Derivation of ironical implicatures by English foreign language learners: do language proficiency and culture play a role?

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"Aunque el camino es áspero y son duros los tiempos,
cantamos con el alma. Y no hay un hombre solo
que comprenda la viva razón del canto nuestro".

"Destino Alegre", José Hierro.

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ABSTRACT

Literature on cross-cultural communication has demonstrated that communication breakdowns are more likely to occur among speakers from different cultural backgrounds (Togame, 2016). This led other scholars, such as Bouton (1988), to test the communicative habits of non-native speakers of English and to contrast them with those of English native speakers. The results of these studies have proved that the derivation of implicatures by English non-native speakers differs if compared with that of English native speakers and that ironical implicatures are among the most difficult ones to grasp for English non-native speakers. Both language proficiency and culture have been regarded as possible variables influencing the derivation of implicatures (Bouton, 1988). In view of this literature and applying Hall's (1976) proposal on the notion of culture, the present study aims at analysing which the variables influencing the derivation of ironical implicatures by English foreign language learners are. For current purposes, the present study analyses first whether the sample participating derives pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures or not; secondly, if culture as a bidirectional factor has an impact on the participants' interpretations; and finally, if the language proficiency level of the participants can also influence their interpretations. In order to do so, a sample of 12 English foreign language learners (all of them belonging to a high context culture) filled a questionnaire which was used to gather data. The questionnaire contained 15 questions: 10 multiple-choice questions and 5 open questions, each of them giving rise to an ironical implicature. The findings suggest that the sample examined shows a high tendency to derive pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures, especially if questions are presented as multiple choice questions. Also, the data obtained reveal that while the impact of the participants' high context cultural background on their interpretations is not that clear, it may have had an impact on their interpretations of some questions, as common patterns of interpretation to some questions have been found. Additionally, the results prove that participants' lack of familiarity with some items of the target language culture may directly influence the participants' interpretations. Regarding the role of the language proficiency variable, data confirm that questions which are grammatically more complex pose a difficulty when it comes to interpreting them and that it has been more challenging to derive a pragmatically felicitous ironical interpretation for those participants whose language proficiency was slightly under the mean of the sample. These findings lead to the conclusion that both culture and language proficiency seem to play a role in the derivation of ironical implicatures by English foreign language learners.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EFL	English as a foreign language
ENNS	English non-native speakers
ENS	English native speakers
FL	foreign language
FLL	foreign language learners
HC	High Context
LC	Low Context
L2	second language
Q	question
RQ	research question
RT	Relevance Theory
SLA	second language acquisition
TL	target language

1. Introduction

We live in a global world where English is spoken by about a quarter of the world's population (British Council, 2013). Such is its importance that children from countries where English is not an official language are taught it from an early age. As a way of example, English is learnt by 96.1% of European students in upper secondary general education (Eurostat, 2020). In the process of acquiring a second language (L2) as a foreign language (FL), linguistic skills (listening, speaking, writing and reading) are given primary importance (Kim, 2002). However, sometimes students face some difficulties which transcend the knowledge of the language being studied, and that relate to extra-linguistic knowledge. This is precisely the object of study of the present work, which is especially dealt with in sections 1.1 and 1.2, where an in-depth description of the development of the concept "communicative competence" is presented. While section 1.1 deals with the origins of communicative competence as a concept and its evolution, section 1.2 is devoted to the analysis of pragmatic competence and sociolinguistic competence, which are also part of communicative competence. Given that the meanings speakers' words convey usually go beyond the explicit meaning of the employed words themselves, section 2 will introduce the two main theories that have been developed in order to explain how hearers manage to bridge the gap between what is said and what is meant. Thus, section 2.1 exposes Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) and section 2.2 deals with Relevance theorists' proposal (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]). As this paper specifically focuses on irony, the application of the above-mentioned theories to the case of irony is described in sections 2.1.1 and 2.2.1, respectively. After the presentation of these two theories, section 2.3 addresses how these theories apply to actual communication. This section will show how sometimes breakdowns appear when communication is taking place; something which is more likely to happen when communication occurs between people belonging to different cultures. Taking this latter point into account, section 3 mainly deals with Bouton's (1988) study, where he demonstrated that English native speakers (ENS) and English non-native speakers (ENNS) derived meanings from implicatures differently and that ironical implicatures were among the most difficult ones to grasp for ENNS. In fact, Bouton pointed at the possibility of culture and language proficiency being the factors that made ENNS derive meanings differently than ENS, but he also concluded that further research needed to be done. So, in light of this evidence, in section 3.1, first a description of the notion of culture following Hall's (1976) proposal is presented and then, in section 4, the present study is

exposed. Taken that ironical implicatures were among the most difficult ones for ENNS in Bouton's study, the present study aims at filling the existing gap, that is, to explain what the variables influencing English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' derivation of ironical implicatures are. Hence, in section 4.1, the research questions (RQ) of this study are presented; in section 4.2, the method followed is explained; on its part, section 4.3 deals with information regarding the participants; section 4.4 addresses details related to the instrument employed; and section 4.5 reports on the results found. Section 5 discusses the results previously described, in relation to the literature exposed in sections 1-3. Finally, in section 6, the main conclusions of the present study and also its limitations, together with some proposals for further research are presented.

1.1 From Communicative Competence to Intercultural Competence

Many efforts are made so that learners of English acquire the language and achieve communicative competence, which is considered the main goal when teaching EFL learners (Folashade, 2020). The term "communicative competence" was first introduced by Hymes (1972, as cited in Warren, 2012), as an alternative to Chomsky's (1965) "linguistic competence", which referred "to the linguistic system (or grammar) that an ideal native speaker of a given language has internalized" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 3). Chomsky (1965) limited his definition of competence to the linguistic side; in contrast, this was not the case in Hymes' proposal (Canale & Swain, 1980), who introduced the concept of communicative competence, maintaining Chomsky's linguistic competence (Kamiya, 2006), but including also the idea of "appropriateness of sociocultural significance of an utterance" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 4); this is, Hymes incorporated the sociocultural side. In Hymes' view, when acquiring a language, children acquire not only knowledge on the grammar of the specific language but also knowledge on "when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner" (Hymes, 1972, p. 277). His theory focused mainly on monolinguals' communication (Coperías, 2002) but, throughout the coming decades, different linguists developed further on the notion of communicative competence. Among them, Canale and Swain (1980) suggested another theory on communicative competence in which they considered L2 learners. Their proposal consisted in subdividing communicative competence into three different competences: GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE, which referred to the understanding not only of the linguistic rules of a language but also of its lexicon. SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE, formed by sociocultural and discourse norms;

the former being related to both the appropriateness of some propositions in a specific situation and to the degree to which a certain grammatical form expresses appropriate attitude and register, and the latter to the notions of cohesion and coherence.[1] And finally, STRATEGIC COMPETENCE, which is constituted by verbal and non-verbal cues and tactics on which the speaker draws when communication fails (Canale & Swain, 1980). As well as Canale and Swain, van Ek (1986) also developed further Hymes' communicative competence (Coperías, 2002). In van Ek's idea of communicative competence, the notion consisted of six different competences: LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE, which has to do with knowledge of linguistic rules on how to manipulate them in the production and interpretation of utterances. SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE, which links language and context. DISCOURSE competence, which refers to speakers' capacity to produce and interpret utterances. STRATEGIC COMPETENCE, which alludes to the tactics speakers use in order to make communication successful when it has previously failed. SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE, which acknowledges the fact that foreign language learners (FLL) will likely be familiar with a different culture from that of the language they are learning, but at the same time supposes that learners are acquainted to some extent with the culture of the language they are learning. And finally, SOCIAL COMPETENCE refers to aspects such as motivation, attitude or self-confidence that shape a speaker's intention and ability to engage in communication (Coperías, 2002).

Canale and Swain and van Ek's approaches share similarities such as the subdivision they make of the communicative competence notion into different competences which revolve around the linguistic side, the sociolinguistic one and also the strategic competence. However, van Ek's account differentiates from Canale and Swain's in that he includes the social competence (Coperías, 2002). Even if this last approach by van Ek (1986) has been accepted by scholars (Warren, 2012), it has also received a main criticism which has to do with placing the native speaker as the referent figure when it comes to the development of nearly all the competences (Warren, 2012; Coperías, 2002). In this sense, Cook (1999) claims that the emphasis placed on native speakers when teaching a language constitutes an unachievable precedent that hinders second language acquisition (SLA). For this reason, he suggests that "L2 users be viewed as multicompetent language users rather than as deficient native speakers" (Cook, 1999, p. 185). Before Cook (1999), Byram and Zarate (1994) had already proposed to change the figure of the native speaker

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[1] This last type of rule of discourse was not included in Canale and Swain (1980) but rather added by Canale (1983, as cited in Kamiya, 2006).

by that of the "intercultural speaker" (Coperías, 2002), a speaker who, when learning a FL, does not set aside the sociocultural background of his native language, but rather a learner that considers it (Coperías, 2002). What is more, intercultural speakers would develop "intercultural competence", which is defined by Fantini (2006) as "(...) a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself" (p. 12). The fact that in this account the figure of the native speaker is substituted by that of the intercultural speaker does not mean that linguistic standards are less demanding (Coperías, 2007); indeed, linguistic competence is considered a major strand in intercultural competence (Taguchi, 2017). Despite this, as Taguchi notes, none of the proposals that have been made related to intercultural competence provides information on which the necessary linguistic standards that an intercultural speaker must acquire are (2017). An example of this lack of linguistic information is Byram's (1997) presentation of the skills a learner must develop in order to become an intercultural speaker: from the six *savoirs* he proposes, none of them deals with linguistic knowledge (Coperías, 2007).

The initial emphasis placed by Chomsky on the linguistic side has been developed towards a new, more inclusive concept which is that of communicative competence. A concept that does not only heed the linguistic side of communication but also the social and cultural ones. Aspects which are especially important regarding EFL learners (Fauzia, 2016), because lack of knowledge on elements such as culture, which is varying, can lead to communication breakdowns (Chin et al., 2009), as language is not equally used in each culture (Fauzia, 2016). Acknowledgement of social and cultural aspects as determining facets within communicative competence led to an increase in the analysis of these notions, as it will be seen in section 1.2.

1.2 Pragmatic Competence and Sociolinguistic Competence

Probably, one of the major shifts in the process towards the definition of the term communicative competence was that of Hymes' (1972), whose theory changed the focus on the study of language and put emphasis on the language in use rather than on the language system in isolation. As seen in section 1.1, after Hymes, others such as Canale and Swain (1980) or Canale (1983) continued to shape the notion of communicative competence using Hymes' proposal as a reference. In these models, pragmatic competence was incorporated, although not explicitly referred to with this term.

In fact, it was Bachman (1990) the first one who introduced the concept (Barron, 2003). For his model, Bachman employed the term "communicative language ability" instead of "communicative competence", since, according to him, it covered both the notions of knowledge and also use of that knowledge in a specific context (Bagarić, 2007). Communicative language ability consists of three different categories: LANGUAGE COMPETENCE, STRATEGIC COMPETENCE and PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS. At the same time, language competence can be divided into pragmatic competence on the one side and organisational competence on the other. In reference to pragmatic competence, Bachman further argues that it is formed by illocutionary competence, which was later named "functional language" by Bachman and Palmer (1996, p. 69), and sociolinguistic competence (Barron, 2003). The former alludes to the relation between the utterance and the speaker's communicative goal and the latter refers to the connection between language and context (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, as cited in Laughlin et al., 2015). Bachman expanded on this notion by analysing four abilities which belong to the sociolinguistic competence: sensitivity to differences in dialect or variety, sensitivity to differences in register, sensitivity to naturalness, and the ability to interpret cultural references and figures of speech (Bachman, 1990). As it can be concluded from Bachman's proposal, for him, sociolinguistic competence is a subcomponent of pragmatic competence, which at the same time is a subcomponent of language competence and communicative competence, i.e. communicative language ability in Bachman's model.

Just as Bachman did, Celce-Murcia et al. (1995) developed another communicative competence model in which they also included the notion of pragmatic competence. In line with Bachman's division of this competence into functional and sociolinguistic competence, Celce-Murcia et al. also separated this competence in what they called ACTIONAL COMPETENCE, which can be equated to Bachman's functional competence, and SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE, which can be associated with Bachman's sociolinguistic competence. For Celce-Murcia et al. (1995), "[a]ctional competence is defined as competence in conveying and understanding communicative intent, that is, matching actional intent with linguistic form" (p. 17), and sociocultural competence alludes to the competence speakers have to produce messages which are appropriate in a given social and cultural context. This last competence was further examined by Celce-Murcia et al. (1995), who divided it into four components: social contextual factors, stylistic appropriateness factors, cultural factors, and non-verbal communicative factors. On the

one hand, social contextual factors have to do with both the speakers' characteristics, such as their age or gender and with the situational variables, which include particularities of social situation, time, etc. As for stylistic appropriateness factors, they concern aspects like politeness strategies or degrees of formality. In the case of the third component, cultural factors cover the social and cultural knowledge one might have of the target language (TL) community as well as the cross-cultural variation that may exist between one's background and that of the TL community. Finally, Celce-Murcia et al. included non-verbal communication, which, according to them, is fundamental, especially for L2 speakers. In fact, speakers usually communicate nonverbally without noticing and this can constitute an even greater difficulty for L2 speakers (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995).

Just as with communicative competence, the notion of pragmatic competence and, consequently, that of sociocultural competence has received a growing interest in the last decades, mainly due to the fact that it has been acknowledged to serve a main function in the process of language acquisition (Falkum, 2019). Among the components which both Bachman and Celce-Murcia et al. argue to be subcomponents of pragmatic competence, the one concerning cultural knowledge is particularly noteworthy for EFL learners, since the meaning speakers seek to convey usually goes beyond the literal meaning of the employed words (Pexman et al., 2019) and these intended meanings by speakers are "given by specific cultures" (Bachman, 1990, p. 97) with which FLL usually lack familiarity. Thus, culture becomes an important aspect since it can hinder a correct interpretation of the speakers' intended meaning (Bachman, 1990). As correct understanding of speakers' intended meaning is not always achieved, scholars have attempted to explain how hearers manage to bridge the gap between what is said and what is meant by speakers (see section 2).

2. Theoretical Framework

Within pragmatics, the gap between the grammatical encoded meaning and the meaning speakers actually intend to convey has been broadly acknowledged to exist (Ariel, 2010). As a consequence, and with the purpose of filling this gap, some accounts have been developed aiming to explain how hearers manage to interpret utterances and get at the speaker's intended meaning. Among the proposals, we find Grice's (1975) approach and also that of Relevance Theory (RT) (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]).

2.1 Grice's Cooperative Principle

Grice's (1975) approach became revolutionary in the field of human communication, since it abandoned the idea of understanding communication as a coding-decoding process (Wharton, 2003).

According to Grice, people engaged in conversation do not make meaningless, irrational contributions, but rather cooperate (1975). This idea is framed within the Cooperative Principle, a principle that speakers are supposed to follow when conversing. This principle is formulated as follows: "Make your contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Grice expands on this principle and divides it into four categories, each of them constituting a maxim and some of them counting also with submaxims. The maxims and submaxims are the following:

(1) The Cooperative Principle

    a. Maxim of Quantity: "Give the right amount of information"

        1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

        2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

    b. Maxim of Quality: "Try to make your contribution one that is true"

        1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

        2. Do not say that for what you lack adequate evidence.

    c. Maxim of Relation: "Be relevant"

    d. Maxim of Manner: "Be perspicuous"

        1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

        2. Avoid ambiguity.

        3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

        4. Be orderly.

(Grice, 1975, pp. 45-46)

For Grice, this principle can bridge the gap between explicit and implicit meaning, because from these maxims and speakers' behaviour towards them, implicit meanings are

generated in conversation. Speakers engaged in conversation may follow or may not follow these maxims. Whether they do or not, conversational implicatures are generated (Ariel, 2010). Huang (2016) defines conversational implicatures as "any meaning or proposition expressed implicitly by a speaker in his or her utterance of a sentence which is meant without being part of what is said in the strict sense" (p. 156). Grice (1975) suggests three different groups that give an account of how conversational implicatures are generated. In Group A, we have examples where the speaker seems to be following the Cooperative Principle: for instance, there are two people (A and B) and A is next to his car and B arrives and they maintain the conversation in (2):

(2) a. "I am out of petrol". (p. 51)

   b. "There is a garage round the corner". (p. 51)

A, according to Grice's proposal, would assume that even if B does not answer to his remark explicitly, B is cooperating at the level of what is implicated and obeying the maxims implicitly, so that B's contribution would be regarded as informative, relevant and truthful. In Group B, we have what Grice names a clash between maxims. These are cases where speakers have to violate one maxim (e.g. the first submaxim of Quantity "Make your contribution as informative as is required", p. 49) in order to obey another (e.g. the second submaxim of Quality "Do not say that for what you lack adequate evidence", p. 49). And finally, in Group C, we have conversational implicatures that are generated by floutings of maxims, which are cases where speakers deliberately disobey a maxim. In examples belonging to this third group, even if a maxim is flouted at the level of what is said, hearers must consider that speakers are obeying the corresponding maxim or the whole Cooperative Principle at the level of what is implicated (see section 2.1.1). With this proposal, Grice is offering an answer to how speakers and hearers behave in conversation and to how implicit meanings are generated, which can also be applied to the case of irony.

2.1.1 Grice's account on irony

On Grice's account, irony is a figure of speech and as such, it falls under Group C of Grice's proposal. This is, its use by speakers constitutes a flouting, in this case of the first submaxim of the Maxim of Quality, i.e. "Do not say what you believe to be false'' (Grice, 1975, p. 46). From this perspective, when speakers flout this maxim, the resulting

implicature is the opposite of what is said (Garmendia & Korta, 2007). As a way of example, Grice exposes a situation in which there are two friends (X and A) and X has revealed a secret of A. Then A, in front of people who are aware of the fact that X has betrayed A, says (3a). Strictly speaking, at the level of what is said, A would not be cooperating, as saying something which you do not believe to be true involves a violation of the first submaxim of Quality. However, Grice understands this example as a decision that A has taken on purpose in order to violate the first submaxim of Quality but cooperate at the level of what is implicated by expressing implicitly a different proposition, which would constitute a conversational implicature; in this case, as it is an ironical utterance what we have, the conversational implicature would be the opposite of what A has said (Grice, 1975), hence (3b).

(3) a. "X is a fine friend". (Grice, 1975, p. 53)

b. "X is not a fine friend".

But this account on irony has not been the only one suggested; on its part, RT proposed a different approach on how hearers bridge the gap between explicit and implicit meaning, a proposal that can also be applied to the case of irony.

2.2 Relevance Theory (RT)

If Grice's account on utterances' interpretation contained the Cooperative Principle and its maxims and submaxims, RT proposes a more reduced account which contains two main principles: the Cognitive Principle of Relevance ("[h]uman cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance") (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986], as cited in Wilson, 2016, p. 83) and the Communicative Principle of Relevance ("[e]very utterance communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance") (Wilson, 2016, p. 85). According to the Cognitive Principle of Relevance, the human cognitive system tends to pay attention to those stimuli which are relevant and then processes them in a way that maximises their relevance (Wilson, 2016). Stimuli are relevant when they interact with contextual assumptions and give rise to new contextual implications (Ariel, 2010). RT explains three different ways in which stimuli can interact with the available context and yield cognitive effects: by strengthening some of the already existing contextual assumptions; by contradicting and eliminating one of those contextual assumptions; or finally, by combining the new input with the context (Wilson & Sperber,

1994). But relevance is not only a matter of cognitive effects, it is also a matter of processing effort. In this sense, the smaller the processing effort, the greater the relevance will be. So, relevance will depend on both the cognitive effects and the processing effort and "the ideal situation would be to produce maximal cognitive effects for a minimal processing effort" (Ariel, 2010, p. 139). RT account on how people interpret utterances is also explained by the Communicative Principle of Relevance, which states that every utterance sets a presumption of its own optimal relevance, meaning that when speakers utter an utterance to hearers, they are calling hearers' attention and this creates an expectation of relevance on the hearers' side. Utterances will be considered optimally relevant if they meet the conditions in (4):

(4) a. It is at least relevant enough to be worth the addressee's processing effort.

   b. It is the most relevant one compatible with the speaker's abilities and preferences.

<div align="right">(Wilson, 2016, p. 85)</div>

Taking the conditions in (4) into account, the Relevance-Guided Comprehension Heuristic (Wilson & Sperber, 2002), which explains how hearers can get at speakers' intended meaning, should be mentioned. According to it, hearers must (see (5)):

(5) a. Follow a path of least effort in constructing an interpretation of the utterance (and in particular in resolving ambiguities and referential indeterminacies, adjusting lexical meaning, supplying contextual assumptions, deriving implicatures, etc.).

   b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

<div align="right">(Wilson, 2016, p. 86)</div>

Hearers' objective is to find that interpretation which satisfies the presumption of optimal relevance, so according to this principle and as (5b) states, once the interpretation that satisfies their expectation of relevance has been found, hearers will stop processing (Wilson, 2016). Just as Grice did, RT also applied their account to irony, as it will be seen in section 2.1.1.

2.2.1 RT's account on irony

For Relevance theorists such as Wilson and Sperber, Grice's proposal on irony shows some problems which their theory tries to put an end to. Among these problems, the most

noteworthy is probably the lack of an explanation that gives an account on why irony is used. In this sense, RT argues that if for Grice, speakers who produce ironical utterances are trying to communicate the opposite meaning to what they are saying, then there should be a reason that explains why those speakers use the ironical utterance rather than their literal counterpart, since if irony involves indirectness, this implies that the utterance will have a greater processing cost that is not compensated by any extra cognitive effect (Wilson and Sperber, 2012). So, with the purpose of extending the analysis of irony and of providing answers to issues like the above mentioned one, Relevance theorists developed an account that suggests that irony is a case of echoic attributive use of language that expresses a certain attitude towards the attributed thought (Wilson & Sperber, 2012), which is that of dissociation with the content of the utterance (Wilson & Sperber, 1981). The example in (6) by Wilson and Sperber (1981, p. 302) clarifies the previous idea:

(6) I'm glad we didn't bother to bring an umbrella.

The sentence in (6) uttered in a context where, for example, the forecaster has announced that that day will not rain and so that there is no need to take out umbrellas and where, after some hours it starts to rain heavily, would be ironic according to RT. First of all, because the speaker clearly does not think what he is saying; in contrast, the speaker is showing an attitude of dissociation with the content of the utterance he has just produced. In addition to this, the speaker is here echoing a thought which is attributed to the weather forecaster, who had previously announced that there was no need to take the umbrellas out because it would not rain.

This view of irony provides an answer to why speakers use irony: they do so because by producing an ironical utterance, they are expressing an attitude of dissociation towards the content of the utterance (not being glad in the case of (6)) (Wilson & Sperber, 1981) and this compensates the processing effort. Additionally, this account of irony also explains how hearers manage to derive speakers' intended meaning: first of all, hearers must realise that speakers are echoing a thought and, secondly, that their attitude towards it is that of dissociation. Once they have acknowledged this, hearers will automatically understand speakers' intended meaning (Wilson & Sperber, 1981).

The accounts that Grice and RT offer describe the processes and steps hearers go through in order to get at speakers' intended meanings. However, when real

communication comes into play, sometimes communicative breakdowns occur. Thus, it is necessary to explain the way these theories apply to actual communication.

2.3 Grice's theory and RT applied to communication

The theoretical framework described in sections 2.1 and 2.2 presents us with two different approaches that analyse how hearers manage to interpret implicit meanings. In analysing the accuracy of these theories, Clark (2013, as cited in Togame, 2016) mentions than an appropriate account should provide an explanation on why misunderstandings that are related to the way in which hearers and listeners construct a context may arise when communication is taking place. In this respect, RT suggests that sometimes communication is not successful since choosing the right contextual assumptions is quite complex for hearers (Togame, 2016). Notwithstanding, this is not the only difficulty regarding contextual assumptions, since as Togame (2016) states, a contextual assumption stems not only from previous texts or discourse "but it can also be drawn from a subset of the hearer's beliefs and assumptions about the world including […] general cultural assumptions, religious beliefs" (p. 125). Unlike RT, Grice did not expand on the idea that people involved in conversation may create "different hypotheses which can lead to misunderstandings" (Togame, 2016, p. 124).

As communication breakdowns can sometimes be explained as a consequence of extralinguistic factors such as culture, the study of cross-cultural communication becomes particularly interesting.

3. Cross-cultural communication

The fact that some theories such as RT indicated that the sharing of contextual assumptions between hearers and speakers was necessary for successful communication, together with the idea that disparities between the assumptions held by speakers and those held by hearers tend to appear more often in intercultural communication (Togame, 2016), fostered the carrying out of experiments such as that of Keenan (1976). In this study, where Keenan examined the communicative habits of Malagasies, the results found came to challenge the universality of Grice's maxims and proved that cultural aspects influence each person's inferencing process (Kavetska, 2020).

Conclusions such as this one led others to test EFL learners' ability to interpret conversational implicatures. One of these experiments was that of Bouton (1988), in which he tested ENNS' and ENS' ability to interpret implicatures based on Grice's

maxims. The objective was to analyse if someone's cultural background had an impact on the derivation of meanings from implicatures and to test if those meanings that were extracted from implicatures varied between ENNS and ENS. Importantly, as language proficiency could be another variable interfering in the interpretation of implicatures, given that some participants where ENNS, their language proficiency level was B2. The implicatures Bouton included in his implicature test ranged from a wide variety of types, where irony was included. Indeed, irony proved to be one of the most challenging types of implicatures to process. As irony is to a great extent culture-specific, Bouton interpreted these results as a consequence of the cultural background of participants and, thus, regarded culture as an element which had an impact on ENNS' interpretations, considering that ENNS' interpretations were different from those of ENS. Despite these results, Bouton concluded that further research needed to be carried out in order to manifestly prove that cultural background, instead of language proficiency, was the responsible variable in causing ENNS derive different meanings to those of ENS (Kavetska, 2020).

However, the reasons why irony is amongst the most difficult types of implicatures to derive for EFL learners have not been thoroughly analysed yet. Scholars such as Bouton (1988) pointed at the possible influence of culture as well as of language proficiency, field which deserves further study.

3.1 Hall's (1976) proposal

Language proficiency is measured considering four domains (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and, generally speaking, there is quorum on what the notion means. However, culture as a concept has been broadly defined in literature (Hall, 1959; Hall, 1976; Hofstede et al., 2010 [1991]; Minkov et al., 2013). For present purposes, culture will be considered following Hall's (1976) proposal.

Hall (1959, as cited in Nishimura et al., 2008) defined culture as "the way of life of people: the sum of their learned behavioural patterns, attitudes and material things. Culture is often subconscious; an invisible control mechanism operating in our thoughts" (p. 784). Apart from defining it, Hall (1976) developed further on the notion of culture and made a distinction between High Context (HC) and Low Context (LC) cultures. According to him, whether a country belongs to a HC culture or to a LC one will have an impact on the way its population communicates. Taking this idea as a base, Hall (1976) defines HC communication as the "one in which most of the information is either in the

physical context or internalised in the person, while very little in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message" (p. 91) and LC communication as "the opposite [to HC communication]; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (p. 91). Notwithstanding, Hall acknowledged that this distinction does not imply that a country's culture falls under the categorisation of either HC culture or LC culture. In fact, he argued that there is not a culture that belongs to one end of the scale, but that this way of categorising the cultures of particular countries is useful to understand people's behaviours underlying communication (Hall & Hall, 1990).

According to Hall's (1976) analysis of cultures, HC cultures are societies where close-knit groups predominate, this is, people maintain close relationships and the bonds they share are strong. In contrast, in LC cultures, the ties between people are weaker. Even if relationships are closer in HC cultures, in LC cultures formulating questions about personal issues directly is not considered impolite, fact which does not happen in HC cultures, where this usually seems disrespectful (Tella, 2005, as cited in Nishimura et al., 2008). This aspect responds to the fact that in HC cultures, society is clearly structured, and people are aware of that existing social hierarchy and also of the established codes of behaviour (Kim et al., 1998, as cited in Nishimura et al., 2008). In line with this, HC cultures are also characterised for avoiding direct confrontation and for keeping up appearances (Rosenberg, 2004). In addition to this, HC cultures are featured for being reluctant to changes. As they are fixed and stable societies, people trust their history, relationships or status. These inherent features of HC and LC cultures have a direct impact on the way people communicate: while LC communication is straightforward and people belonging to this group expect speakers to express what they mean clearly in their message, HC communication is not that direct and listeners are expected to understand what is not explicitly said (Nishimura et al., 2008). Hall and Hall (1990) categorise some countries' cultures: for instance, they place Japan and Arab or Mediterranean countries as HC cultures, and the United States of America, Germany and other Northern European countries as LC cultures. In a more explicit scale, England would be in the middle towards the lower part and Spain in the middle towards the higher part of the scale. Others such as the Arab countries would be towards the top of the HC cultures (Hall & Hall, 1990, as cited in Nishimura et al., 2008).

As this proposal gives an account of the patterns of behaviour underlying communication that different cultures show, its application to the derivation of

implicatures by EFL learners could answer the question of whether the cultural background of a person influences this person's derivation of implicatures or not.

4. The present study

4.1 Research Questions (RQs)

Throughout section 3, it has been exposed that the experiment carried out by Bouton (1988) proved that ENNS interpreted sentences differently to ENS, and also that irony was among the most difficult implicatures to derive for ENNS. Besides this, Hall's (1976) account of how culture may influence people's communicative habits has been described in section 3.1. In view of this literature, the present study aims to analyse which the variables playing a role in the derivation of ironical implicatures by EFL learners are.

For present purposes and in view of the aforementioned literature, this study analyses whether language proficiency and culture are factors intervening in the derivation of ironical implicatures. Importantly, in this study, the culture variable is examined in a bidirectional way, this is: apart from investigating the possible influence of the participants' cultural background on the derivation of ironical implicatures, the level of acquaintance with the TL culture is also analysed, in order to see if it plays a role in the derivation of ironical implicatures. Thus, the RQs are the following:

RQ1: Do EFL learners derive pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures?

RQ2: Does culture as a bidirectional factor influence the derivation of ironical implicatures?

RQ3: Is TL proficiency a factor influencing the derivation of ironical implicatures?

Based on the literature review, these are the predictions to the previously exposed RQs:

Prediction 1: The sample will derive pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures, based on Hall (1976).

Prediction 2: Culture as a bidirectional factor will influence the derivation of ironical implicatures, based on Bouton (1988).

Prediction 3: TL proficiency will be a factor influencing the derivation of ironical implicatures, based on Bouton (1988).

4.2 Method

A pilot experiment was carried out, whereby participants were administered a questionnaire in situ (see the Appendix). Before they started to answer it, they were provided with a brief explanation of the experiment were some important aspects were pointed out. Firstly, I introduced myself and I told them that the data collected were going to be part of my Bachelor's Degree Final Project. Also, I clarified them that their participation was voluntary and that their answers would be kept anonymous. In addition to this, I informed participants of the fact that there were neither correct nor incorrect answers, so that they did not feel under pressure when it came to fill the questionnaire. Finally, I facilitated my academic email account so that participants could contact me if they had any question. In any case, participants could find all this information at the top of the first page in the questionnaire (see the Appendix).

On average, participants answered the questionnaire in 20 minutes.

4.3 Participants

The sample was formed by 12 participants (10 women and 2 men, with a mean age of 21 years), all of them students of the English Grammar II module at the Faculty of Arts of the University of the Basque Country. Of the 12 participants, there were 11 whose country of origin was Spain and 1 whose country of origin was Morocco. None of the participants was an ENS, however, their English proficiency level could be roughly assessed as good-excellent in the scale "very bad – bad – regular – good – excellent". Besides this, half of the sample (6 participants) claimed that they used Spanish and Basque to communicate with their family and friends. One participant said that he employed mainly Spanish but that he also used English on a daily basis. Also, there was another participant that said that he used Arabic and Spanish. And finally, there were four people who claimed that Spanish was the only language they employed to communicate with family and friends. In an attempt to measure the participants' familiarity with the English culture, participants were asked to answer some questions regarding the frequency with which they practised certain activities. In general, participants watched TV or films in English quite often, however, the majority answered that they read books in English sometimes. Similarly, participants were not used to watching TV programmes from British or American TVs, with only 2 participants answering that they did this daily. Additionally, they were asked to specify any other activity they practised that involved exposure to English, the most frequent answers being listening to music in English (3

participants) or attending university lectures in English (2 participants). Other answers involved browsing the Internet (1 participant), using social media networks (1 participant) or talking with a person from the United States of America via videoconference every day (1 participant).

4.4 Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of three different sections was created (based on Bester, 2012): a background information section, an instructions section and a questionnaire section (with the experimental items) (see the Appendix). In the first part, participants were asked to answer personal questions regarding their age, country of origin, level of English and the frequency with which they practised certain activities, as explained in section 4.3. In the second section, students were provided with instructions on the structure of the test and on how to answer the questionnaire's questions. On its part, the questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, each of them giving rise to an ironical implicature. Of the implicatures Bester included in his test, I introduced 4 in the questionnaire I employed for this pilot study and I created the rest of the questions. The questions I extracted from Bester (2012) are Question (Q) 1, Q2, Q4 and Q7. Of the 15 questions, 10 are multiple-choice questions. These questions have 5 possible answers as the following example retrieved from the questionnaire shows:

14. During a job interview, Mrs Maseras, the interviewer, asks Mr Lewis, the interviewee, how old he is. Mr Lewis answers by asking Mrs Maseras the same question. After the interview, Mr Lewis is told that he will not be hired. During a phone call with his father, Mr Lewis' father tells him:

Mr Lewis' father: **In order to be hired, the next time you should ask the interviewer her age first.**

Mr Lewis' father means:
a) It has not been a good idea asking the interviewer her age.
b) The interviewee must always ask the age first.
c) One good option in order to be hired is asking the interviewee his/her age.
d) He wants his son to be hired so he is giving him the best advice he can give
   in order for him to be hired.

e) Other

The options provided range from a variety of types: a semantically correct ((c) in the example) or incorrect ((b) in the example) interpretation, a pragmatically felicitous ((a) in the example) or infelicitous ((d) in the example) interpretation, and 1 possible answer named "other" (e) whose election means that participants think that the other possible answers are not adequate and that they interpret the sentence differently (e.g. they provide a neutral interpretation).

Apart from the multiple-choice questions, the questionnaire also counts with 5 open questions, as the one presented below, in which participants have to explain how they interpret the corresponding sentences.

6. John, Alex, and Mark had a group presentation and John did not prepare his part, so when it was his turn to speak, his mind went blank.

Mark: **Certainly, God gave him the gift of the gab.**

How do you interpret Mark's words?

In order not to bias participants, multiple-choice questions were mixed together with open questions, so that every 2 multiple choice questions, an open question was placed.

Questions were designed so that the three RQs (see section 4.1) could be examined. In this sense, all the questions were used to reach a conclusion on the derivation of ironical implicatures (RQ1). Similarly, all the questions were analysed in order to answer if the cultural background of the participants influenced the way they interpreted the sentences, and Q8 and Q15 were the ones which were designed so as to answer if acquaintance with the TL culture had an impact on the interpretation of ironical utterances (RQ2). And finally, Q5, Q6, and Q10 were the questions which served to answer if TL proficiency was a factor influencing the derivation of ironical implicatures (RQ3).

In order to measure whether the cultural background of participants played a role in their derivation of ironical implicatures, Hall's approach to culture (exposed in section 3.1) was applied, this is: all the participants were regarded as members of HC cultures, since their countries (i.e. Spain and Morocco) are described by Hall as countries where

this kind of communication predominates (Hall & Hall, 1990, as cited in Nishimura et al., 2008).

4.5 Results

4.5.1 Derivation of ironical implicatures (RQ1)

The data collected show that the sample participating in the experiment derives pragmatically ironical implicatures. Graph 1 reveals the number of participants (y axis) that derive pragmatically felicitous interpretations for each question (x axis):
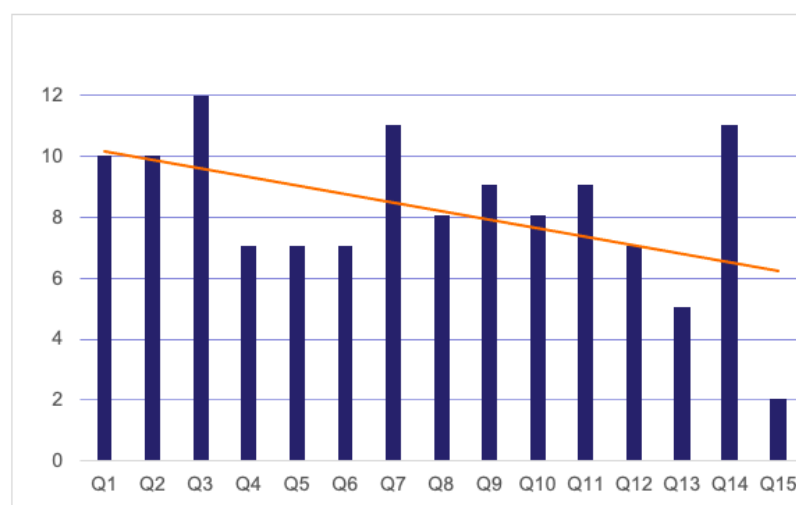

Graph 1: Pragmatically felicitous implicatures

The trend line in orange shows that the tendency of participants to derive pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures is situated between 6 and 10, being the mean 8,2 (72,5%). This tendency to derive pragmatically felicitous implicatures is higher if the questions are presented as multiple-choice questions, where the mean of pragmatically felicitous implicatures is 8,7; in contrast, the mean of open questions is 7,4.

As for multiple-choice questions, Graph 2 reveals that those questions for which participants derived less pragmatically felicitous interpretations were Q13, which was interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by 5 participants (41,6% of the sample), and Q4 and Q5, which counted with 7 pragmatically felicitous interpretations (58,3% of the sample). In the opposite sense, the questions for which more participants chose the pragmatically felicitous option were Q8 and Q10 with 8 participants (66,6% of the sample); Q11 with 9 participants (75% of the sample); Q1 and Q2 with 10 participants (83,3% of the sample); and Q7 and Q14 with 11 participants (91,6% of the sample).
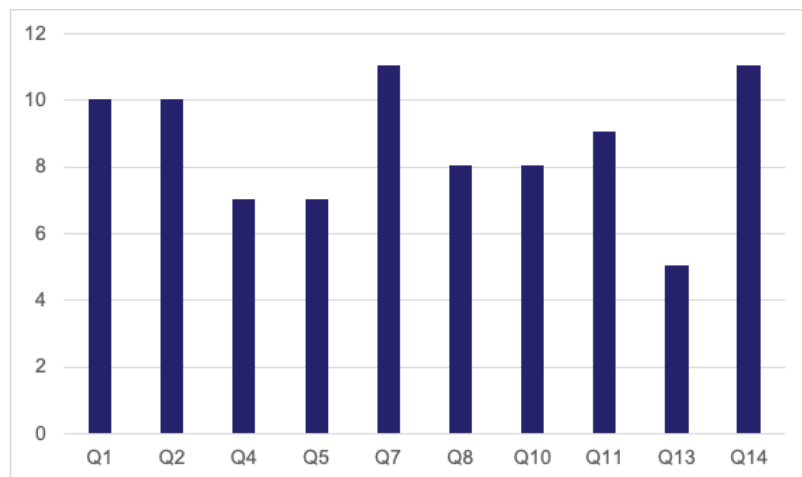
Graph 2: Multiple-Choice Questions

In regards to open questions, Graph 3 displays the number of pragmatically felicitous interpretations that participants derived for each question. The one receiving less pragmatically felicitous interpretations was Q15, with 2 participants (16,6% of the sample) deriving the implicature in a pragmatically felicitous way. By contrast, Q3 obtained a pragmatically felicitous interpretation by the 12 participants (100% of the sample). On their part, Q6 and Q12 were interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by 7 participants (58,3% of the sample), and Q9 by 9 participants (75% of the sample).
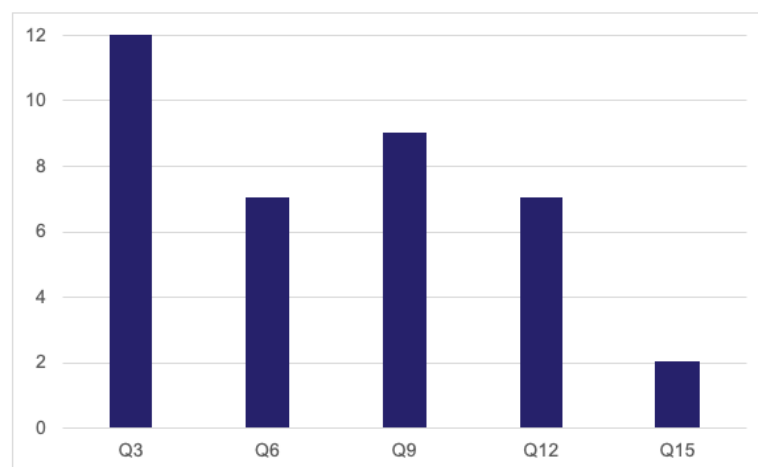
Graph 3: Open Questions

4.5.2 Culture (RQ2)

Data do not clearly show that the participants' cultural background has an impact on their derivation of ironical implicatures. However, they indicate that familiarity with the

TL culture plays a role in the derivation of ironical implicatures. Even if the evidence found regarding the influence of cultural background is not substantial, the fact that some questions have been interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by nearly all the participants (such as Q14 (11 participants, 91,6% of the sample) and Q2 (10 participants, 83,33% of the sample)) or that other questions such as Q13 have been interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by less than half of the sample (5 participants, 41,6% of the sample) shows that there is some underlying factor which drives participants to almost coincide in their interpretations of some questions.

Regarding the questions designed to answer if acquaintance with the TL culture plays a role in the interpretation of ironical implicatures, Graph 1 results for Q8 and Q15 reveal that the participants' familiarity or lack of familiarity with elements belonging to the TL culture either helps them to derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation or hinders this interpretation. For instance, one of the answers provided for Q15 was: "I don't know what Brummie is" (Participant 11), fact which prevented this participant from deriving a pragmatically felicitous interpretation. In the case of Q8, Participant 3 chose option (e) (other) and specified that he could not "tell if she's [Margaret] being sarcastic or not without hearing her say it", which proves that the participant would rely on other cues, i.e. the tone, rather than on "Chelsea" which is supposed to be the cue for participants in Q8 to perceive the ironical nature of the utterance.

4.5.3 TL Proficiency (RQ3)

The data collected prove that language proficiency is a factor influencing the derivation of ironical implicatures. The answers (see Graph 1) provided for Q5, Q6 and Q10 (questions which are grammatically more complex, as they contain English idiomatic expressions) by those speakers which did not derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation reinforce this idea: for Q5, 4 of the 5 participants (Participants 1, 3, 5 and 6) which did not derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation chose option (d), this is, a semantically correct interpretation and omitted the information given by the idiom "sitting on the fence". On its part, Q6, which was an open question, was left blank by 2 participants (Participants 10 and 12). Interestingly, these were the only cases in which no answers were provided in the whole questionnaire. Finally, in Q10, 2 of the 4 participants who did not derive the implicature in a pragmatically felicitous way chose option (a), which was the semantically correct interpretation. Again, this indicates that those

participants ignored the meaning of the idiom "I see eye to eye with [someone]", fact that hindered a pragmatically felicitous interpretation.

5. Discussion

With the aim of knowing if participants would derive pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures (RQ1), data were obtained, which show that the analysed sample presents a high tendency to derive pragmatically felicitous interpretations in the case of ironical utterances (m=8,2). This tendency increases if questions are formulated as multiple-choice questions (m=8,7) rather than as open questions (m=7,4). This may respond to the fact that the possibilities a multiple-choice question offers may facilitate and act as a cue for participants, who in the case of open questions had to interpret, without being given possibilities. Besides, as the participants of the sample were either from Spain or from Morocco, two countries where HC communication predominates, this high tendency to derive pragmatically felicitous interpretations can be understood as a consequence of Hall's (1976) definition of HC cultures. As explained in section 3.1, Hall argues that in HC cultures speakers and hearers are used to a mode of communication in which the message is implicitly transmitted and where hearers are supposed to understand those meanings which are not explicitly said (Nishimura et al., 2008). This is a plausible explanation as to why the participants of this pilot experiment are likely to derive pragmatically felicitous interpretations when it comes to ironical utterances and confirms Prediction 1.

Additionally, in order to test whether culture as a bidirectional factor would influence participants' derivation of ironical implicatures or not (RQ2), results were gathered and, even if they do not provide robust evidence on the influence of the participants' cultural background, the sample's answers to some questions are in accordance with Hall's theory. For example, Q14 was interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by nearly all the participants (91,6% of the sample). If we consider that HC cultures are described as well-structured societies (Kim et al., 1998, as cited in Nishimura et al., 2008) where people are perfectly aware of both the social hierarchy and the politeness routines (e.g. not asking personal questions) (Tella, 2005, as cited in Nishimura et al., 2008), the results are not surprising: the great majority of the sample has interpreted Mr Lewis' father's words as ironical, because the fact that you should not ask the age to the person that is interviewing you for a potential job is a fact rooted in HC cultures (like Spain or Morocco) and known by the vast majority of their inhabitants.

Just as Q14, the answers provided for Q13 by some of the participants who did not choose the pragmatically felicitous interpretation may be understood as a consequence of the fact that they are part of a HC culture. This is so because 4 participants chose option (a), which constitutes a pragmatically infelicitous interpretation involving a negative comment. As exposed in section 3.1, HC cultures avoid direct conflict and tend to express themselves indirectly so that appearances are maintained (Rosenberg, 2004). This may have led participants to understand Lucy's words as a way of implying that she does not want Amy to go to the hen party, rather than as an ironical comment she has made in order to encourage Amy to attend the hen party.

A further inherent characteristic of HC cultures which can be perceived in the answers participants provide is the fact that these cultures are characterised for relying on history, for being fixed, and for being reluctant to changes (Nishimura et al., 2008). For instance, Q2 was interpreted as ironical by nearly all the participants (83,33% of the sample). The idea that because a man is dancing with a woman, this man is being disloyal to his friend (the woman's husband) is part of a mentality that is undergoing change. Notwithstanding, the vast majority of participants interpreted that Bill was not acting as a good friend should with Peter, and thus, Peter's words were interpreted as ironical. This shows that the fact that a man dances with a woman who is his friend's wife is still understood as a disloyal gesture towards a friend by the participants of the sample, who are all members of HC cultures. Although the majority of the sample regarded Peter's words as ironical, two participants selected different options: (b) and (c), which treat the situation described in Q2 as something usual. This reveals that this vision is starting to change among some of the members of HC cultures.

As culture was regarded as a bidirectional factor, I also analysed (by including two different questions) if acquaintance or lack of acquaintance with the TL culture influenced the way participants interpreted ironical sentences. The results show that, in fact, it does. For example, Q15 (with 16,6% of pragmatically felicitous interpretations) shows that it was particularly challenging for participants to perceive the dissociation in Benjamin's words. The item "Brummie" was included because Brummie is a variety widely despised by many people in the UK; even mass media and speakers of the variety themselves show sometimes a negative attitude towards it (Hurst, 2015). However, participants in the sample were not clear about Benjamin's words: some answered that "He [Benjamin] could be being sarcastic (…) but maybe he means that her [Laura's] accent will reach the audience" (Participant 1), others derived a semantically correct interpretation of

Benjamin's words and answered that "He [Benjamin] is proposing Laura to be the speaker" (Participant 3), others also pointed at the fact that "It depends on how he says it, on the tone. He could be serious or ironic" (Participant 7) and another participant answered that he did not know what Brummie was (Participant 11). All these answers show that the lack of familiarity with what Brummie is made them disregard this item which was the one giving them the cue to realise that Benjamin was actually employing irony.

Not to the same extent as Q15, probably because Q8 was designed as a multiple-choice question, but the answers provided by those speakers who did not derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation for Q8 also seem to signal that the lack of familiarity with what "Chelsea" is hindered their interpretation of Q8 as an ironical one. Taken the popularity of this London neighbourhood, which is additionally among the most expensive ones to have a house in (Tarver, 2020), the item was employed to act as a cue for participants and to help them perceive the dissociation of Margaret with her own words' content. However, out of the 4 participants that did not derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation, 2 selected option (b) and 1 chose option (a), both of which are choices that show that the item "Chelsea" did not act as a cue for them, as they did not perceive the dissociation. In addition, Participant 3 chose option (e) and explained that he needed to hear Margaret in order to be able to say whether she was being sarcastic or not. His answer reveals too that his lack of familiarity with the item "Chelsea" is preventing him from reaching a conclusion on whether Margaret's words are ironical or not and, thus, that he needs some further cue, which in this case would be the tone. These findings partially confirm Prediction 2, as while the data collected do not provide robust evidence for the possible effect of the participants' HC cultural background on their answers, data validate the idea that familiarity with the TL culture influences the participants' derivation of ironical implicatures.

Concerning the possible effect that the TL proficiency level can have when it comes to deriving ironical implicatures (RQ3), the results obtained demonstrate that it actually plays a role. Even if the participants' level was assessed as a good-excellent in the scale "very bad – bad – regular – good – excellent", there were individual differences between participants, so that the TL proficiency level of some was "good", and the level of others was identified as "excellent" or "regular-good". Three idioms, each one in three different questions, were selected in order to measure this variable. The overall high proficiency level of participants made them interpret the questions designed to measure this variable,

generally, in a pragmatically felicitous way; however, it is also worth examining those answers which are not pragmatically felicitous, since they can shed light on this matter. For instance, for Q5, 4 participants selected option (d), which is the semantically correct interpretation. Also, for Q10, 2 of the 4 participants who did not derive a pragmatically felicitous interpretation chose option (a), which is also a semantically correct interpretation. Unlike the mean of the sample, the individual TL proficiency level of these participants who did not derive the implicatures in a pragmatically felicitous way is "good" or "regular-good". This shows that the lack of understanding of the idioms "to sit on the fence" and "to see eye to eye with [someone]", which may be related to their language proficiency level being a bit under the mean of the sample, hindered an ironical interpretation of these questions, fact that confirms Prediction 3.

6. Conclusions and Further Research

The results and the discussion presented in sections 4.5 and 5, respectively show that the sample examined derives pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures. Additionally, even if the results found do not provide robust evidence on the influence that the participants' HC cultural background had when they were asked to derive ironical implicatures, some of the results obtained show that there is some common behaviour underlying the derivation of ironical implicatures that is shared by nearly all the sample's participants. This seems to signal that at least some of the characteristics of HC cultures and of their way of communicating, such as preferring to convey information implicitly or trying to avoid direct criticism, have come into play when participants were interpreting the ironical sentences. Concerning the bidirectional nature of the culture variable, the results obtained provide strong evidence that reveals that lack of familiarity with items belonging to the TL culture can hinder a pragmatically felicitous interpretation. This is particularly exemplified by the results for Q15, which was an open question that was interpreted in a pragmatically felicitous way by only 2 participants (16,6% of the sample). Similarly, the language proficiency variable has also been proven to play a role in the interpretation of ironical sentences. Although the proficiency level of the sample was roughly assessed as good-excellent, individual differences have appeared to show that those participants whose language proficiency level was slightly under that of the sample's mean had more difficulties in understanding the idioms' meaning and, consequently, in deriving a pragmatically felicitous interpretation.

Notwithstanding, the results obtained in this pilot study count with some limitations regarding the size of the sample, the age of the participants, the not varied cultural background of the sample or even the very nature of irony itself, since it is an element for which prosodic cues such as tone constitute an important factor. Apart from this, a statistical analysis was not run, as it was beyond the scope of this paper. In view of these limitations, broadening the sample would be interesting, so that more participants from different age ranges and cultural backgrounds would be tested. Furthermore, including ENS would be positive, so that their results could be compared to those of EFL learners. Finally, in order to provide participants with a more natural simulation of communication, the Qs could be presented as audios instead of being written, so that participants are not biased by not hearing speakers' intonation. All in all, the present study has managed to bridge the gap between what is said and what is meant, as regards the derivation of pragmatically felicitous ironical implicatures by EFL learners, taking their HC culture, as well as their degree of familiarity with the TL culture, and their TL proficiency level into account.

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Appendix

Administered Questionnaire

(adapted from Bester, 2012)

My name is Paola Ortiz Fernández and I am a fourth-year student of the English Studies degree at the University of the Basque Country. I have created this questionnaire in order to collect data for my Bachelor's Degree Final Project (TFG). Your answers and participation in this study will be anonymous and voluntary, therefore, you can stop participating at any time. It is important to mention that there are neither correct nor incorrect answers. Thank you very much for participating and if you have any questions you can contact me via email (portiz016@ikasle.ehu.eus).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1) How old are you?

2) Which is your gender?

3) Which is your country of origin?

4) Are you a native speaker of English? If not, answer question 5.

5) What is your English level on the following skills? Choose the option that suits you best.

   4.1) Speaking: Very bad – Bad – Regular – Good – Excellent
   4.2) Listening: Very bad – Bad – Regular – Good – Excellent
   4.3) Reading: Very bad – Bad – Regular – Good – Excellent
   4.4) Writing: Very bad – Bad – Regular – Good – Excellent

6) What language(s) do you speak with your family and friends?

7) How often do you do the following?

   7.1) Reading books in English

   7.2) Watching films/series in English

   7.3) Watching TV programmes from British/American televisions

   7.4) Any other activity in English (specify).

INSTRUCTIONS

Read the following excerpts and then choose one of the five possibilities (a-e) that are given to you for questions 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13 and 14. In case you choose option

(e) in any of those questions, explain why you have chosen that option. For questions 3, 6, 9, 12 and 15, a written answer explaining your interpretation of the speakers' utterances is needed.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. After a difficult meeting where clients did not like any of their ideas for a new advertising campaign, two colleagues leave the boardroom.

John: **That went well.**

John means:
a) The meeting went very well.
b) The meeting did not go well.
c) It could have been worse.
d) He is thankful that at least they didn't get fired.
e) Other

2. Bill and Peter work together in the same office. They are good friends. They often have lunch together and Peter has even invited Bill to have dinner with him and his wife at their home several times. Now Peter's friends have told him that they saw Bill out dancing with Peter's wife recently while Peter was out of town on a business trip.

Peter: **Bill certainly knows how to be a really good friend, doesn't he?**

Peter means:
a) Bill is not acting the way a good friend should.
b) Peter's wife and Bill are becoming really good friends.
c) Peter and Bill are good friends, so Peter can trust him.
d) Nothing should be allowed to interfere with the friendship.
e) Other

3. James, Olivia's brother, is complaining because he is in charge of washing the dishes. Olivia has arrived home from work and continues working from her laptop. James continues to complain and Olivia says:

Olivia: **As I have been the whole day doing nothing, I can do it for you.**

How do you interpret Olivia's words?

4. A few friends are at a house party. A fellow guest who is not looking where he is going bumps into Dadrian and spills his drink all over Dadrian's brand new leather jacket. Dadrian grabs the offender by the collar and throws him against the wall, yelling at him. Sam, one of Dadrian's friends, turns to one of his buddies:

Sam: **You think he's angry?**

Sam means:
a) He thinks Dadrian doesn't have reason to be so angry.
b) He is not sure whether Dadrian is as angry as he looks.
c) It is obvious Dadrian is very angry.
d) He wants to know why Dadrian is so angry.
e) Other

5. Marie must choose in a maximum of two weeks the university where she would like to study her Medicine degree. Her neighbour sees Marie's father and asks him how is Marie doing with the decision. Marie's father answers:

Marie's father: **She is sitting on the fence, you know, Marie is very good at making decisions.**

Marie's father means:
a) Marie is sitting on the fence because she has already taken the decision.
b) Marie has changed her mind and will now study a different degree.
c) Marie is not a good decision maker.
d) Marie is a good decision maker.
e) Other

6. John, Alex, and Mark had a group presentation and John did not prepare his part, so when it was his turn to speak, his mind went blank.

Mark: **Certainly, God gave him the gift of the gab.**

How do you interpret Mark's words?

7. A customer in a clothing store starts yelling loudly at a sales person, ranting and raving and waving his arms about. Another customer looking at shoes nearby says to her friend:

Gwen: **You can tell he's a little upset.**

Gwen means:
a) You can tell the customer is a little upset.
b) You can tell the customer is very upset.
c) It's not clear how upset the customer is.
d) The customer has nothing to be upset about.
e) Other

8. Tom and Margaret are preparing a surprise party in London for their friend Ryan. When talking about how they will pay the party, Tom tells Margaret that as she has just been promoted and works in one of the most prestigious law firms, she should pay for everything. To this, Margaret answers:

Margaret: **Of course I could bear the costs and also, if you wish, we could celebrate the party at my place in Chelsea.**

Margaret means:
a) Margaret will do anything that's needed from her in order to make her friend Ryan happy.
b) Margaret agrees with Tom's proposal.
c) Margaret thinks that as she has been promoted, it is fair enough that she pays.
d) Margaret has not liked Tom's proposal.
e) Other

9. Elizabeth has had an exam this morning for which she has not studied. When her friends ask her how it has gone, she answers:

Elizabeth: **The teacher will marvel with my wise, elaborated answers.**

How do you interpret Elizabeth's words?

10. During a school meeting, parents are discussing which could be the new extracurricular activity that the school should add to the list of the already offered activities. Lucas, a father, suggests that the school should offer children the possibility to learn cooking. Martha, another mother, answers:

Martha: **I see eye to eye with Lucas, that's why I want to propose ballet as an alternative.**

Martha means:
a) Martha agrees with Lucas.
b) Martha does not like Lucas' proposal.
c) Children won't like Lucas' proposal.
d) Martha has not heard Lucas' proposal.
e) Other

11. Frans takes his girlfriend Magda out for a sundowner picnic. He goes to great trouble to make sure that everything is perfectly organized. But everything goes wrong: they get attacked by mosquitoes as the sun sets, the wine bottle breaks and spills over everything, and Magda twists her ankle in a hole as they walk to the top of the hill. In the meantime, dark clouds move closer and drops begin to fall.

Frans: **At least it's not raining.**

Frans means:
a) Well, at least it is not raining too hard yet.
b) And as if things couldn't possibly get worse, it is raining too.
c) The rain is the least of our problems right now.
d) The weather forecast said nothing about rain.
e) Other

12. The members of a company will meet with some potential investors in order to make a deal. The office manager asks the workers to clean the meeting room but they answer that that is a workspace and that as such, it can't be impeccable. When the boss of the company arrives at the meeting room and asks why that mess is not yet cleaned, the office manager answers:

Office Manager: **Cleaning? What for? It is a truth universally acknowledged that investors enjoy chaos.**

How do you interpret the office manager's words?

13. Lucy and Amy, two close friends, are discussing whether they should go to Jessica's hen party or not. Amy is not really into it and Lucy tells her:

Lucy: **Be careful, your parents may punish you if you go to the party.**

Lucy means:

a) Lucy does not want Amy to go to the hen party.
b) Lucy would like Amy to go to the party but is worried about the reaction Amy's parents will have if she goes.
c) Lucy is advising Amy not to go because Amy's parents will punish her if she goes.
d) Amy's parents are quite intransigent.
e) Other

14. During a job interview, Mrs Maseras, the interviewer, asks Mr Lewis, the interviewee, how old he is. Mr Lewis answers by asking Mrs Maseras the same question. After the interview, Mr Lewis is told that he will not be hired. During a phone call with his father, Mr Lewis' father tells him:

Mr Lewis' father: **In order to be hired, the next time you should ask the interviewer her age first.**

Mr Lewis' father means:
a) It has not been a good idea asking the interviewer her age.
b) The interviewee must always ask the age first.
c) One good option in order to be hired is asking the interviewee his/her age.
d) He wants his son to be hired so he is giving him the best advice he can give in order for him to be hired.
e) Other

15. A group of five mates will give a talk in front of an audience in a conference taking place at the University of Cambridge. When they are about to choose who the spokesperson will be, Benjamin, one of the members of the group, says:

Benjamin: **Laura's Brummie accent will win over the public without any doubt.**

How do you interpret Benjamin's words?