alex.
    b. The answer has two different meanings.
    c. The man's answer is more informative than is required.
    d. The answer is too long to understand.

Student 1, age: 24   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] It's not long. It may have two different meanings. I think he doesn't want to answer clearly. I think choice "a" is better.
Student 2, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think it doesn't have two different meanings. I think the answer is not informative enough because it doesn't answer enough where John is.
Student 3, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] We have such a joke in Farsi. I think it didn't give enough information.
Student 4, age: 27   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think it doesn't give enough information.

2)
A: Excuse me, do you know what time it is?
B: Yes.
Which one is correct?
    a. B's answer is ambiguous.
    b. B answered incorrectly.
    c. B's answer is more informative than is required.
    d. B did not provide enough information.
Student 1, age: 24   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] The answer "Yes" is very incomplete. I think it did not provide enough information. It needs more answers.
Student 2, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] Let's go through the options. It's not ambiguous. The answer was correct. I think he didn't provide enough information.
Student 3, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] It's clear. It didn't provide enough information.
Student 4, age: 27   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think it doesn't give enough information either.

3)
Husband: Your nagging goes right in one ear and out the other.
Wife: That's because there is nothing between to stop it.
The wife's answer is:
    a. a false statement.
    b. too long to understand.
    c. not clear.
    d. irrelevant here.

Student 1, age: 24   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think too long is better. Maybe in this way she wants to make it more polite.
Student 2, age: 25   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think we can say irrelevant. Length is not a difficulty for understanding here. So irrelevant is the best choice.
Student 3, age: 25   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think the answer is irrelevant here.
Student 4, age: 27   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think her answer is irrelevant.

4)
[In the exam]
Teacher: Will you two please stop passing notes!
Pupil: We're not passing notes. We're playing cards.
The pupil:

    a. answers unclearly.
    b. tells a short answer.
    c. gives untrue information.
    d. answers irrelevantly.

Student 1, age: 24   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] It's not vague. I think "lie" is better. Yes. Untrue is better.
Student, age: 25   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think the answer is unclear.
Student 3, age: 25   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] Students made fun of the teacher. I think it gives untrue information.
Student 4, age: 27   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think it gives untrue information.

5)
Chemistry teacher: What is water?
Dirty-looking boy: A colorless liquid that turns black as soon as I put my hands in it.
The boy's answer:
    a. is too brief to understand.
    b. has more than one meaning.
    c. does not have any clear meaning.
    d. is irrelevant to chemistry class.

Student 1, age: 24   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] He has answered in a childish way. I think it's irrelevant to chemistry class. He didn't provide a chemical description of water.
Student 2, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] It's a pure childish answer. I think it's irrelevant to chemistry class.
Student 3, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] Yes. It's not a chemistry definition of water. So choice "d" is correct.
Student 4, age: 27   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] Well. I think it an irrelevant answer.

6)
A: Tourism to U.S. is down since President Trump took office, costing $4.6 billion and 40,000 jobs
B: We may need that wall to keep people in.
Which one is correct?
    a. The answer is a false statement.
    b. The answer is not clear.
    c. The answer is intentionally irrelevant, but implies another point.
    d. The answer is too long to understand.

Student 1, age: 24   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] Tourism has decreased in the U.S. He said something ironically. I think he wants to show another point that is the wall Trump wants to build.
Student 2, age: 25   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think the answer is not clear because I cannot understand the relationship between tourism and the wall. Yes. The answer is unclear.
Student 3, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] I went over the items. C is correct because he wants to imply something else. Other options don't seem correct.
Student 4, age: 27   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] Well. I think it is an irrelevant answer and he wants to imply something else.

7)
Diner: Waiter, I'm in a hurry. Will the cakes be long?
Waiter: No, sir. They will be round.
The underlined sentence:
    a. is not true.
    b. is too brief.
    c. is irrelevant.
    d. has more than one meaning.

Student 1, age: 24   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] His answer is meaningless. I think his answer is false. It's clear, too.
Student 2, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] Definitely it has more than one meaning. That was very funny.
Student 3, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] It has more than one meaning. It's vague.
Student, age: 27   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think his answer is irrelevant here. There is no relationship between long and round.

8)
Edwin told his girlfriend that if she didn't marry him, he'd get a rope and hang himself right in front of her home.
"Oh, please don't do it, Edwin," she said. "You know, father doesn't want you <u>hanging around here</u>."
The underlined part:
    a. has only one meaning.
    b. has more than one meaning.
    c. does not have any clear meaning.
    d. is irrelevant.

Student 1, age: 24   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] The answer is relevant. I think it's vague. It has more than one meaning. So choice "b" is correct.
Student 2, age: 25   answered correctly
    [Reading the item aloud] Of course it has more than one meaning. Very funny.
Student 3, age: 25   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think it has only one meaning.
Student 4, age: 27   answered incorrectly
    [Reading the item aloud] I think the answer has only one meaning.

Table 6 shows the frequency and percentage of eight items of the EHCT. In this qualitative phase of the study four students participated.

	True		False	
	F	%	F	%
Q1	4	100	0	0
Q2	4	100	0	0
Q3	0	0	4	100
Q4	2	50	2	50
Q5	4	100	0	0
Q6	3	75	1	25
Q7	2	50	2	50
Q8	2	50	2	50

Table 6**:** Frequencies and Percentages of eight items of EHCT

As Table 6 indicates, all the participants selected the wrong items for question 3. Therefore, Question 3 (f=4, p=100%) was the most difficult question. Moreover, all of the participants selected thecorrect items for Questions 1 and 2 (f=4, p=100%). Therefore, they were the easiest questions.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study mainly intended to find which of Grice's non-observed conversational maxims cause difficulty for EFL learners to comprehend English discourse of humor. To find the most challenging maxim from the viewpoint of Iranian EFL learners, the descriptive statistics of the four maxims in the EHCT were analyzed. Results showed that among the four Grice's non-observed conversational maxims, Quantity (.75) has the highest mean score which makes it the easiest maxim while Quality (.41) has the lowest mean score which means that it is the most difficult maxim. Finally, data for the qualitative phase of the study was collected through the think-aloud method. Results of the qualitative data also confirmed the quantitative results. In the EHCT, Quantity was the easiest maxim while Quality was the most difficult maxim.

Results of the present study indicated that the mean score of the Relevance and Quality maxims in PHCT and the Quality and Manner maxims in EHCT, were lower than .50, which was the average value of the choices. It means that although the respondents had an intermediate level of English, they had a low level of humor comprehension. This can be related to the fact that although humor is a global phenomenon, it is culturally specific. In other words, our comprehension of humor is shaped by our unique culture. This may explain why, when non-native speakers with an intermediate level of English watch movies in English, they become baffled with the actors' laughter even if they know the meaning of every single word. This can be due to different cultural backgrounds.

The present results are supported by previous studies. For instance, according to Martin and Ford (2018), people from different cultural backgrounds comprehend humor in various ways. They claimed that there are obvious significant cultural influences in the way humor is used and comprehended.

Many studies have shown that Easterners and Westerners differ in their beliefs about what makes something funny or not and this is reflected in their reaction when confronted by humor in a foreign language (e.g., Chen & Martin, 2005, 2007; Hiranandani &Yue, 2014). Understanding how culture impacts

humor comprehension and humor use is very important since humor has affects human psychological well-being (e.g., Martin, 2001; Martin & Ford, 2018).

It can be concluded that the comprehension of humor is shaped by students' unique cultural backgrounds. In most cases, the comprehension of humor is very difficult. As Wulf (2010) explains, humor is challenging since it needs sociocultural knowledge. The findings of this research are in line with other studies such as Taillard's (2004) who claimed that humor and Grice's conversational maxims are culturally determined and they may not be globally applied because of cultural differences. Sarangi and Slembrouck (1992) also believe that Grice's conversational maxims should include social factors as the social position of communicators. Therefore, understanding humor may require EFL learners to have particular background knowledge; otherwise, learners will be unlikely to comprehend humor (Hodson, 2008). As a result, training EFL learners' humor competence can help learners comprehend humor in a more effective way (Hodson, 2014).

Implications of the study

The current study presents some pedagogical implications for language teachers. The findings of this study can possibly encourage EFL teachers to investigate the learners' levels of humor comprehension using the tests mentioned above. The teachability of pragmatics and humor is complicated (Bell & Attardo, 2010). However, it seems that raising EFL learners' awareness of the different uses of humor depending on with whom, when, and where may be an appropriate starting point in humor learning.

Limitations of the study

Any research study is inevitably faced with some shortcomings that prevent its generalizability. Since the present study was done in a specific context of learning (private language institutes), the findings cannot be generalized to other contexts of English language learning. Moreover, due to the learners' intermediate level of English proficiency, other levels of language were not assessed. Thus, future studies may try to address these limitations.

Grice's conversational maxims could describe only the humor which comes from implicature. There may be some kind of humor which comes from situations that implicature cannot explain. The data, in this study, were collected from a sample of intermediate-level Iranian EFL learners in Tabas language institutes, which probably limit the generalizability of the findings.

Although this study integrated a large number of participants in order to ensure a representative sample of Iranian EFL learners, the reader must be cautious in generalizing the findings to typical language learners in other parts of the country and other levels. The current research is primarily restricted to accounting for the conceptions of EFL learners in the private sector, excluding the public and state school students' comprehension of humor.

Suggestions for further research

Future studies can focus on comedy situations. The current study also investigated the textual humor; therefore, verbal humor and different types of humor can be studied in future research. In the present study, demographic information was not controlled. For example, age can be an important variable which may impact the results of the study. Thus, it would be better to carry out a study with student samples from various age groups in further research to find the relationship between variables. Moreover, due to the learners' intermediate level of English proficiency, other levels of language were not assessed. Future studies may address these limitations.

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Appendix
English Humor Comprehension Test (EHCT)

Name: Gender: Age:
Please read the following items, and then choose the best option.

1)
 A man walking down the streets sees another man with a very big dog. One man asks the other, "Does your dog bite?", the man replies, "No, my dog doesn't." The man pats the dog and has his hand bitten off. "I thought you said your dog didn't bite," said the injured man. "That's not my dog", replied the other.
According to the underlined part:
    a. The man intentionally lied.
    b. The man's answer has two different meanings.
    c. The man's answer was not informative enough.
    d. The man's answer was irrelevant.

2)
Diner: Waiter, I'm in a hurry. Will the cakes be long?
Waiter: No, sir. They will be round.
The underlined sentence:
    a. is not true.
    b. is too brief.
    c. is irrelevant.
    d. has more than one meaning.

3)
A: Let us eat *UP THE STREET*.
B: No, thanks. I do not like concrete.
The underlined part:
    a. is too brief.
    b. has more than one meaning.
    c. is irrelevant.
    d. is a false statement.

4)
Husband: Your nagging goes right in one ear and out the other.
Wife: That's because there is nothing between to stop it.
The wife's answer is:
    a. a false statement.
    b. too long to understand.
    c. not clear.
    d. irrelevant here.

5)
A: Bill and Martha are leaving tomorrow.
B: I'll miss Martha.
B's response:
  a. is not clear.
  b. is too brief to understand.
  c. only attends to part of the topic initiated by A
  d. has more than one meaning.

6)
A: What's your new husband like?
B: I married a rat.
The B's answer:
a. is vague.
    b. is too brief to understand.
    c. is a false statement.
    d. has only one meaning.

7)
Tom: I might win the lottery.
Jean: Yes, and pigs might fly.
The underlined part:
    a. has more than one meaning.
    b. is irrelevant.
    c. is too brief to understand.
    d. shows the obviousness of the untruth of Jean's reply.

8)
A: Let's get the kids something.
B: OK but not I-C-E-C-R-E-A-M [*spelling it out*].
B's answer:
a. is not informative enough to understand.
    b. is irrelevant.

    c. is not clear and concise.
    d. is a false statement.

9)
Teacher: How many letters are there in the alphabet?
Pupil: Eleven.
Teacher: Eleven?!
Pupil: T-H-E-A-L-P-H-A-B-E-T = 11[*spelling it out*].
Which one is correct?
    a. An ambiguity happens regarding the number of the alphabet letters.
    b. Pupil's answer is too brief to understand.
    c. Pupil answered irrelevantly.
    d. Pupil's answer is a false statement.

10)
A guy goes to the Doctors and he says "Doctor, I'm really worried about my brother, he thinks he's a Hen!" The doctor says, "Well, have you taken him to see a psychiatrist?" and the guy says, "Don't be stupid, we need the eggs!"
    The underlined part:
    a. is false and lacks adequate evidence.
    b. is not clear.
    c. has two different meanings.
    d. is too long to understand.

11)
Father: How were the exam questions?
Son: Easy.
Father: Then why look so unhappy?
Son: The questions didn't give me any trouble, but the answers did!
Which one is correct?
    a. Son's answers are deliberately false statements.
    b. an ambiguity happens when the father wants to know about his son's exam.
    c. Son's answers are too brief to understand.
    d. Son answered irrelevantly.

12)
A man died and his wife phoned the newspaper to place an obituary. She called the obituary department and said, "This is what I want to print: Bernie is dead." The man at the newspaper said, "But for $25 you are allowed to print six words." The woman answered, "OK. Then print: Bernie is dead. Toyota for sale."
    The underlined part:
    a. is irrelevant.
    b. does not have any clear meaning.
    c. has two meanings.
    d. is too brief to understand.

13)
Soprano: Did you notice how my voice filled the hall last night?
Contralto: Yes, dear. In fact, I noticed several people leaving to make room for it.
Contralto's answer is:
    a. a false statement.
    b. not clear and concise.
    c. more informative than is necessary to imply something else.
    d. irrelevant.

14)
Mother: How come you never bring any books home from school?
Son: Mom, they're schoolbooks, not home book.
The son's answer is:
    a. not clear and concise to his mother's question.
    b. irrelevant in terms of the reason why he never brings his books home.
    c. too brief to understand.
    d. a false statement.

15)
Jim: Where's the roast beef?
Mary: The dog looks happy.
Mary's answer:
    a. is too brief to understand.
    b. has more than one meaning.
    c. is not clear.
    d. seems irrelevant to the topic to imply something else.

16)
Chemistry teacher: What is water?
Dirty-looking boy: A colorless liquid that turns black as soon as I put my hands in it.
The boy's answer:
    a. is too brief to understand.
    b. has more than one meaning.
    c. does not have any clear meaning.
    d. is irrelevant to chemistry class.

17)

A: Trump accuses Democrats and Republicans of plotting against him.

B: See? <u>He is bringing the country together.</u>

The underlined part:
   a. is an intentionally false statement, implying something else.
   b. has two meanings
   c. is too brief to understand
   d. is irrelevant

18)

Once, a little boy went into a barber's shop. He asked for a shave. The barber told him to sit down, soaped his face and then left. The boy waited for 10 minutes and at last he lost his patience. "Well," he shouted, "what are you leaving me here for all this time?" The barber replied, "<u>I'm waiting for your beard to grow.</u>"

The barber's answer:
   a. is an untruthful statement, but intends to imply something else.
   b. has more than one meaning.
   c. is too brief to understand.
   d. is irrelevant.

19)

A: Tourism to U.S. is down since President Trump took office, costing $4.6 billion and 40,000 jobs

B: <u>We may need that wall to keep people in.</u>

Which one is correct?
a. The answer is a false statement.
   b. The answer is not clear.
   c. The answer is intentionally irrelevant, but implies another point.
   d. The answer is too long to understand.

20)

Alex and John are talking on the phone.

Alex: Where are you, John?

John: <u>In my clothes.</u>

Which one is correct?
   a. The answer is not informative enough for Alex.
   b. The answer has two different meanings.
   c. The man's answer is more informative than is required.
   d. The answer is too long to understand.

21)

A: Excuse me, do you know what time it is?

B: Yes.

Which one is correct?
   a. B's answer is ambiguous.
   b. B answered incorrectly.
   c. B's answer is more informative than is required.
   d. B did not provide enough information.

22)

Pupil: I don't like cheese with holes.

Diner Lady: <u>Well just eat the cheese and leave the holes on the side of your plate</u>!

Lady's answer is:
   a. not clear and concise.
   b. not informative as is required.
   c. too lengthy to understand.
   d. irrelevant to pupil's statement.

23)

Teacher: Do you have a good excuse for being absent yesterday?

Pupil: <u>If I had a good excuse for being absent, I'd save it and use it for tomorrow</u>.

Pupil's answer is:
   a. not clear and concise to his teacher's question.
   b. not required for the current purpose of the exchange between their conversation.
   c. too lengthy to understand.
   d. irrelevant to his teacher's question.

24)

[In the exam]

Teacher: Will you two please stop passing notes!

Pupil: <u>We're not passing notes. We're playing cards</u>.

The pupil:
   a. answers unclearly.
   b. tells a short answer.
   c. gives untrue information.
   d. answers irrelevantly.