EFL Students' Interpretation of Implicature and Gender Representation in Memes

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how EFL students interpret implicature in memes, more specifically those that contain gender representation. A total of 30 undergraduate students majoring in English were used as the respondents. They were asked to fill out a questionnaire containing 7 memes which contain representations of men and women. Considering that memes are multimodal constructions as they are commonly made up of a combination of texts and images, the interaction between these two were also investigated to see how they were able to assist the students in interpreting the hidden meaning behind the memes. The findings revealed that a lot of the students were unable to properly deduce or comprehend the implied meaning regarding gender representation even though they felt that the texts and images did indeed help them in understanding the memes. It was found that they mostly interpreted the memes explicitly. This shows that they still lack pragmatic competence overall. Therefore, it was suggested that language teachers pay more attention to the teaching of implicatures, especially in memes.

Keywords: *Gender representation; implicature; meme; multimodality*

1. Introduction

It has been found that language learners in Indonesia still lack pragmatic competence. For instance, one study showed how students have a relatively low level of pragmatic competence at the university level (Retnowaty, 2017). Another study revealed that even adult learners lack this ability (Malik, 2019). Additionally, Ermansyah's (2019) study highlights that learners with intermediate grammar competence also lack pragmatic competence. Although numerous studies have shown how Indonesian EFL learners have low levels of pragmatic competence, others have highlighted how Indonesian learners of Chinese also face similar problems. For instance, a study by Nan and Marina (2020) revealed that the learners still show signs of pragma-linguistic failures when communicating in Chinese. Considering this condition in Indonesia, several studies have underscored the importance of developing learners' pragmatic competence (Lestari, 2017; Nuridin, 2018; Suwarno, 2018; Nurdiana, 2019; Ariani, Basthomi, and Prayogo, 2021; Lewenussa and Narahawarin, 2021; Prasatyo, Ali, and Hidayati, 2023). Some ways to improve this ability have been explored, e.g., by using movies (Nurdiana, 2012) or through the teaching of specific speech acts (Nuridin, 2018). Another possible media that can be used is internet memes.

Internet memes can be an interesting media for improving learners' pragmatic competence as they often contain implicatures or implied messages. Understanding implicatures is an important aspect of pragmatic competence since the ability to comprehend the hidden meaning of utterances would make learners a more proficient user of a language overall. Implicature itself is concerned with interpreting the implicit meaning behind utterances. It is often the case that the actual meaning behind a person's utterance may not be entirely similar to the literal meaning of the words uttered since what a speaker intends to convey or communicate may go beyond what is explicitly stated in the utterance (Horn and Ward, 2006). Grice (1975 as cited in Pratama, Nurkamto, Rustono, and Marmanto, 2017) argues that with

implicature, people are able to convey their intended meaning indirectly or without clearly expressing it in their utterances. Implicature can be categorized into conventional and conversational. The former deals with meaning related to the truth-conditional semantics of the words in the utterance, while the latter is related to meaning that can only be interpreted by fully understanding the context surrounding the utterance.

With regards to memes, it can be argued that the implicature that can be found in them is the conventional one since most memes do not include conversations but texts consisting of one or more sentences combined with one or more images. In other words, in order to deduce the meaning of the implicature, the reader of the meme does not need to worry about the relation between several utterances and how they violate the cooperative principle, but rather they must be able to interpret the intended meaning by focusing on the written expressions and relate them to the combined image.

Seeing as a meme is normally made up of a combination of texts and images, memes can be considered to be multimodal constructions. Jewitt (2013, as cited in Nita, Setiawan, and Lestari, 2021) is of the opinion that the relation between different modes, e.g., texts and images, contribute to the construction of meaning. Additionally, Van Leeuwen (2007, as cited in Mahfouz, 2021) claims that the verbal and visual mode complements one another, with one mode being able to expand or elaborate on the meaning of the other. Thus, it can be assumed that both elements in a meme, i.e., the text and the image, cooperate to create meaning, and if one were to be omitted, it would most likely have an impact on the overall meaning of the meme. Several studies have been done which focus on the interaction between text and image in memes and how they are able to depict implict meaning (Rina, Yanti and Idham, 2020; Angesti and Meilasari, 2021; Hamza and Yunus, 2022; Siah, Septiyatik & Fikri, 2023).

In addition, memes are generally humorous in nature, but they can also be used to convey more serious messages, one of which concerns gender representation. When talking about gender, it is generally associated with assumed differences between the sexes. These assumptions or stereotypes are ideological and can be constructed through language or other forms of representations (Machin, Caldas-Coulthard and Milani, 2021). Studies have revealed how these stereotypes are often portrayed in various mediums, one of them is through memes. For instance, Drakett, Rickett, Day and Milnes (2018) have shown how women tend to be portrayed as incompetent when it comes to technology, whereas men are commonly considered to be more technologically savvy. Another study that has examined how men and women are illustrated in memes is the one from Sultana, Baig, Sahzzadi, Aman and Noreen (2023). Therefore, it is apparent that society in general have certain perceptions of the characteristics of men and women, and these stereotypes can be depicted in various forms including in memes.

Although it has been mentioned in the beginning that memes can perhaps be used to help improve learners' pragmatic competence overall, it is suggested that memes as a medium that contain implicatures are explored more closely before investigating their effectiveness in improving EFL learners' ability to comprehend implied meanings. Moreover, even though several studies on memes have been conducted, few have focused on how students interpret the implicatures in memes, more specifically memes that portray gender representation. Hence, this research attempts to fill this gap by emphasizing Indonesian EFL students' interpretation of the implicature found in internet memes which contain the representation of men and women. Furthermore, considering that memes are multimodal in nature as they consist of images and texts, the researchers would also like to examine how the multimodality in memes contributes to the interpretation of the implicatures. Based on this background, the following research questions are formulated.

1) How do the students interpret the implicature regarding gender representation in the memes?
2) How does the multimodality in the memes contribute to the interpretation of the implicatures?
3) What are the students' perceptions of the gender representation in the memes?

2. Method

Source of Data

Seeing as the aim of the study is to examine EFL students' interpretation of implicature in memes, especially those that contain gender representation contents, the main source of data for the current research is the result of the questionnaire that is delivered to the students. A more detailed description of this research instrument is presented below. The students who are selected as the respondents for this research are students from the English Department at a private university in North Jakarta from the fifth and seventh semesters since they have already taken the Semantics and Pragmatics subject and already have an idea of how to comprehend implicatures. A total of 30 students from both semesters are included in this study.

Research Instrument

The questionnaire that is distributed to the respondents consists of seven memes collected from various sources on the internet such as Memedroid, Imgur, and MemeZilla. The memes are limited to "men vs. women" memes since the topic of the research is concerned with gender representation. The memes are further grouped into specific categories such as memes with a focus on relationship, health, appearance, and others. Each of the memes used in this study contain two sections, one section portraying a particular stereotype for men, while the other section depicts women's' stereotype. The students are asked to take a look at the memes and answer several closed-ended questions that measure their ability to interpret the implicature, more specifically the implied stereotype for men and women that is illustrated in the memes. Other questions are also included in the questionnaire to investigate the multimodality aspect of the memes, as well as the

perceptions of the students regarding the gender representation found in the memes. Lastly, the questionnaire itself is adapted from Bensaber (2020) and Mahfouz (2021). More specifically, the items in the questionnaire are adapted from those found in Bensaber's (2020) study since it also asks respondents to respond to the memes presented in the questionnaire and asks them about their interpretation of the memes. As for the memes used in the current study, they are adapted from Mahfouz (2021) as that research also focuses on "men vs. women" memes. In terms of the validity and reliability of the instrument, a pilot study was conducted prior to distributing the actual questionnaire to ensure that the items are clearly understood by the respondents and that the result of the questionnaire would be valid and reliable.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

To collect the data, the questionnaire is delivered to the students online via Google Form. After all of the data has been collected, the results are analyzed in accordance with the research questions proposed for this research. First of all, to answer the first research question concerning the students' interpretation of the implicatures that contain gender representation, the result of the questionnaire is analyzed to see how the students have interpreted the implicit characteristics of men and women illustrated in the memes. Next, for the second research question dealing with the multimodality in the memes, the researchers analyze the result of the questionnaire to find out how the multimodal elements in the memes are able to contribute to the construction of the gender representation based on the students' perspectives. More specifically, the researchers investigate how the image and the text interact with one another and help the students comprehend the implicatures. Lastly, the last part of the questionnaire includes questions related to the students' perceptions regarding the gender representation found in the memes, and the researchers examine whether the students have a particular point of view, e.g., whether they agree or disagree with certain characteristics of men and women. All of the data are analyzed qualitatively even though it involves percentages. From these percentages, the researchers interpret the students' understanding of the memes under study and relate them to the multimodal aspect of the memes as well as their perspective of men and women's characteristics and stereotypes.

3. Findings and Discussion

For the first research question regarding students' interpretation of the implicature on gender representation found in the memes, one of the main questions for the seven memes presented in the questionnaire is "Which of the following statement best describes the implicit meaning of this meme?" Based on the result of the questionnaire, it is found that the students seem to have some difficulties in interpreting the implied meaning for most of the memes. Table 1 below summarizes the findings for this question:

Table 1. Summary of the Students' Interpretation of the Implicature

Meme 1	Men and women talk differently	Men are more direct than women when communicating	Women are more direct than men when communicating	Women tells more confusing stories compared to men	None of the above
	4 (13.34%)	19 (63.33%)	-	7 (23.33%)	-
Meme 2	Women are stronger than men	Men are stronger than women	Men tend to exaggerate their symptoms more than women	Women do not get the flu as often as men	None of the above
	14 (46.67%)	-	9 (30%)	-	7 (23.33%)
Meme 3	Women usually get higher scores than men	Men usually get lower scores than women	Women get depressed more easily than men when getting low scores	Men get depressed more easily than women when getting low scores	None of the above
	-	-	21 (70%)	-	9 (30%)
Meme 4	Women consider more things compared to men before travelling	Men worry less than women before travelling	Women carry more things than men when travelling	Men are more practical than women	None of the above
	21 (70%)	2 (6.67%)	-	7 (23.33%)	-
Meme 5	Women's haircuts are more expensive than men's	Men pay less than women for a haircut	Women are willing to spend more than men when it comes to their appearance	When men get a haircut, it is more obvious than women	None of the above
	5 (16.67%)	-	3 (10%)	14 (46.67%)	8 (26.66%)
Meme 6	Friendship	Friendship	Women tend to	Men tend to	None of the

	between men lasts longer than friendship between women	between women is not as good as friendship between men	praise their friends more than men	swear at their friends more than women	above
	17 (56.67%)	6 (20%)	3 (10%)	1 (3.33%)	3 (10%)
Meme 7	Women have more feelings than men	Men have more feelings than women	Women are more emotionally unstable than men	Men experience less emotions compared to women	None of the above
	5 (16.67%)	-	13 (43.33%)	7 (23.33%)	5 (16.67%)

The first meme deals with how men and women communicate. The meme itself can be seen in Figure 1 below.
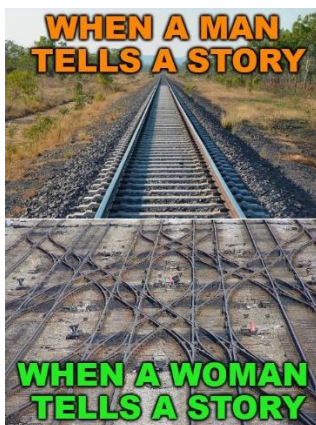

Figure 1. Meme 1 - How Men and Women Communicate

From Table 1 above, it is found that a lot of the students, namely 19 (63.33%) of them interpreted this meme as "Men are more direct than women when communicating." This is indeed the most appropriate interpretation of the implicature compared to the other options. In other words, the students were able to comprehend the implied meaning quite well for this meme, even though there are still some who interpreted it differently.

As for the second meme which is concerned with how men and women act when they are sick, it would seem like many of the students were not really able to properly deduce the implied meaning.

Figure 2. Meme 2 - How Men and Women Act when Feeling Sick

Almost half of the respondents (14 (46.67%)) chose "Women are stronger than men" as their answer and 7 (23.33%) students answered, "None of the above." The most appropriate option is actually "Men tend to exaggerate their symptoms more than women," but only 9 (30%) selected this answer. Hence, it would seem like the students had difficulty understanding the indirect message just by looking at the words and images in this meme.

Similarly, for the third meme which is about how men and women perceive their academic performance, the results show that many of the students, i.e., 21 (70%) of them, chose the option that reflects the explicit meaning rather than the implied hidden meaning, namely "Women get depressed more easily than men when getting low scores." This can clearly be seen from the images and texts, but this is actually not the most appropriate interpretation of the implicature.

Figure 3. Meme 3 - How Men and Women Perceive Academic Performance

The best answer is actually "None of the above" as none of the options are really suitable interpretations. Unfortunately, only 9 (30%) students selected this answer, which shows that a lot of the students still do not fully understand the implied message behind this meme.

The result for meme four is also comparable to the previous two as a lot of the respondents seem to face difficulty interpreting the hidden meaning behind the meme. The meme itself is related to how men and women pack before travelling as can be seen from Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Meme 4 - How Men and Women Pack Before Travelling

There are 21 (70%) students who chose the option "Women consider more things compared to men before travelling" and 2 (6.67%) students who selected "Men worry less than women before travelling" as their answer. Both of these are not really the appropriate implicit meaning for this particular meme. A better interpretation is actually the option "Men are more practical than women," but unfortunately, only 7 (23.33%) students chose this as their answer. Therefore, it can be said that for this meme, the students failed to deduce the implied meaning and instead chose the answers that are more explicit and can be easily understood from the images and texts.

The fifth meme deals with men and women's appearance, in this case, the price they pay for a haircut as can be seen in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Meme 5 - Men and Women's Haircut

For this particular meme, almost half of the respondents, i.e., 14 (46.67%), answered "When men get a haircut, it is more obvious than women." This is not really a very good interpretation of the hidden meaning behind the meme since it is something that can explicitly be seen from the image. Other students have selected other less accurate options as their answer, and only 3 (10%) students chose the best interpretation, namely "Women are willing to spend more than men when it comes to their appearance." From this result, it can be argued that most of the students still cannot see beyond what is literally presented to them and instead choose the interpretations that are obvious based on the images and texts.

As for Meme 6, which is concerned with men and women's friendship, it is found that many students also misunderstood the hidden meaning in the meme. More specifically, only 3 (10%) students selected the appropriate option which is "None of the above" since the other four options do not really reflect the implied meaning but is more related to what can be explicitly deduced from the images and texts. For example, 17 (56.67%) students chose "Friendship between men lasts longer than friendship between women" as their answer, even though this is not really the implicature for this meme. This conclusion can explicitly be made since it is clearly written in the meme that female friendships only last 2-3 years while male ones last forever.

Figure 6. Meme 6 - Men and Women's Friendship

Thus, it can be assumed that most of the respondents could not successfully infer the implicature from this meme. Similar to how they previously responded, the students interpreted the explicit meaning rather than the implied one.

Lastly, Meme 7 is about men and women's emotions and feelings. Quite a lot of students were able to identify the appropriate implicature in this meme, namely "Women are more emotionally unstable than men." More specifically, 13 (43.33%) students or almost half of the respondents succeeded in properly interpreting the hidden meaning. The meme itself can be seen below.

Figure 7. Meme 7 - Men and Women's Emotions and Feelings

Even though there are quite a lot of students who were able to appropriately understand the meme's implied meaning, it should be noted that more than half still chose the other options. Meaning that overall, there are still more students who misunderstood the implicature behind this meme and opted to select the option that reflects the explicit meaning that can be inferred from the meme. For example, 7 (23.33%) students selected "Men experience less emotions compared to women" as their answer, which is definitely something that can be easily deducted from the image of the emoticons which are less varied compared to the women's emoticons. From this result, we can conclude that the students still tend to interpret the explicit meaning based on the texts and images instead of thinking beyond and inferring the actual hidden meaning.

Next, with regards to the second research question which deals with how the multimodality in the memes contribute to the interpretation of the implicatures, the findings seem to suggest that the students mostly have a positive view on this. In other words, they believe that the interaction between the text and image in the memes does indeed help them to understand the hidden message. As can be seen from table 2 below, for all seven memes, over 85% either strongly agreed or agreed that both the text and image in the memes play a significant role in assisting in the interpretation of the implied meaning.

Table 2. Summary of the Contribution of Multimodality to Students' Interpretation of Implicature

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Meme 1	19 (63.33%)	11 (36.67%)	0	0
Meme 2	13 (43.33%)	13 (43.33%)	3 (10%)	1 (3.34%)
Meme 3	14 (46.66%)	15 (50%)	1 (3.34%)	0
Meme 4	16 (53.33%)	12 (40%)	2 (6.67%)	0
Meme 5	13 (43.33%)	14 (46.67%)	3 (10%)	0
Meme 6	15 (50%)	14 (46.67%)	1 (3.33%)	0
Meme 7	15 (50%)	15 (50%)	0	0

Of course, it should be highlighted that even though the respondents generally agreed that both the images and texts did indeed help them to understand the message contained in the memes, the result of the first research question seem to suggest that they still had a lot of difficulty interpreting their hidden meaning. Hence, although the students felt like they were able to understand the memes based on the interaction between the images and texts, they actually did not fully comprehend the real intended meaning behind the memes. In other words, the interaction between the images and texts failed to successfully assist the students in properly understanding the implicit meaning related to gender representation. It might even be the case that the images and texts mislead the students to interpret the memes literally.

Furthermore, concerning the last research question which deals with the students' perception of gender stereotypes, their replies varied among the 7 statements presented in the questionnaire. Nevertheless. Table 3 below reveals that out of the 30 respondents, most of them essentially still have a positive view concerning these statements. Meaning that only very few students either disagreed or strongly disagreed. The item with the highest level of agreement is statement 6, with 11 students (36.67%) strongly agreeing and 16 students (53.33%) agreeing. In other words, the

respondents generally agree that women tend to plan things out more carefully than men. On the other hand, the stereotype with the highest disagreement is statement 3, with 9 students (30%) disagreeing and 2 students (6.67%) strongly disagreeing. Hence, there are quite a number of respondents who believe that men are not necessarily more emotionally stable than women.

Table 3. Questionnaire Result - Students' Perception of Gender Stereotypes

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Statement 1	6 (20%)	17 (56.67%)	7 (23.33%)	0
Statement 2	5 (16.67%)	16 (53.33%)	9 (30%)	0
Statement 3	6 (20%)	13 (43.33%)	9 (30%)	2 (6.67%)
Statement 4	6 (20%)	19 (63.33%)	4 (13.33%)	1 (3.34)
Statement 5	12 (40%)	12 (40%)	6 (20%)	0
Statement 6	11 (36.67%)	16 (53.33%)	3 (10%)	0
Statement 7	4 (13.33%)	17 (56.67%)	7 (23.33%)	2 (6.67%)

- Statement 1: Men care less about their appearance compared to women.
- Statement 2: Women are more concerned about their academic achievements compared to men.
- Statement 3: Men are generally more emotionally stable compared to women.
- Statement 4: Women have higher pain thresholds and tolerance levels than men.
- Statement 5: Men tend to use more direct strategies in their communication compared to women.
- Statement 6: Women tend to plan things out more carefully than men.
- Statement 7: When men swear at their friends, they do not really mean it. When women compliment their friends, they do not really mean it either.

Based on the result, it can be seen that the students generally agreed with the 7 statements concerning gender stereotypes. Although the memes are not Indonesian memes, it would seem that how men and women are represented in the west is quite similar with their view of how men and women are in Indonesia. For instance, with regards to women being more careful planners than men, it would seem like it is similar in both Indonesian and western cultures.

Lastly, when comparing the result of this research with some previous ones, there are two important points worth highlighting. First of all, this study has revealed how memes can successfully portray gender representation, which is in line with the result of Mahfouz's (2021) research which underscores how the combination of images and texts in memes can indeed contribute to the depiction of men and women's stereotypes. This is also supported by the current study's findings which show how the students generally agreed that both text and image help them to understand the implicit meaning in the memes. Finally, in terms of understanding memes, similar to the findings from Bensaber's (2020) research, it was found that some memes were more difficult to comprehend compared to others. Just as the result of this study revealed, only the first meme was quite easily understood by the respondents, while for the other memes, the students still had difficulty properly interpreting the implicature behind the memes. Hence, it can be argued that the combination of text and image may to some extent influence people's ability to fully comprehend and interpret the hidden meaning or implicature in a meme.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the findings of the current study seem to suggest that it may not always be easy to interpret implied meanings, especially when they are presented in memes. Readers must be able to not only understand the hidden message behind the texts, but behind the images as well since memes are multimodal constructions and normally consist of a combination of texts and images. The interaction between the texts and images may not always successfully help readers to deduce the implicature in a meme as they may end up misleading them into infering the implicit and obvious meaning which is reflected in the texts and images. Even though the students felt like the interaction between the texts and images were able to help them deduce the implied meaning of the memes, the results revealed otherwise since a lot of them were unsuccessful in properly understanding the hidden meanings. Lastly, it should also be noted that in terms of gender representation, even though the memes used in this study are western memes, it would seem like the Indonesian students more or less agreed with the stereotypes of each gender presented in the memes. This shows that between western people and Indonesian people, they more or less view men and women similarly. For instance, both consider women to be better at planning things compared to men.

Considering that a lot of the students were still unable to properly comprehend the implied meaning of the memes, it is highly suggested that the lecturers give more emphasis on the teaching of implicatures, especially in relation to memes. In line with the results of previous studies which have underscored the importance of developing learners' pragmatic competence (Lestari, 2017; Nuridin, 2018; Suwarno, 2018; Nurdiana, 2019; Ariani, Basthomi, and Prayogo, 2021; Lewenussa and Narahawarin, 2021; Prasatyo, Ali, and Hidayati, 2023), it would be beneficial for the learners to be given more exposure to memes and how to interpret their implicature, including implicature related to gender representation. Studies have shown how using various online materials can help improve learners' language learning. For

example, a study by Rerung (2021) has shown how social media like Facebook and Instagram have a positive impact on language learning. Therefore, the writers feel that utilizing internet memes would also be helpful for students, as they are not only humorous and entertaining, but they can also be used to learn more about implicatures.

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