

Maxim Flouting Awareness and Communication Competence Among College Students

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conversational inference, maxim flouting, pragmatic instruction, indirect language use, EFL higher education, communication competence

Abstract. Pragmatic understanding is essential in higher education because students are expected to interpret not only explicit statements but also implied meanings in academic and social interaction. This study determined the level of maxim flouting awareness and communication competence of college students in selected state universities and colleges in Iloilo during Academic Year 2025–2026. It also examined whether communication competence differed according to students' level of maxim flouting awareness and whether the two variables were significantly related. The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were obtained from 340 third-year college students selected through stratified random sampling. Researcher-developed instruments were used to measure maxim flouting awareness and communication competence. The data were analyzed using mean, standard deviation, analysis of variance, and Pearson product-moment correlation at the 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed that students had moderate maxim flouting awareness ($M = 9.39$, $SD = 3.36$) and high communication competence ($M = 12.34$, $SD = 3.30$). Communication competence differed significantly across levels of maxim flouting awareness, $F(4, 335) = 19.233$, $p < .001$. A significant positive relationship was also found between maxim flouting awareness and communication competence. The results suggest that students who are more aware of flouted conversational maxims tend to demonstrate stronger communicative ability. The study highlights the value of explicit pragmatics instruction in helping students interpret indirect meanings, recognize speaker intention, and respond appropriately in varied communicative contexts.

Introduction

In Philippine institutions of higher learning, especially in the state universities and colleges, English is extensively applied in class instruction, discussion, research projects, collaborative work, and other academic engagements. However, the present findings suggest that some students may communicate adequately while still having difficulty identifying how indirect meanings are produced through maxim flouting.

Learners have enough vocabulary and grammar, but they have difficulty when communication is based on implied rather than explicit meanings. Learners often face challenges in inferring speakers' intended meanings in contexts involving contextual and indirect cues, which can lead to pragmatic failure and communication breakdowns (Thomas, 1983; Taguchi & Roever, 2017; Taguchi, 2019).

This problem belongs to the field of pragmatics. Pragmatics concerns how meaning is shaped by context, speaker intention, and shared assumptions, particularly when utterances communicate more than their literal form states (Grice, 1975; Slotta, 2020). Maxim flouting awareness refers to the ability to recognize when a speaker intentionally breaks conversational expectations, such as giving too little information, saying something ironic, being unclear, or answering indirectly.

The said skill is important because communication competence is not only about grammatical accuracy. It also includes the ability to use language appropriately, maintain interaction, adjust to the audience, and respond to meanings shaped by

social context. The study was anchored on Grice's theory of conversational implicature and the communicative competence framework of Canale and Swain. Together, these perspectives show that students need both linguistic knowledge and pragmatic judgment to communicate effectively.

According to Grice's Theory of Conversational Implicature and Cooperative Principle from 1975, the success of communication is explained by four maxims of conversation – quantity, quality, relation, and manner. When participants of dialogue obey these maxims, the hearers can infer not only the literal meaning of what they heard but also additional implications that are not directly stated. On purpose, speakers breach these maxims to give listeners hints regarding the indirect meaning of their statements. Meaning that students will better understand what speakers mean if they are good at noticing implicature and enjoying maxim flouting. Interlanguage pragmatics study shows that the second language learners who are very good at pragmatics understand indirect speech acts better (Taguchi, 2019; Ciftlikli et al., 2022). Wilson and Katsos (2022) noted that language comprehension requires more than decoding words and sentences, listeners must extract the speaker's intended message by integrating contextual clues and common assumptions throughout communication. Therefore, empirical evidence is in favor of the assumption that an understanding of implicature and awareness of flouting maxims are part of pragmatic competence and have a positive impact on the learners' communicative competence.

Existing studies in pragmatics often analyze maxim flouting and implicature in films, literary texts, or selected conversations. Fewer studies examine how college students themselves understand these pragmatic features and how these abilities relate to their communication competence. This study addressed that gap by examining the levels and relationships of maxim flouting awareness and communication competence among college students in state universities and colleges in the Province of Iloilo.

The study answered three central questions: What are the students' levels of maxim flouting awareness and communication competence? Is there a significant difference in communication competence across levels of maxim-flouting awareness among college students? Is there a significant relationship between students' maxim flouting awareness and communication competence? The following sections present the methodology, results, and discussion, and the implications of the findings for English language teaching.

Methodology

Research Design

The study used a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. The quantitative phase came first and used a descriptive-correlational approach to determine the levels of the two variables and their relationships.

Participants

The study involved 340 third-year students enrolled in selected state universities and colleges in Iloilo. They came from West Visayas State University, Northern Iloilo State University, Iloilo Science and Technology University, and Iloilo State University of Fisheries Science and Technology. Participants were drawn from education, hospitality management, and information and communications technology programs to represent the target population proportionately. The sample was selected through stratified random sampling from a population of 2,568 participants. G*Power indicated a minimum sample of 319, but the sample was increased to 340 to ensure proportional representation.

Instruments

Researcher-developed instruments were used. The Maxim Flouting Awareness Test contained 20 multiple-choice items asking participants to identify which conversational maxim was flouted in short English dialogues. The Communication Competence Test contained 20 scenario-based multiple-choice items measuring grammatical, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence. Each correct answer received one point. All instruments underwent expert validation, pilot testing, item analysis, revision, and re-evaluation before actual administration.

Procedure and Data Analysis

The researcher secured permission from the participating universities and campuses before data collection. Participants received informed consent forms explaining the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. The quantitative instruments were administered face-to-face.

For quantitative data, frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to describe the levels of the variables. Analysis of variance tested differences in communication competence when participants were grouped by levels of maxim flouting awareness. Pearson product-moment correlation tested the relationships between the two variables. All inferential tests used a 0.05 level of significance.

Results and Discussion

Levels of the Variables

Table 1 presents the descriptive results for maxim flouting awareness and communication competence. The students obtained a moderate level of maxim flouting awareness ($M = 9.39$, $SD = 3.36$) and a high level of communication competence ($M = 12.34$, $SD = 3.30$). These findings indicate that the respondents were generally capable of communicating in academic and social situations, but their ability to identify how conversational maxims are intentionally flouted was not yet fully developed.

The moderate score in maxim flouting awareness suggests that students may recognize that a statement is indirect, ironic, vague, or intentionally incomplete, but they may still find it difficult to determine which specific maxim is being flouted. In contrast, the high level of communication competence implies that students can generally express ideas, respond to others, and adjust their language according to context. This difference shows that communicative ability does not automatically mean strong metapragmatic awareness. Students may communicate effectively in many situations, yet still need explicit support in analyzing the pragmatic rules behind indirect language use.

Grice's (1975) theory of conversational implicature fits with this idea. This theory explains how speakers can break conversational rules to suggest certain meanings indirectly. So, when this happens, students should be ready to both take what is being said at face value and figure it out by drawing conclusions. To identify the maxim flouting, one should be capable of taking into account the context and intentions of the speaker (Slotta, 2020). According to Taguchi and Roever (2017), pragmatic competence is complicated for many second language speakers because it presupposes context-related understanding besides the ability to use language correctly. The intermediate level of the participants' sensitivity means that the respondents know how to interpret the indirect communication, but they might have some problems with the pragmatic understanding of the maxims flouting.

Furthermore, according to Canale and Swain (1980), effective communication involves a combination of three communication competencies – grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic. Bachman (1990) suggested that the researcher add organizational and pragmatic competence to these competencies. In addition to this, the high level revealed by the test is consistent with the definition of communication competence presented by Tibaldo (2022).

Variable	Mean	SD	Description
Maxim flouting awareness	9.39	3.36	Moderate
Communication competence	12.34	3.30	High

Table 1. Descriptive Levels of Maxim Flouting Awareness and Communication Competence

Difference in Communication Competence and Maxim Flouting Awareness

Communication competence differed significantly across levels of maxim flouting awareness. Students with stronger As shown in Table 2, communication competence differed significantly when students were grouped according to their level of maxim flouting awareness, $F(4, 335) = 19.233$, $p < .001$. This result indicates that students with higher awareness of flouted conversational maxims also tended to demonstrate stronger communication competence.

This finding suggests that awareness of maxim flouting contributes to how students interpret messages and respond appropriately in interaction. When students can recognize that a speaker is being indirect, ironic, insufficiently informative, irrelevant, or intentionally unclear, they are more likely to understand the intended meaning and choose a suitable response. In this sense, maxim flouting awareness supports communication competence because it helps students move beyond literal interpretation and consider meaning in relation to context, speaker intention, and communicative purpose. The findings are consistent with the tenets of pragmatic competence. Grice (1975) proposed that conversational maxims are regularly violated to transmit meaning, and Slotta (2020) found that the identification of such violations is important for comprehending speakers' intents. The disparities revealed are supported by Tribushinina (2012) since a lack of pragmatic awareness might result in a breakdown in communication. The result is also consistent with Ariyanti et al. (2020), who emphasized that maxim flouting in interaction requires communicative competence because speakers and

listeners need to interpret meanings that are not explicitly stated. Thus, students' ability to recognize maxim flouting may strengthen their capacity to manage indirect meanings in English communication.

Grouping Variable	SS Between	df	MS Between	F	p	Decision
Maxim flouting awareness	687.610	4	171.902	19.233	< .001	Significant

Table 2. Differences in Communication Competence among the Levels of Maxim Flouting Awareness

Relationship Between Maxim Flouting Awareness and Communication Competence

Table 3 shows a significant positive relationship between maxim flouting awareness and communication competence, $r = .441$, $p < .001$. This means that students who had better awareness of maxim flouting also tended to have higher communication competence. The relationship was moderate, indicating that maxim flouting awareness is an important but not the only factor associated with communication competence.

The moderate correlation suggests that communication competence is shaped by several related abilities, including pragmatic awareness, language proficiency, confidence, topic familiarity, and exposure to communicative situations. However, the significant result confirms that awareness of flouted maxims has a meaningful role in students' communicative performance. In classroom and real-life interactions, students who can identify implied meanings are better positioned to interpret messages accurately and respond in ways that fit the situation.

This finding is consistent with the study of Kentmen et al. (2023), who associated pragmatic competence with the learners' understanding of speech acts and conversational implicatures. Also relevant are Erdogan and Kitson (2025) who emphasize the significance of pragmatic competence in language learning. In the same vein, Kamel (2024) underscored that recognizing when a maxim is flouted is important to enable learners in multilingual classroom settings to infer the intended meaning of speakers beyond the literal meaning and avoid misunderstanding which can contribute to more effective communication. Kamel also pointed out that successful interaction often depends on learners' ability to interpret indirect, exaggerated or apparently irrelevant utterances as meaningful communicative strategies rather than conversational mistakes

Variables	r	p	Interpretation
Maxim flouting awareness and communication competence	.441	< .001	Significant positive relationship

Table 3. Relationship Between Maxim Flouting Awareness and Communication Competence

The findings show that while the respondents demonstrated high communication competence, their moderate level of maxim flouting awareness points to a specific area for instructional improvement. Explicit discussion of conversational maxims, implicatures, indirect responses, sarcasm, understatement, and contextual meaning may help students understand not only what is said, but also what is meant in communication.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study found that the respondents had high communication competence but only moderate awareness of maxim flouting. This result suggests that many college students can participate effectively in academic and social communication, yet they may still have difficulty explaining how indirect meanings are produced in conversation. They may sense irony, indirectness, understatement, or purposeful ambiguity, but they may not always recognize the conversational maxim being intentionally flouted.

The significant difference and positive relationship found in the study indicate that maxim flouting awareness is connected to students' communicative performance. Students who are more aware of flouted maxims are more likely to understand implied meanings, interpret speaker's intention, and respond appropriately to different communicative situations. This finding affirms that communication competence involves more than grammar, vocabulary, and sentence construction. It also requires sensitivity to context, tone, speaker relationship, intention, and the social meaning of utterances.

For English and communication instructors, the findings point to the need for explicit pragmatics instruction. Lessons should give students opportunities to examine how meaning changes when speakers become indirect, ironic, vague, overly brief, or intentionally irrelevant. Classroom activities may include dialogue analysis, interpretation of implied meanings,

comparison of literal and intended meanings, role-play, and guided reflection on authentic communicative situations. These activities may help students connect pragmatic concepts with actual language use.

For curriculum planners and administrators, the findings support the integration of pragmatic competence into communication courses and language enhancement programs. Since maxim flouting awareness was only moderate, communication instruction should not be limited to correctness and fluency. It should also develop students' ability to understand meanings that are implied rather than directly stated.

Future researchers may test the effectiveness of pragmatics-based instruction through experimental, quasi-experimental, or longitudinal designs. Such studies may provide stronger evidence on whether explicit instruction improves students' awareness of maxim flouting and strengthens their overall communication competence. Future investigations may also include students from other regions, year levels, and academic programs, as well as related variables such as confidence, intercultural competence, English proficiency, classroom exposure, and pragmatic performance in oral or online communication.

The study was limited to selected third-year college students from state universities and colleges in Iloilo and focused only on maxim flouting awareness and communication competence. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted within this scope. Further studies may broaden the context and examine how students apply pragmatic awareness in actual classroom discussions, professional interactions, digital communication, and other real-life communicative settings.

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Competing Interests Statement

The author declares no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study may be made available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to institutional and ethical restrictions on confidentiality and participant privacy.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.