



Examining Culture Differences in Iraqi EFL Learners' Pragmatic Tolerance towards Infelicitous Utterances

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Abstract

This research investigates Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic tolerance for violations of Grice's Maxim of Quality, with particular attention to the use of verbal irony. The study examines whether these learners' diverse cultural backgrounds influence their tolerance for violations of the Quality Maxim in ironic utterances. The sample comprised 80 female learners aged 19–25 from three Iraqi universities, representing Arab, Turkman, Kurd, and Syriac backgrounds. The participants completed an experiment using Sentence Judgment Tasks, which consisted of visual and written scenarios designed to elicit responses to pragmatic violations. They were required to evaluate several target and control utterances using a binary (Agree/Disagree) scale. The results indicate that participants' pragmatic tolerance levels were similar across all groups. That is, participants' cultural backgrounds did not appear to influence their pragmatic tolerance of ironic items, as all groups demonstrated lower tolerance for these violations. However, nearly half of the participants were inconsistent in their responses to these violations, suggesting difficulty with irony processing. The findings emphasise the importance of explicitly teaching irony to improve Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic competence and tolerance of such violations.

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دراسة الفروق الثقافية في تسامح متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية من العراقيين تجاه العبارات غير الملائمة تداولياً

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الخلاصة

تتناول هذه الدراسة التسامح التداولي لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية من العراقيين تجاه انتهاكات مبدأ الجودة لغرايس، من خلال استخدام عبارات المفارقة اللفظية على وجه الخصوص. وتركز الدراسة على ما إذا كانت الخلفيات الثقافية المختلفة لهؤلاء المتعلمين تؤثر في مدى تسامحهم مع انتهاكات مبدأ الجودة في المفارقة اللفظية. شملت العينة 80 طالبة تتراوح أعمارهن بين 19-25 عاماً، من خلفيات عربية، وتركمانية، وكردية، ومسيحية، تم اختيارهن من ثلاث جامعات عراقية. خضعت المشاركات لتجربة باستخدام مهام الحكم على الجمل، والتي تضمنت سيناريوهات مرئية ومكتوبة تهدف إلى استثارة ردود الفعل تجاه الانتهاكات التداولية. طُلب من المشاركات تقييم عدد من العبارات المستهدفة والعبارات الضابطة باستخدام مقياس ثنائي (موافق/غير موافق). وأظهرت النتائج أن مستويات التسامح التداولي كانت متقاربة نسبياً بين جميع المجموعات. أي أن الخلفية الثقافية للمشاركات لم تؤثر على تسامحهن التداولي تجاه عبارات المفارقة اللفظية، إذ أبدت جميع المجموعات تسامحاً منخفضاً تجاه هذه الانتهاكات. ومع ذلك، فإن ما يقارب نصف المشاركات أظهرن عدم الثبات في استجابتهن تجاه هذه الانتهاكات، مما يشير إلى صعوبة لديهن في معالجة هذه العبارات. وتؤكد النتائج على أهمية تعليم المفارقة اللفظية بصورة واضحة من أجل تحسين الكفاءة التداولية لدى متعلمي اللغة الإنكليزية من العراقيين، وتعزيز تسامحهم تجاه مثل هذه الانتهاكات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التسامح التداولي؛ المفارقة؛ الخلفية الثقافية؛ انتهاك المبادئ؛ متعلمو اللغة الإنكليزية بوصفها لغة أجنبية من العراقيين.

1. Introduction

The process of understanding during talk exchange is best understood through Conversational Implicature Theory. The concept of conversational implicature was first suggested by Grice (1975,1981) (1, 1a) and was later developed by scholars like Levinson (1983) (2) and Green (1989)(3). Adopting this approach, inferences are drawn by figuring out how an utterance and its context relate to one another (Bouton, 1999) (4). Grice's theory of conversational implicature posits that language use is governed by an underlying principle that promotes rational interaction while maximizing efficiency. Grice termed this overarching concept the "cooperative principle" and decomposed it into nine conversational Maxims, which he grouped into four categories: Quality, Quantity, Relevance, and Manner. According to Huang (2007) (5), this cooperative principle and its component Maxims ensure that the appropriate amount of information is shared during a conversation in a sincere, relevant, and clear manner.

Levinson (1983) (2) asserts that Grice's Maxims generate *inferences* that are not included in the utterances' semantic content. At the very least, there are two ways by which these inferences are generated: by *adhering* to the Maxims or by *breaking* them. Once a conversational Maxim is breached, or "flouted" (in Grice's terms), by language users; this forces listeners to make additional inferences to understand the intended meaning.

A few researchers, like Bouton (1999) (4), concentrated on teaching non-native speakers (NNSs) how to interpret implicatures. However, the capacity of NNSs to infer the same meaning from implicatures in American English worried those researchers. They discovered that while there was not much of a difference for native speakers (NSs) in this regard, NNSs had a greater difficulty in mastering certain implicatures than others. The process of drawing inferences requires pragmatic competence on the part of interlocutors. Unfortunately, a lot of EFL learners lack the competence that would allow them to achieve it. Therefore, many EFL learners try to make analogies between the pragmatics of the target-language community and their native language (or any other languages they might speak) to address pragmatic challenges (6).

Numerous studies (Carneiro et al., 2020) (7) have demonstrated that participant language or cultural background directly affects the level of comprehension for EFL learners. Many researchers' studying pragmatics generally agree that language use is influenced by culture which can lead to a misinterpretation or misreading of a speaker's intended meaning. Majidi (2015) (8) asserts that speakers' social behaviors mirror the underlying worldview of the language they use at home. By considering the connections between pragmatics and culture, learners can enhance their proficiency and mutual understanding (9).

In an attempt to investigate culture difference in Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic tolerance towards violations of the Quality Maxim, which states that speakers should present accurate information for which they have sufficient evidence, the current study has targeted several Iraqi EFL learners from different cultural backgrounds to see whether there is any significant difference, among these EFL learners, in terms of tolerance towards violations of the Quality Maxim, through using ironic utterances in particular.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

It is hard for EFL learners to understand pragmatic communication, especially when it deviates from conversational norms. These misunderstandings can lead to difficulties in understanding or cultural clashes. This matter is vital in Iraq's multicultural EFL context. Unfortunately, the available literature provides little research on how culture affects Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic tolerance. Therefore, studying these potential variations could improve language teaching and intercultural communication.

1.2. Aim of the Study

This study aims to investigate the extent to which Iraqi EFL learners' culture difference influences their pragmatic tolerance towards infelicitous utterances that violate the Quality Maxim through using irony.

1.3. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer these research questions:

1. How do Iraqi EFL learners react in terms of pragmatic tolerance towards infelicitous utterances?
2. To what extent do Iraqi EFL learners from different cultural groups differ in their pragmatic tolerance towards infelicitous utterances violating the Maxim of Quality?

1.4. Hypotheses

Based on the above research questions, it is hypothesized that:

1. Iraqi EFL learners do not show pragmatic tolerance towards infelicitous utterances.
2. Iraqi EFL learners' different cultural backgrounds have no significant effect on their pragmatic tolerance towards infelicitous utterances in irony.

2. Literature Review

This section provides a brief review of the literature on irony and culture.

2.1. Irony

Irony is a widely debated subject in linguistics due to the absence of a universally recognized definition (10). However, some definitions are given for convenience in what follows.

Colebrook (2004) (11) defines irony as “saying what is contrary to what is meant.” This definition is typically ascribed to the first-century Roman orator Quintilian, who was reflecting on Socrates and Ancient Greek literature. Cruse (2006) (12 p. 90) also defines irony as a form of figurative language wherein the intended meaning of an expression typically contrasts with its literal interpretation. Similarly, irony has traditionally been understood to be the act of “saying something and meaning the opposite,” according to Garmendia (2018) (13 :p. 17). In the same vein, Wilson (2013, p: 14) states that irony is a trope in which a corresponding figurative meaning replaces the literal meaning. As such, the ironic meaning is the opposite or contradictory of the literal sense.

Collectively, these definitions characterize irony in terms of 'opposition.' Consider the following example:

Mary (*after a chaotic lecture*):

That went well!

+> That didn't go well / That went badly

Irony is a common subject for pragmatic research. It was a crucial component of traditional pragmatic theories and remains popular. While irony encompasses various forms, including *verbal*, *situational*, and *dramatic*, only verbal irony is addressed in pragmatics due to its relevance to the communicative paradigm. In other words, pragmatics studies deliberate communicative acts, or utterances (Garmendia, 2018,) (13;pp. 3-7).

2.2. Irony and the Maxim of Quality

The relationship between the concept of irony and the Maxim of Quality goes back to Grice's reformulation of the traditional pragmatic definition of irony (Grice, 1975, 1981) (1,1a). According to

Grice, ironic meaning is a particularized conversational implicature arising from the overt exploitation of the Quality Maxim (Gurillo & Ortega, 2013) (15 p. 17). Many pragmatics scholars have been unified by Grice's (1975) (1) perspective on irony as involving an opposition, where one thing is said, and the opposite is meant (Garmendia, 2018) (13 p: 14) . Grice argues that individuals interpret irony by first identifying when an utterance deviates from a conversational Maxim, and then constructing an interpretation that aligns with the cooperative principle (Cook, 2005, p. 18). (16)

Although Grice's view of irony raises some theoretical and practical issues, the current research builds on Grice's treatment of irony as implicature arising from violating the Quality Maxim. This aligns with similar studies (Jasim & Hussein, 2024; Yasseen & Hussein, 2024 (17,18). which uses Grice's cooperative principle to identify pragmatic meanings.

2.3. Culture and Implicature

It is widely recognized that individuals in two distinct countries communicate differently, not simply because their linguistic codes (such as lexicons and grammars) differ, but also because the ways they use these codes vary (19). What impact, if any, does culture exert on reasoning? One effect is likely related to the content of inferences: because different cultures hold different beliefs, their conclusions will also differ (Johnson-Laird & Lee, 2006, p. 463). (20).

Therefore, the universality of Grice's cooperative principle has been challenged by scholars who argue that the Maxims are not universally applicable to all languages, as many linguistic communities do not adhere to all of them (Leech, 1983, p. 80 21) (see Keenan, 1976) (22). The potential for cross-cultural variation in usage may lead individuals from one group to misinterpret the implicatures of another group. In other words, cultures vary in their *application* of these principles and in their definitions of cooperation, which can reduce the efficiency of implicature as a conversational tool for cross-cultural communication (Bouton, 1999 Rose ; Kasper, 2001 (4,23) cited in Cignetti & Di Giuseppe, 2024).

3. Methodology

This section focuses on the methodology the was used in this research. It describes how the data were collected, what stimuli were employed, how the participants were chosen, how the experiment was conducted, which model was adopted, and the

statistical procedure that was used for analysing the data.


3.1. Data Collection

The data for the current research were collected through employing a pen-and-paper test. Situations containing infelicitous utterances were created as sentence judgment tasks (SJTs) and presented to participants to investigate cultural differences in pragmatic tolerance for violations of the Quality Maxim. The participants were asked to evaluate each utterance using a binary (Disagree/Agree) scale. Due to time constraints, only a quantitative approach was employed in this study.

3.2. Stimuli


Visualized contexts were mainly provided with the test items, whereas others were accompanied only by written contexts. The items presented scenarios designed to elicit ironic implicatures and test the Quality Maxim. In each ironic scenario, two fictional characters engaged in a conversation about a specific topic or a situation such as the weather conditions, food, work problems, etc. to reflect their opinions and remarks in situations that were common to people in everyday life. These scenarios presented two contrasting utterances: one was pragmatically *felicitous* produced by the first character, and another was pragmatically *infelicitous* produced by the second character, where the violation of the Quality Maxim occurs. See the following example in the figure below:

Context: Matt and David went to see their friend, John, at his house. John asked them to stay for dinner, but his family were not there. So, John went to the kitchen to prepare the dinner for his friends. After a while, he returned carrying the dinner. However, the food seemed to have been over cooked. So, Matt and David commented the following:



1. Matt: "It seems that John's not so good at cooking, my friend! The dinner seems pretty bad, unfortunately! What do you think David?"

Disagree	Agree



2. David: "It seems delicious! I think I'll eat the whole plate if I'm brave enough!"

Disagree	Agree

Figure (1): Two Test Items on Irony

3.3. Participants

The research targeted Iraqi EFL learners at the university level. The samples comprised female learners from Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish, and Syrian backgrounds. The total number of participants was 80, with 20 participants per cultural group. For the study, this number was sufficiently representative for generalizing the results. The samples were selected from 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-year students in the Department of English Language at the College of Education for Humanities, at the universities of Mosul, Kirkuk, and al-Hamdaniya, for the academic year 2024–2025.

The sampling strategy followed Dörnyei's (2007, p. 97) random sampling, which was 'on a completely random basis to reduce the influence of external or personal biases during the selection process. This would increase the likelihood that the chosen sample accurately represents the broader population, making the findings more generalizable and reliable.

3.4. Procedure of Conducting the Experiment

The experiment was printed on paper and was disseminated to the participants. The researchers and some staff members at the targeted universities conducted it in a single session for each cultural group, and their help was greatly appreciated. To ensure that participants understood the task, it was important to include training items at the beginning of the experiment. Thus, following Schmitt and Miller (2010, p. 39) (24), the experiment first displayed three items to train participants before the test, to help avoid mistakes. The test took nearly 20 minutes. After completing the test, the participants were thanked orally by the researchers for their participation. They were also informed of the aim of the experiment in the end.

3.5. Model of the Study

This research adopts Katsos and colleagues' (2008, 2010, 2011) (25-27) Pragmatic Tolerance Hypothesis (PTH) as a framework for analyzing the data. This hypothesis assumes that binary measures assess pragmatic tolerance rather than competence. Katsos and colleagues aimed to refute the prevailing claim in language acquisition research that children who accepted underinformative utterances in binary measures were judged incompetent language users. Therefore, this hypothesis refutes the claim by arguing that children, like adults, notice pragmatic violations. Still, they are less likely than adults to reject them when asked to evaluate an utterance's truthfulness (Noveck, 2018, p. 89) (28). Thus,

Katsos and colleagues (2018, 29) argued that both children and adults possess similar pragmatic competence, but differ only in their metalinguistic attitudes, i.e., their pragmatic tolerance towards infelicities, which develops with age.

In the available literature, PTH has been adopted mainly to analyze scalar implicatures that violate the Quantity Maxim, with no mention of irony. As such, the researchers argue that this hypothesis could also be applied to analyze irony, as it involves a violation of Grice's Quality Maxim. Thus, according to the PTH, for participants to be considered tolerant of Maxims' violations, their ratings on the binary measure should indicate acceptance (i.e., a high rating) of these violations. By contrast, for participants to be considered intolerant of Maxims' violations, their ratings should reflect a refusal of these violations (i.e., low ratings).

3.6. Statistical Procedures to Analyze Data

This research used a series of statistical tests. The data analysis began with calculating participants' mean answer scores, followed by a one-way ANOVA to test for group differences. Consistency of participants' responses was also computed, and Chi-square tests of association were run to examine the relationship between participants' cultural backgrounds and tolerance levels. However, before conducting the data analysis, the participants' responses were systematically coded and converted to numerical formats suitable for statistical testing to derive generalizable results (30). The data analysis process was conducted using SPSS software (Version 26). The scoring technique that was adopted for the binary measure is reported below.

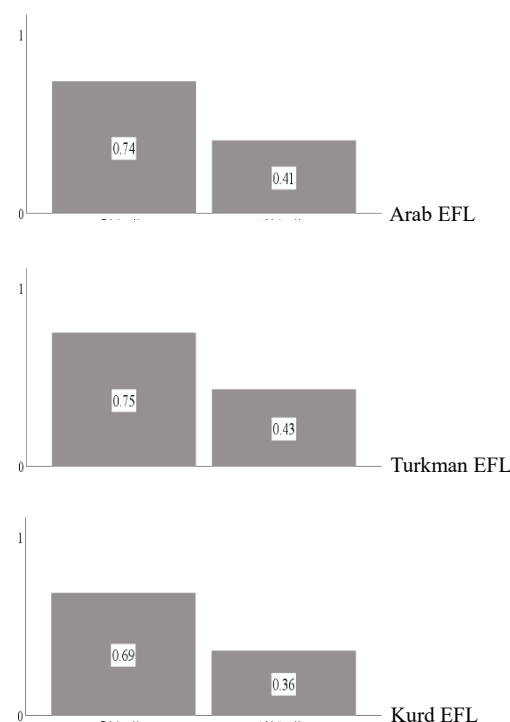
3.6.1. Scoring Technique: The Binary Responses

Since the binary scale has only two options (Disagree/Agree), the participants' answers were coded using only '0/1'. Thus, the data were coded normally with 0 for *Disagree* and 1 for *Agree*. In applying this scoring format, the means of the participants' answers were expected to receive higher ratings (approaching 1) in control items, because the participants were expected to logically accept felicitous statements in these conditions. Regarding the targeted items, i.e., the infelicitous (ironic) statements, if the participants' means reach '1', they would be considered tolerant of pragmatic violations of the Quality Maxim. Conversely, if the participants' means lower to '0', they would be considered intolerant of these violations.

4. Results

The first step in analyzing the data was running a calculation of the participants' mean answer scores to see whether or not there were any significant differences between the two item types, i.e. felicitous and infelicitous statements. The results (see Figure 2) showed that all four groups, as expected, responded to the felicitous utterances (the controls) by rating them higher. By contrast, their agreement with the infelicitous utterances, which were ironic, was noticeably lower. This suggests that the participants *have understood the hidden meaning* (i.e., they have derived the implicature) and yet they showed intolerance to these violations. Now, with all groups consistently preferring felicitous utterances over infelicitous ones, the researchers' argument raised in 3.5. Concerning the applicability of the PTH on violations of the Quality Maxim, the results of the data analysis support this.

However, tolerance levels varied across the groups. The Syriac group had the highest agreement level with the ironic statements ($M = .4625$), followed by the Turkman group ($M = .4313$). On the contrary, the Kurd group had the lowest mean ($M = .3625$), while the Arab group was slightly higher ($M = .4063$). Therefore, while all groups recognized the difference between sincere and ironic utterances, their tendency to accept the ironic ones seemed to vary depending on their cultural backgrounds. See the figure below:



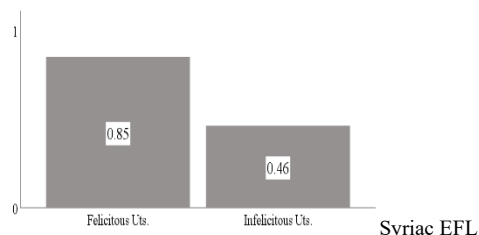


Figure (2): The mean answer score of all participants for the ‘felicitous/infelicitous’ statements in the binary measure

The next step, for now, was to run a between-groups test to investigate any differences among the groups in tolerance for irony statements. However, before running the analysis, the data were tested for normality.

The Shapiro-Wilk test revealed that the data for each cultural group were normally distributed ($p > .05$). In addition, a Levene’s test of homogeneity showed that the variances were equal across groups, $F(3, 76) = 2.34, p = .080$. Therefore, a one-way ANOVA was considered appropriate. The analysis showed that the differences among the four groups were not statistically significant, $F(3, 76) = 0.60, p = .619$. That is, the similarity in response behavior among these participant groups suggests that their cultural backgrounds did not have a meaningful influence on their tolerance of Quality Maxim violations in irony items.

Following similar studies (e.g., Slabakova, 2010) (31), a further step in the analysis was to measure the consistency of participants’ tolerance scores when scoring the irony items. Here, the participants were categorised into three groups according to their response behavior as either: *consistently disagreed* (low tolerance), *consistently agreed* (high tolerance), or *inconsistent* (in between). See the table:

Cultural Group	Consistently Disagreed ($\leq 30\%$ Agreement)	Consistently Agreed ($\geq 70\%$ Agreement)	Inconsistent (31–69% Agreement)
Arab	8 (40%)	4 (20%)	8 (40%)
Turkman	4 (20%)	1 (5%)	15 (75%)
Kurd	8 (40%)	1 (5%)	11 (55%)
Syriac	7 (35%)	5 (25%)	8 (40%)
Total	27 (33%)	11 (13%)	42 (52%)

Table (1): Tolerance Consistency across Cultural Groups in Irony Items

Looking at the total statistics shown in the bottom of the table, however, the largest portion of the participants (52%) were inconsistent. This suggests the difficulty faced among these EFL learners in deriving the ironic implicature, and hence, their

variability in judging those utterances. Yet, 33% consistently disagreed, demonstrating low tolerance, and 13% consistently agreed where they showed high tolerance.

For the comparisons among the groups, the results revealed that the Arab and Kurd participants equally showed the highest proportion of consistent disagreement (40%), suggesting strong rejection (i.e., intolerance) of pragmatic infelicities. Although the Turkman and Syriac groups revealed lower consistent proportions of disagreement (20% and 35% respectively), the results suggest that these groups also have lower tolerance towards Quality Maxim violations.

It is worth noting that some differences in tolerance were observed *within* the groups. For example, the Syriac group had the highest proportion of consistent agreement (25%), followed by the Arabs (20%). These proportions suggest higher tolerance among *some* participants in these two groups. However, the Turkman and Kurd groups, showed similar consistent agreement (5%).

Regarding participants’ inconsistent behavior, the Arab and Syriac groups were similar (40%). The Kurd group had the highest proportion (55%), while the Turkman group had the highest proportion of inconsistent behavior (75%). This inconsistent behavior, unfortunately, suggests that many of these EFL learners have lower pragmatic competence and, consequently, have difficulty comprehending irony. In sum, regarding tolerance for violations of the Quality Maxim, the Arab, Kurd, and Syriac groups showed low tolerance (40%, 40%, and 35%, respectively). The Turkman group also showed low tolerance; however, most participants (75%) in that group were inconsistent in their responses. That is why the Turkman group’s low tolerance level was 20%. Generally, these results suggest that Iraqi EFL learners appear to be highly sensitive to violations of the Quality Maxim, hence, aligning with Yasseen’s (2024) study. (32)

A final step was to investigate whether cultural background influenced pragmatic tolerance toward ironic utterances. Therefore, three Chi-square tests of independence were performed based on the above three consistency categories. The tests for the consistently low-/high-tolerance groups were not significant in terms of the connections between cultural backgrounds and tolerance levels: $\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 2.40, p = .493$, Cramér’s $V = .17$; and $\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 5.38, p = .146$, Cramér’s $V = .26$, respectively. While the test for the inconsistent

participants revealed a result *nearly* approaching significance, $\chi^2(3, N = 80) = 6.62, p = .085$, with a moderate effect size (Cramér's $V = .29$). These results suggest that the association between cultural background and tolerance levels regarding irony might be clearer at the group level, rather than the participant level.

5. Discussion

This research aimed to examine Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic tolerance in responding to violations of Grice's conversational Maxim of Quality through employing irony. This was achieved by analysing the participants' interpretations of ironic statements using a binary (Disagree/Agree) rating scale. The study's main objective was to investigate whether these Iraqi EFL learners' cultural backgrounds (Arab, Kurd, Turkman, Syriac) influenced their pragmatic tolerance. This section discusses the quantitative results from the preceding section.

The results of the data analysis showed that while all participant groups rated control items higher than ironic ones, pragmatic tolerance levels were relatively similar among the groups. That is, at the group level, *all four groups were intolerant of violations of the Quality Maxim*. At the individual level, although the Arab and Syriac groups had higher agreement mean scores for ironic items (20% and 25%, respectively) than the Turkman and Kurd groups, who showed lower agreement means (5% each), the one-way ANOVA test did not reveal statistically significant differences among them. This finding suggests that these EFL learners' tolerance for irony as a form of Quality Maxim violation might not be affected by cultural background. Therefore, the null hypothesis is retained based on the results.

However, the observed differences within these groups' *means* (though these were not significant) suggest that *some* of the Arab and Syriac participants might be more relaxed with figurative or non-literal meaning, unlike the Turkman and Kurd participants whose results suggest their discomfort with such a kind of language.

Additionally, the large proportion of inconsistency seen in irony responses—where over half of the participants (52%) fell into the “inconsistent” category—indicates difficulty among these learners in processing ironic implicatures. The participants'

inconsistency might be due to a lack of linguistic proficiency, pragmatic awareness, or both. In other words, this inconsistency appeared to be constrained by the participants' linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors, among others, especially when these EFL learners are exposed to ambiguous or context-sensitive implicatures (Slabakova, 2010; Katsos & Bishop, 2011, Yasseen & Hussein, 2024) (31,26, 18). This finding aligns with similar studies, which showed that irony comprehension, particularly in a second language (L2), requires advanced pragmatic skills that are not uniformly developed, they are late-acquired, and even advanced learners rely on explicit strategies to detect it (Ivanko & Pexman, 2003; Ellis et al, 2021 (33,34) This, in turns, highlights the need for explicit instruction to be pragmatically competent in irony detection.

In sum, these minor cultural differences were partially confirmed by Chi-square tests, which revealed nearly approaching significant associations between the groups' cultural backgrounds and their inconsistent response categories. The findings shed light on the importance of considering linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural factors in L2 pragmatics research and instruction.

Conclusion

This research examined the extent to which Iraqi EFL learners' diverse cultural backgrounds affect how they respond to ironic utterances that violate the Quality Maxim. Although pragmatic tolerance was generally low in all groups, there were no statistically significant differences across Arab, Kurd, Turkman, and Syriac learners. However, subtle differences in showing greater tolerance for irony among *some* Arab and Syriac learners suggest potential cultural implications. Because of the high percentage of inconsistent answers, it appears that many EFL learners have trouble understanding irony, most likely as a result of language or pragmatic incompetence. The identified challenges emphasize the broader cognitive and sociocultural factors that influence the pragmatic competence of L2 learners. The retention of the null hypothesis highlights the complexity of irony comprehension in all L2 contexts and emphasizes the necessity of focused pragmatic instruction.

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