



Iranian EFL Learners' Pragmatic Interpretation of Irony: Textual and Audio-Visual Cues in Focus

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Abstract

The current study was an attempt to investigate the relationship between language proficiency and the interpretation of ironic utterances by Iranian EFL learners and the impact of audio-visual modality on the ability of learners to interpret irony; it also examined which contextual cues, namely textual cues and audio-visual cues, are more used for detecting irony by Iranian EFL learners. To this end, fifty-three homogenized participants attended the study and tried to identify the ironies extracted from the American sitcom *How I met your mother* using two types of contextual cues. The findings of the current study revealed that there was no significant relationship between the learners' language proficiency and their detecting ironic utterances. Moreover, findings indicated the irony comprehension was more accurate when the comment was presented in an audio-visual modality. Results also indicated that the most frequent cues which were used by Iranian EFL learners were positive words and neutral words, however, the least frequent linguistic cues were polite requests and superlative adjectives. Facial expressions and body movements were the most frequent visual cues, and intonation in the voice was the most frequent prosodic cue. Results suggest that multimodality-oriented teachings can improve irony comprehension.

Keywords: Pragmatic Knowledge; Verbal Irony; Proficiency; Linguistic Cues

1. Background

Pragmatics is the subfield of linguistics and semiotics that studies signs and symbols and how they are used in communication in the physical or

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social context (Kasper & Rose, 2002). It is strongly related to the context or situation when/where something is being said. And, It is defined as “the study of language from the point of view of *users*, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication” (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 301). Hidayat (2016) states pragmatics has more to do with the analysis of what people mean in their utterances than what the words might mean literally. Untari (2016) identifies four areas in pragmatics: (a) pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning; (b) pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning; (c) pragmatics is the study of how to get more communicated than it is said; (d) pragmatics is the study of the expression of relative distance.

According to Taguchi and Rover (2017) the term interlanguage as part of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), refers to learning the pragmatics of the target language to form interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), which is now used interchangeably to mean second language pragmatics or L2 pragmatics. Interlanguage pragmatics studies non-native speakers’ production and comprehension of speech acts of the target language and how the knowledge of speech acts is required (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).

Irony as a speech act studied in pragmatics, referred to by Yus (2000) as a figure of speech, that is the contradiction between what is explicitly stated and what is meant (traditional view). The traditional view of irony as reported by Al-Fatlavi (2018, p. 12) states that “irony communicates the opposite of what is stated, and the contradiction between the literal meaning and the intended meaning is essential for crystallizing irony”. Shively et al. (2008) treated verbal irony based on Gricean theory namely the Cooperative principle and maxims for communication, as a conversational implicature that violates the cooperative principle and the maxim of quality. However, recently some researchers (Sperber & Wilson 1981; Kaufer, 1981; Bouton, 2000) attempted to address the limitation of the traditional and Gricean definition of irony by the echoic mention theory of irony. Echoic account assumes that verbal irony is the attribution of thoughts that the speaker implicitly dissociates herself/himself from. Based on Togame (2016) irony is not a clear-cut or easily definable phenomenon. In other words, utterance ironic is not either ironic or not, while, they are more or less interpreted as implicitly attributive with an implicit dissociative attitude.

According to Sperber and Wilson (1986) context has an essential role in interpreting verbal ironic utterances. When an interlocutor hears an utterance, the relevant contextual cues that the hearer finds relevant will

set his or her cognitive environment. The interlocutor will select the most relevant cues among them, and will ultimately achieve the intended meaning of the speaker. So, the utterance interpretation depends on the contextual information which is related to the cognitive environment. In this regard, Yus determines seven irony-related cues that may help the hearer to perceive the speaker's intention, which includes "factual information, Physical setting, nonverbal communication, biographical data about the speaker, mutual knowledge, previous utterances, and linguistic cues" (2000, p. 354). These cues are helpful and used by L1 speakers and hearers to make or comprehend ironic remarks.

Based on the relevance theory, the human brain can integrate simultaneous activation of contextual information, and this activation can lead the hearer to more or less effective processing of the ironic interpretation. Yus (2000) explains that detecting the ironic utterance will be easier if these contextual cues are activated in large numbers, and it will take less effort in comparison with literal decoding. However, if the numbers of contextual cues are not enough, misunderstanding of the irony utterance may occur. Based on Yus's theory, it is hypothesized that the presence of audio and visual context will assist in the process of recognizing and interpreting ironic statements.

Studies show that the better recognition of the literal meaning of an utterance and perceiving the mismatch between literal meaning and situational context are associated with the enhancement of language proficiency. As stated by Shively et al. (2008), the role of proficiency level and greater experience in the target language on detecting irony are denoted. Moreover, there is a similar link between language proficiency and the ability to understand and use humorous talk (Bell, 2006; Davies, 2003). As believed by Capelli et al. (1990), complete detection of irony requires a listener to understand some ideas. First, the listener should realize that speaker intends to convey a meaning quite different or even opposite of what he said. Second, the listener also should understand that the speaker knew that listener is aware of the figurative meaning of the speaker. Finally, a full understanding of why the speaker chose irony to convey his ideas is required. All of these skills develop within the language proficiency enhancement. As Kim (2013, p. 194) explains "a mental structure consisting of perceptual information enables an individual to interpret cultural experiences and expressions to create meaning". Cultural experiences refer to the knowledge of social norms, expectations, and assumptions in the target language which improves by the increasing proficiency level as well as target language inputs.

Authentic English conversations are full of informal and ironic expressions which are used by native speakers in real interactions. English language learning is gained by the formal side of second language interaction such as requests, warnings, invitations, apologies, predictions, complaining, and likes or dislikes, however, ironic intentions like attacking, criticizing, expressing negative emotions, joking, etc., are ignored and according to Kim (2013), perceiving verbal irony for L2 learner makes a great challenge (Ackerman, 1983; Creusere, 1999; Giora et al., 2005; Rockwell, 2000). Most foreign language learners rely on the structures of their first language when they confront the new and unfamiliar situation in the target language. They may use their first language strategies when they encounter an ironic situation in English that can be different from strategies that are used by native speakers. Whereas, the irony is a neglected area in EFL classrooms and EFL learners are not familiar with this form of language. Teaching this kind of language in EFL classrooms and making EFL learners familiar with it, is noticeable. While there is rich literature on ironical language in linguistics, relatively little is known about how the perception and use of this figure of speech by second language learners occur.

Furthermore, based on relevance theory as believed by Yus (2000), irony conveys a much greater variety of meaning than the mere opposite. Also, while irony has a universal definition and feature of human language, a great number of different visual, prosodic, lexical, and contextual cues are used to convey ironic messages with different emotions, attitudes, and intentions. Therefore, understanding and appropriate interpreting of irony in a second language is a complicated process. Bouton (2000), administered a study and included multiple-choice items presented in written form to investigate the interpreting of conversational implicatures in English, and the lack of audio and visual cues in his study was visible. The question that arises from this result is whether L2 learners' ability to accurately perceive irony would be increased by the presence of audio and visual context. There is almost a lack of literature to examine the effect of multi-modalities on L2 learners' detecting irony in Iran, while nearly most of the studies in Iran focus on the role of multimodality in listening comprehending, vocabulary, idiomatic structures, and cultural awareness. Therefore, the researchers decided to explore the capacity of multimodality in comprehending ironic utterances among Iranian EFL learners.

Previous studies suggested that the recognition of the irony is different and more difficult for second language learners, (even those who have

high language proficiency) than native speakers (Bell, 2006; Nelms et al., 2002). Also, previous studies compared the interpretation of non-native speakers with native speakers from the standpoint of whether non-native speakers detect irony correctly or not based on the assumption that native speakers are always correct. However, it will be assumed that looking for how irony is understood, would be better to consider similarities in the response. Since the irony may be occurred more in the conversational environment and daily life between people, as well as in the textual, auditory, or audio-visual modality. Hence, communicators need to be able to understand ironic intent in all these modalities. Also, they should be able to understand irony when they listen to or watch ironic interactions.

2. Objective of the Study

The present study aims to shed light on research on L2 irony comprehension. Hence, the present study aimed to investigate the effect of language proficiency and the presence of multimodality on the Iranian EFL learners' ironic utterances interpretation at different intermediate levels of proficiency. Furthermore, the study explores which linguistic cues in the written texts and which non-verbal and prosodic cues in audio-visual contexts make detecting the irony easier.

Finding a way to answer and solution for the above-mentioned problems led to the formation of research questions for the present study, which deal with how Iranian EFL learners at an intermediate level of proficiency comprehend the irony.

RQ1. Do Iranian EFL learners at upper-intermediate, intermediate, and lower-intermediate levels of English proficiency perceive ironic utterances differently?

RQ2. Do Iranian EFL learners detect written ironic utterances more accurately when those utterances are accompanied by audio-visual contexts?

RQ3. What kind of contextual cues (written ques sub-types or audio-visual sub-types) are used most frequently by Iranian EFL learners for recognizing and understanding verbal irony in English?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

The current study was both descriptive and correlational since it investigated the contextual factors that assist Iranian EFL learners to comprehend verbal irony in English, and proceeded by attempting to find a relationship between increasing the level of proficiency and the more

correct interpretation of ironic utterances; the study also checked the impact of adding audio-visual contextual cues to written texts and the correct detection of irony. Pretest and posttest results were analyzed and compared to discern to what extent the participants in each group could gain benefit from multimodality. The independent variables were language proficiency and accompanying multimodality, whereas the dependent variable was the participant's ability to detect irony.

3.2. Research setting

The setting in which the data were collected was an EFL setting where all the respondents to the questionnaires of the study were Persian-speaking nonnative English learners at different levels. The online instruction was developed in the WhatsApp group for three hours, and participants received an explanation of the ironic nature with adequate examples and through playing some clips. Due to insufficient real-life use of English in the community and the lack of interaction with native speakers, cultural awareness is largely marginalized in this setting. An online survey for the main L2 pragmatic study was developed in two versions (written text and video clips) to acquire the impact of audio-visual context on the perception of irony by learners.

WhatsApp was used for instruction, and Sky-Room and Google-Forms were used to collect data. Sky-Room is a web conferencing system that can be used for creating online events like learning, meeting, and webinar. Sky-Room provides the following key features: real-time voice and video conversation, presentation, whiteboard, screen, and advanced chat. Google form is a web-based app used to create forms for data collection purposes.

3.3. Participants

In total 53 participants were selected non-randomly to do the main L2 pragmatic study. They were 36 females and 17 males. Their age ranged from 16 to 33 years ($M = 22.22$, $SD = 4.39$). 50 of them were EFL learners, and their L1 was Persian; three of them were Persian-Turkish bilinguals and EFL learners as well. Some 28 of the participants had bachelor's degrees, and the rest, were high school students in Shahreza, Iran.

To ensure the homogeneity of the participants, they took part in a placement test to examine their vocabulary levels and listening level. They were chosen from among the learner population who were able to pass the Key English Test (KET) with a score upper intermediate (scores ranging from 140 to 150), intermediate (from 110 to 139), and lower-intermediate

(from 110 to 119). The participants were all enrolled in one of three levels of intermediate: upper-intermediate (N = 18), intermediate (N = 16), low intermediate (N = 19). None of them have received English language education outside of Iran, except one of the gentlemen who graduated in architecture from Italy. No participants had previously received any type of instruction on the concept and use of irony in English.

3.4. Instruments and Materials

3.4.1. Key English Test (KET)

A sample of KET was used to determine the English language proficiency of learners, which was adopted from practice tests by Capel and Ireland (2008). KET is Cambridge ESOL's exam which recognizes the ability to deal with everyday written and spoken English at a basic level that has two pamphlets. In the current study, due to some administrative issues, the first pamphlet was used to measure and comprise vocabulary and listening tests in off-line testing conditions. This section consisted of 15 multiple-choice questions to measure the vocabulary knowledge of participants and also two audios that included 19 multiple-choice questions to measure the listening knowledge. The allotted time for completing the exam was 60 minutes. The reliability of the test had been reported to be .85 based on the results of the Cronbach's alpha formula.

3.4.2. Written Irony Text

The first version of the experiment included a written text in which, a synopsis of each movie scene was provided. Every synopsis has been started with a short explanation of a movie scene and the context in which the movie has been performed, and target utterances were underlined. An example of one of the synopses is provided as follows.

Scene 1: *A strange creature was found in Lily and Marshall's home and terrified them greatly. They are speaking about it in the cafe.*

Barney: What was it?

Marshall: Only the craziest, meanest-looking mouse you've ever seen.

Lily: Mouse? Sweaty, that wasn't a mouse. That was a huge cockroach.

Marshall: Baby, it was a mouse. It had whiskers.

Lily: what those things coming out of his head? Those were antennae.

Barney: Marshall ran away from a cockroach! Hhhhh!

Marshall: It was a mouse.

Barney: Oh, yeah, sorry, my bad! You're a man!

After students read the synopsis of the movie scene, they were asked to answer the questions in the test sheet as a pretest to collect data.

3.4.3. Video Clip

As Shively et al. (2018) mention, the movies have higher validity compared to other sources because of naturally occurring speech acts. Video clips accurately represent the content and semantic-syntactic patterns of speech acts despite their tendency to misrepresent socio-pragmatic norms (Kite & Tatsuki, 2005; Rose, 1997, 2001). Also, a movie as an authentic language input is used in a lot of second language classrooms because both visual and auditory contexts are accessible.

In the current study, six video clips of the United States television sitcom *How I met your mother* were played. The Tv sitcom genre was selected because speakers tend to exaggerate cues for comprehending irony. Each clip was approximately one minute long and contained one to four ironic utterances. A total of fifteen target utterances were selected by the researcher, in which the researchers provided four no ironic utterances as distracter items to collect sufficient data and eleven of them were ironic utterances. There were no captions in English or Persian. Laugh tracks in the clips were not removed because they were played frequently in the movie in response to every type of humor. So, they did not affect participants to comprehend irony. After participants watch each clip, they were asked to answer the questions in the test sheet as a posttest to reach data.

3.4.4. WhatsApp Instruction Group

Before the experiment, the researcher made a group on WhatsApp to instruct the concept of irony in English, possible speaker intent of each ironic utterance, communication goals; they were trained regarding cues which aid participants to understand irony with some linguistic examples of conventional ironic utterances, some examples for non-verbal cues, and speaker's intentions through three video clips. The instruction took approximately three hours, held in three sessions.

3.4.5. Test Sheets

In this study, the tests were researcher-made consisting of two test sheets related to the written text version as a pretest and video clips as a posttest, which was conducted in Google-Form.

The first test sheet for written texts included five questions for each ironic utterance in a synopsis. The first question was included to check

whether the participants had watched the movie before. However, it was found that previously seeing the movie did not have a statistically significant relationship with participants' perception of irony. The second question was open-ended since it would be a more reliable measure of participants' perception of the ironical meaning of the utterances. Participants explained what the speaker meant by the ironic utterance and their understanding of the ironic intent of the utterance, as well.

The third question was used to measure the irony-level rating concerning participants' agreement with the task question. The Likert scale included five ordered categories consisting of: 'not at all,' 'not so much,' 'some,' 'quite a lot,' and 'very much.' The rationale for using the Likert scale was that it is the best technique to elicit opinion and judgment about participants' perception of the speakers' attitude, feelings, or beliefs (Togame, 2016; Field & Hole, 2002; Kasper & Rose, 2002).

The last two questions were the Multiple-choice Discourse-Completion Task (MDCT). It is a kind of task that encourages the participants to choose the best response among several alternatives (Nemati, 2014). The potential of MDCTs in language assessment has been explored in a variety of settings and with examinees of more than one ethnicity, language, and proficiency of level (Setoguchi, 2008). MDCT item format differs across the context and purpose of the intended assessment in which they are being used, evolving and adapting to specific needs of different contexts of use (Birjandi & Rezaei, 2010; Roever, 2006). The options in question 4 were provided to determine the intentions and communicative goals of the ironist and the options in question 5 were provided to determine the linguistic cues which helped participants to comprehend irony. In both questions, participants were asked to select possible items. To calculate the reliability of the task, Cronbach's Alpha was used. Additionally, the pilot study was used to see whether the items were understood or not so that if there were any ambiguity, they would be revised or omitted. The validity of the task was evaluated by three experts who had Ph.D. degrees in TEFL.

The second test sheet included four questions for each ironic utterance in a clip. The second, and fourth questions were the same questions in the first test sheet (pretest); the first and third questions were added. In the first, second, and third questions, the researchers intended to investigate to what extent participants' opinions have changed after watching the clip. Finally, the last question was a MDCT which was explained above to examine the audio-visual contextual cues which assist participants to

comprehend irony. In this question, participants were asked to select possible items, too.

3.5. Procedures

To capture the Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic knowledge of irony, 53 Iranian EFL learners were selected by the KET test to estimate their proficiency levels and to make sure that they were rather homogeneous. Then the participants were divided into three groups based on their language proficiency, namely, low-intermediate (N = 19), intermediate (N = 16), upper-intermediate (N = 18). Then, the situations were piloted to 4 Iranian EFL learners to estimate the appropriateness of written texts, video clips, and questionnaires for the study.

In the current study, a test was carried out in an online testing condition via Sky-room and it was self-administered by the participants themselves. 4 Iranian participants (age: between 20 and 26; three females and one male) were recruited for this purpose. Two of them were upper-intermediate, one of them was intermediate, and the rest was low-intermediate. Before doing the task, the researcher instructed the concept of irony and most of the speaker's intentions of using ironic utterances and cues that assert participants to comprehend irony.

Three episodes were selected which were one to three minutes and contained one to seven ironic utterances and a synopsis of each movie scene was provided. Then participants were asked to answer the questions in test sheets in Google-Form.

The main reason for conducting the pilot study was to see whether the items in questionnaires, which were researcher-made, were understood or not so that if there were any ambiguous parts reported by the participants, they would be revised or omitted for the main study. Furthermore, all participants mentioned, the task was very time-consuming and tedious for them. Especially, one of the clips was approximately three minutes long and consisted of seven ironic utterances. They said that it is too difficult to remember the whole clip and its details. Thus, all the clips that were selected for the study were less than one minute and did not consist of more than four clips. Also, the researchers decided to hold the test through three sections depending on the language proficiency, because each participant in each level needed their own time. The researchers also, separated the test process from the instruction section for it to take less time. The overall attitude of participants about the task and the attention of the researcher to all aspects of the task as a whole was that it had been well-designed. To evaluate the reliability of the learners' scores were used

to compute the K-R21 reliability coefficient, which turned out to be .71, and the validity of the task was judged by three experts who had Ph.D. degrees in TEFL.

The test was done online via Sky-room in three sessions quite similar in a week. Each session was developed depending on participants' level of proficiency to manage the time for each group since each level needed its own time according to their abilities. Participants at the high intermediate level needed between 105 and 120 minutes to finish the task, the time range for the intermediate level was between 105 and 130 minutes, and the low intermediate group had a time range between 120 and 140 minutes. Overall, the time required for each session was approximately two hours (± 20).

Before the experiment, a group was made in WhatsApp consisting of the participants of each session to instruct them the concept of irony and cues that aid participants to realize the irony before the test, and also to send the link of Sky-room, and other necessary links while the test was administered. The test started with a brief reminder instruction. Then the participants received the first written text (i.e., a synopsis of each movie scene). They were asked to read the synopsis carefully and follow the link in the message in the WhatsApp group to answer the first test sheet (pretest). Afterward, they received the clip and each clip was played twice. Eventually, the link of the questionnaire again was sent to the WhatsApp group to respond to the second test sheet (posttest). These stages were repeated for each clip. The results collected from the administration of tests were subject to statistical analysis through Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS, Version 26).

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. Results of the Proficiency Test

The KET test was administered at the outset of the study to ensure the learners are at the three proficiency levels of upper-intermediate (scores ranging from 140 to 150), intermediate (from 110 to 139), and lower-intermediate (from 110 to 119). The learners' scores on this proficiency test were then compared using a one-way between-groups ANOVA, the results of which are in view in Tables 1 through 3.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for the Proficiency Test Scores of the Learners

Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
						Statistic	Sig.
Upper-intermediate	18	145.11	2.494	140.00	150.00	.192	.06
Intermediate	16	128.37	7.553	115.00	139.00	.147	.20
Lower-intermediate	19	115.52	2.735	110.00	119.00	.148	.20
Total	53	129.45	13.310	110.00	150.00	-	-

Mean, standard deviation, and other descriptive statistics of the three proficiency groups are shown in Table 4.1. There were considerable differences among the three mean scores of the groups as the upper-intermediate ($M = 145.11$), intermediate ($M = 128.37$), and lower-intermediate ($M = 115.52$) levels. The results of the one-way between-groups ANOVA table (Table 2) have to be checked to make sure these learners in the three proficiency groups are significantly different from one another. Before that, it is a good idea to check the results of the normality test, as it is an underlying assumption of ANOVA. These results are represented in the two rightmost columns of the table above; the fact that the p values under the Sig. column of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test in Table 1 are all higher than the .05 level of significance indicating that the normality assumption is met.

Table 2. Results of One-way ANOVA for Comparing the Learners' KET Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	8116.867	2	4058.434	185.103	.000
Within Groups	1096.265	50	21.925		
Total	9213.132	52			

As it could be noticed in the table above, there were significant differences among the three groups of learners at the different proficiency levels because the p -value in Table 2 was shown to be smaller than the alpha level of significance ($.000 < .05$). Table 3 shows the exact locations of the differences among these three groups of learners.

Table 3. Results of the Scheffe Post Hoc Test for the Learners' KET Scores

(I) Proficiency Level	(J) Proficiency Level	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Upper- intermediate	Intermediate	16.736*	1.608	.000	12.67	20.79
	Lower- intermediate	29.584*	1.540	.000	25.69	33.47
Intermediate	Upper- intermediate	-16.736*	1.608	.000	-20.79	-12.67
	Lower- intermediate	12.848*	1.588	.000	8.84	16.85
Lower- intermediate	Upper- intermediate	-29.584*	1.540	.000	-33.47	-25.69
	Intermediate	-12.848*	1.588	.000	-16.85	-8.84

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that the upper intermediate group was significantly better than the intermediate groups ($p < .05$) in terms of proficiency level, and the intermediate group was significantly better than the lower-intermediate group ($p < .05$). This being so, it was no surprise that the upper-intermediate learners also significantly outweighed the lower-intermediate learners in the KET test. These results are shown below in a bar chart.

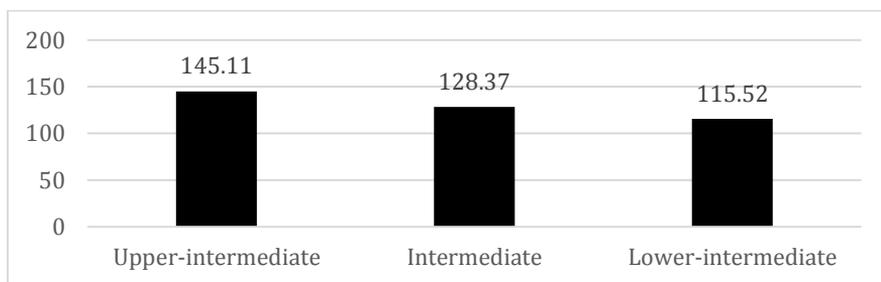


Figure 1. Mean scores of the three proficiency groups on the KET test

It is evident in the bar chart that there are significant differences among the KET scores of the learners in the three proficiency groups. The

results of the three research questions of the study are presented in the following sections.

4.2. Results for the First Research Question

The first research question of the study was: Do Iranian EFL learners at upper-intermediate, intermediate, and lower-intermediate levels of English proficiency perceive ironic utterance differently? To find the answer to this research question, the scores of the learners in the three proficiency groups were compared via one-way between-groups ANOVA twice: once it was done for their scores obtained from the written irony test, and then a comparison was made between their scores obtained from the audio-visual context (i.e., accompanied by video clips). The results of the analyses are presented in what follows.

4.3. Results of the Written Irony Test

The scores of the learners in the three proficiency groups obtained from the written irony test were compared and presented in Tables 4 and 5 below.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics Results for the Learners' Written Irony Test

Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
						Statistic	Sig.
Upper-intermediate	18	20.11	3.341	14.00	26.00	.170	.20
Intermediate	16	18.18	3.673	13.00	25.00	.162	.20
Lower-intermediate	19	17.78	2.678	12.00	23.00	.196	.10
Total	53	18.69	3.331	12.00	26.00	-	-

The mean scores of the upper-intermediate ($M = 20.11$), intermediate ($M = 18.18$), and lower-intermediate ($M = 17.78$) learners were different from one another on the written irony test. To find out whether the differences among these mean scores were statistically significant or not, the researcher had to check the p -value under the Sig. column in the ANOVA table which follows (Table 5).

Table 5. Results of One-way ANOVA for the Learners' Scores on the Written Irony Test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	55.79	2	27.89	2.67	.079
Within Groups	521.37	50	10.42		
Total	577.17	52			

As it is displayed in Table 5, there was not a statistically significant difference in the written irony test of the learners in the three proficiency groups since the *p*-value under the Sig. column was greater than the specified level of significance (i.e., .079 > .05) This result is also evident in the bar chart below.

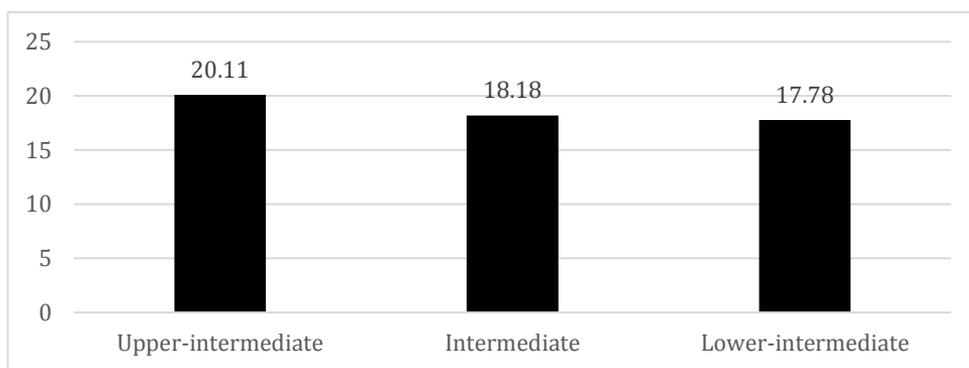


Figure 2. Mean scores of the learners on the written irony test

This bar chart demonstrates the fact that the differences among the three groups on the written irony test are not considerable although upper-intermediate learners outperformed intermediate learners, who in turn outweighed the lower-intermediate participants.

4.4. Results of the Audio-visual Irony Test

The results obtained upon the administration of the irony test in the audiovisual context of video clips are presented in this section. Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics for the comparison of the three groups of proficiency.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics Results for the Learners' Audiovisual Irony Test

Proficiency Level	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Kolmogorov-Smirnov	
						Statistic	Sig.
Upper-intermediate	18	24.11	2.846	19.00	28.00	.094	.20
Intermediate	16	22.93	3.172	17.00	28.00	.134	.20
Lower-intermediate	19	22.47	2.835	17.00	28.00	.154	.20
Total	53	23.16	2.972	17.00	28.00	-	-

Based on the information presented in Table 4.6, the mean scores of the upper-intermediate ($M = 24.11$), intermediate ($M = 22.93$), and lower-intermediate ($M = 22.47$) learners on the audiovisual test of irony were different from one another. To figure out whether the differences among these mean scores were of statistical significance or not, the researcher needed to look down the Sig. column in Table 7.

Table 7. Results of One-way ANOVA for the Learners' Scores on the Audiovisual Irony Test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	26.02	2	13.01	1.50	.233
Within Groups	433.45	50	8.66		
Total	459.47	52			

As it could be observed in Table 7, there was no statistically significant difference in audiovisual irony test scores for upper-intermediate, intermediate, and lower-intermediate learners since the p -value under the Sig. column was higher than the specified level of significance (i.e., $.233 > .05$). This obtained result is also displayed in the bar chart which follows.

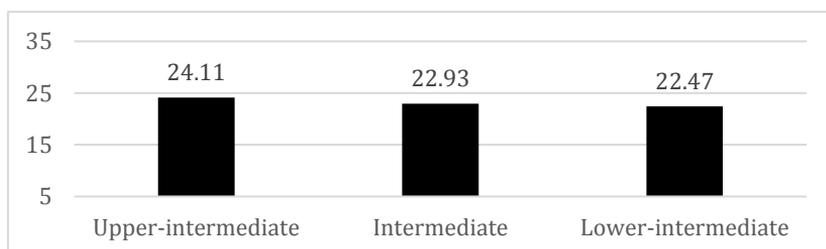


Figure 3. Mean scores of the learners on the audiovisual irony test

As it is shown in the bar chart above, although the upper-intermediate learners obtained a higher score than the intermediate learners, who in turn outdid the lower-intermediate learners, the differences among them were not found to be substantial.

4.5. Results for the Second Research Question

The second research question of the study asked: Do Iranian EFL learners detect written ironic utterances more accurately when those utterances are accompanied by audio-visual contexts? In an attempt to find the answer to this research question, the written irony test scores of the learners were compared with the audiovisual irony test scores of the learners in each proficiency group via conducting three separate paired-samples *t*-tests, and for reasons of space, the results were merged and presented in the two tables that follow.

Table 8. *Descriptive Statistics Results for the Written and Audiovisual Irony Test Scores of the Learners*

Groups		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Upper-intermediate	Written	20.11	18	3.34	.78
	Audio-visual	24.11	18	2.84	.67
Intermediate	Written	18.18	16	3.67	.91
	Audio-visual	22.93	16	3.17	.79
Lower-intermediate	Written	17.78	19	2.67	.61
	Audio-visual	22.47	19	2.83	.65

Table 8 shows that the mean scores of the audiovisual irony tests were greater than those of the written irony tests for all the learners in the upper-intermediate, intermediate, and lower-intermediate groups. To see whether the difference between the audiovisual and written test scores for each of the groups was of statistical significance or not, the researcher had to examine the *p* values under the Sig. (2-tailed) column in Table 9 below.

Table 9. Results of Paired-samples T-Test for the Written and Audiovisual Irony Test Scores of the Learners

Pairs	Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Upper-intermediate Written – Audio-visual	-4.00	2.65	.62	-5.32	-2.67	-6.38	17	.000
Intermediate Written – Audio-visual	-4.75	1.00	.25	-5.28	-4.21	-19.00	15	.000
Lower-intermediate Written – Audio-visual	-4.68	1.52	.35	-5.42	-3.94	-13.35	18	.000

Table 9 reveals that there is a statistically significant difference between the written and audiovisual irony test scores for upper-intermediate learners (20.11 vs. 24.11) and that the same is true for the intermediate learners (18.18 vs. 22.93), and the lower-intermediate learners (17.78 vs. 22.47) because the *p* values under the rightmost column of the table were found to be smaller than the pre-set level of significance ($p < .05$). This result is also graphically represented through the following bar chart.

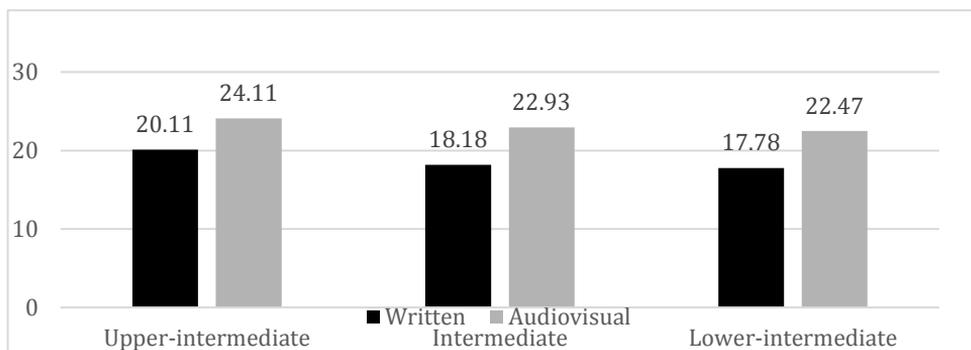


Figure 4. Mean scores of learners on the written and audiovisual tests of irony

It is observable in this bar chart that there are considerable differences between the written and audiovisual mean scores of the learners for all the

three groups of upper-intermediate, intermediate, and lower-intermediate learners.

4.6. Results for the Third Research Question

The third question of this study was: what kind of contextual cues (written ques sub-types or audio-visual sub-types) are used most frequently by Iranian EFL learners for recognizing and understanding verbal irony in English? To determine the frequency of contextual cues selected by the participants for each comment, they were categorized into two certain groups namely, written ques and audio-visual ques.

The written ques sub-types that were selected based on pragma-linguistic characteristics included: positive words, neutrally words, negative words, polite request, metaphor, extreme adjectives, superlative adjectives, and repeating words. The results are demonstrated in Table 4.10.

Table 10. *Written ques selected by participants in each comment*

Comments	Positive Words	Neutrally words	Negative Words	Polite Request	Metaphor	Extreme Adjectives	Superlative Adjectives	Repeating Words
1:	12 (21.4%)	16 (28.6%)	16 (28.6%)	2 (1.3%)	5 (3.6%)	10 (17.9%)	6 (10.7%)	1 (3.6%)
2:	10 (20%)	24 (48%)	13 (24%)	4 (8%)	18 (36%)	6 (12%)	6 (12%)	2 (4%)
3:	25 (39.4%)	8 (12.1%)	8 (12.1%)	12 (18.2%)	2 (3%)	21 (33.3%)	2 (3%)	42 (63.6%)
4:	30 (55.6%)	17 (29.6%)	2 (3.7)	4 (7.4%)	11 (22.2%)	22 (40.7%)	2 (3.7%)	7 (11.1%)
5:	20 (35.7%)	16 (28.6%)	8 (14.3%)	8 (14.3%)	8 (14.3%)	18 (32.1%)	5 (7.1%)	1 (3.6%)
6:	18 (34.6%)	16 (30.8%)	8 (15.4%)	8 (15.4%)	10 (19.2%)	10 (19.2)	6 (11.5%)	6 (11.5)
7:	14 (25.9%)	14 (25.9%)	3 (7.4%)	4 (7.4%)	21 (37%)	8 (14.8%)	8 (14.8%)	21 (37%0)
8:	11 (21.7%)	16 (34.8%)	2 (4.3%)	10 (21.7%)	20 (43.5%)	4 (8.7%)	4 (8.7%)	6 (13%)
9:	30 (57.7%)	13 (26.9%)	4 (7.7%)	10 (19.2%)	2 (3.8%)	15 (30.4%)	3 (4.3%)	0
10:	12 (26.1%)	14 (30.4%)	16 (34.8%)	2 (4.3%)	13 (30.4%)	2 (4.3%)	7 (17.4%)	2 (4.3%)
11:	22 (45.8%)	16 (33.3%)	6 (12.5%)	6 (12.5%)	10 (20.8%)	4 (8.3%)	5 (12.5%)	0
Total	204 (22.1%)	170 (18.4%)	86 (9.5%)	70 (7.6%)	120 (13%)	128 (13.8%)	54 (5.8%)	88 (9.5%)

According to table 10, the participants selected written cues in each comment to detect and interpret ironic comments in this way: Positive words with 204 instances ($p = 22.1\%$) were chosen by participants as the most frequently used cues; neutrally words with 170 instances ($p = 18.4\%$) were the second most frequently used cue. Then, extreme adjectives with a frequency of 128 ($p = 13.8\%$) were selected, next, a total count of metaphor is 120 instances ($p = 13\%$) was chosen. Negative words with 86 instances ($p = 9.5\%$), and repeating words appear with 88 instances ($p = 9.5\%$) have taken the next place in our study. Lastly, polite request with 70 instances ($p = 7.6\%$) and superlative adjectives occurred with 54 instances ($p = 5.8\%$). This result is also graphically represented through the following bar chart:

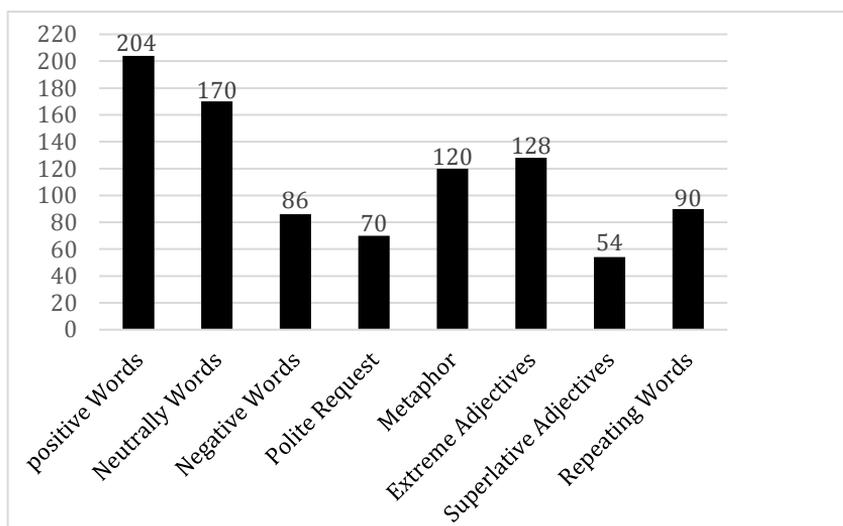


Figure 5. The frequently used written cues

As the figure shows, the first option which selected by participants is positive words ($f = 204$). Then neutrally words have been more chosen ($f = 170$). The third selection is extreme adjectives ($f = 128$) and metaphor ($f = 120$) have taken the fourth place in the chart. Following that, repeating words appear in the next place ($f = 90$). Then negative words ($f = 86$) were selected by participants and eventually, polite request ($f = 70$) and superlative adjectives ($f = 54$) were selected less than all.

To make sure the differences among frequency use of written cues used for the identification of irony are significantly different, the inferential statistical procedure Chi-square Goodness-of-fit was used. It is worth mentioning that the Chi-square goodness-of-fit test is a single-sample nonparametric test. It is used to determine whether the distribution of

cases (e.g., written ques) in a single categorical variable follows a known or hypothesized distribution.

Table 11. Test Statistics

	Written Ques used for the detection of irony
Chi-Square	159.232 ^a
df	7
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 115.3.

As it can be seen in the table above, the difference among the frequency use of written cues employed by Iranian EFL students was statistically significant $\chi^2(7) = 159.232, p \leq 0.05$. According to the above table, the significance value (0.000) corresponding to this comparison was less than the *p*-value (.05). The conclusion to be drawn from these analyses would be that there is a significant difference among the frequency use of written cues employed by Iranian EFL students.

The audio-visual cues sub-types that were adopted from Yus (2000) to detect irony, were: visual cues like body movement, facial expression, gesture, and prosodic cues such as stress, pause, and intonation in the voice. Table 12 indicates the descriptive statistics for the comparison of the audio-visual cues represented in the clips.

Table 12. Audio-visual ques selected by participants in each clip

	Body movement	Facial expression	Gesture	Stress	Pause	Intonation
Comment 1	43 (57.9%)	32 (55.2%)	34 (58.9%)	18 (31%)	2 (3.4%)	30 (53.7%)
Comment 2	32 (59.3%)	30 (55.6%)	32 (59.3%)	10 (18.5%)	6 (11.1%)	30 (53.6%)
Comment 3	51 (78.1%)	43 (68.8%)	29 (43.8%)	23 (37.5%)	21 (31%)	38 (59.4%)
Comment 4	28 (50%)	36 (64.3%)	25 (46.4%)	16 (28.6%)	12 (21.4%)	30 (53.6%)
Comment 5	24 (46.2%)	24 (46.2%)	10 (19.2%)	22 (42.3%)	14 (26.9%)	21 (42.3%)
Comment 6	21 (42.3%)	29 (53.8%)	22 (42.3%)	26 (50%)	8 (15.4%)	24 (46.2%)
Comment 7	28 (50%)	36 (64.3%)	26 (46.4%)	17 (28.6%)	12 (21.4%)	30 (53.6%)
Comment 8	28 (50%)	34 (65.4%)	21 (38.5%)	22 (42.3%)	5 (11.5%)	34 (65.4%)
Comment 9	24 (50%)	24 (50%)	12 (25%)	16 (33.3%)	8 (16.7%)	26 (54.2%)
Comment 10	29 (53.8%)	34 (65.4%)	20 (38.5%)	22 (42.3%)	6 (11.5%)	34 (65.4%)
Comment 11	26 (52%)	32 (64%)	23 (48%)	14 (28%)	8 (16%)	25 (48%)
Totally	334 (21.6%)	354 (22.9%)	254 (16.4%)	206 (13.3%)	102 (6.6%)	322 (20.8%)

As is shown in table 12, body movement has been employed with 334 instances ($f = 334, p = 21.6\%$), and facial expression with 354 instances ($f = 354, p = 22.9\%$). Gesture appears with 254 instances ($f = 254, p =$

16.4%), and stress as a prosodic cue appears with 206 instances ($f = 206$, $p = 13.3\%$). Pause as another prosodic cue was selected with the frequency of 102 ($f = 102$, $p = 6.6\%$), and a total count of intonation is 322 ($f = 322$, $p = 20.8\%$). This result is also graphically represented through the following bar chart.

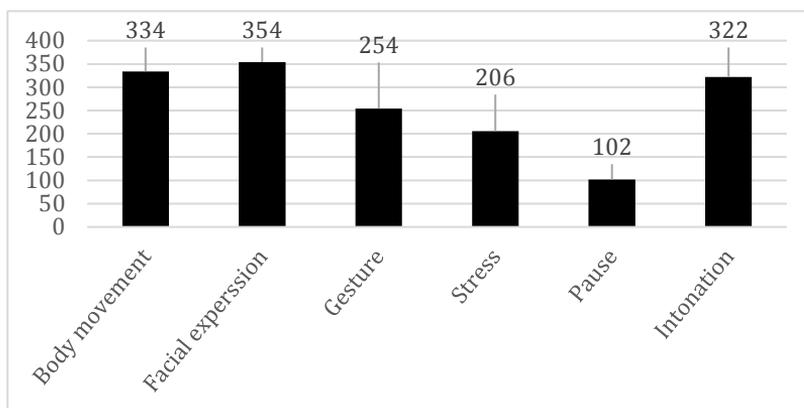


Figure 6 The frequently used audio-visual cues

As displayed in Figure 6, the most frequent use of visual cues is the facial expression ($f = 354$), the second most frequent one is the body movement with a frequency of ($f = 334$). Intonation in the voice as the type of prosodic cues is dedicated the third most frequency ($f = 322$) to itself. Gesture ($f = 254$) is in the fourth place. Then stress appears in the next place and lastly, pause with ($f = 102$) was used by participants in the test.

To ensure the differences among frequency use of audio-visual cues used for the identification of irony are significantly different, the inferential statistical procedure Chi-square Goodness-of-fit was used, as reported below.

Table 13. Test Statistics

	Audio-Visual Ques used for the detection of irony
Chi-Square	175.756 ^a
df	5
Asymp. Sig.	.000

a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 262.0.

As it can be seen in the table above, the difference among the frequency use of audio-visual cues employed by Iranian EFL students was statistically significant $\chi^2(5) = 175.756$, $p \leq 0.05$. According to the above

table, the significance value (0.000) corresponding to this comparison was less than the *p*-value (.05). The conclusion to be drawn from these analyses would be that there is a significant difference among the frequency use of audio-visual cues employed by Iranian EFL students.

5. Discussion

The first research question investigated whether Iranian EFL learners at upper-intermediate, intermediate and lower-intermediate levels of English proficiency perceive ironic utterances differently or not. Bell (2006) and Shively (2008) state that level of proficiency and a greater experience in target language and culture have an essential role in interpreting irony, and L2 learners would be better in perceiving irony by greater language proficiency. Similarly, Taguchi (2011) claimed that a higher level of proficiency and the study-abroad experience was advantageous for increased pragmatic abilities such as comprehending both implicatures types and routine expressions. Hence, students who have a high language proficiency have a much higher pragmatic knowledge than lower language proficiency learners, because they pass more courses in four skills. Pragma-linguistic includes linguistic forms besides their social functions. So, it can be improved in terms of developing language proficiency which involves lexical, grammatical, and discourse knowledge. These findings were also supported by Hamidi and Khodareza (2014), who attempted to determine the relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency among Iranian EFL learners. They concluded the quality of speech act performance is related to general language knowledge, and a greater language proficiency aids learner to have a more accurate pragmatic comprehension in the test.

However, the result of the current study did not commensurate with the expected results. There was no statistically significant difference in written irony test score and audio-visual test score among upper-intermediate, intermediate, and low-intermediate participants. Our finding was supported by some previous studies such as Eliss et al. (2021) asserting that irony is a late acquired aspect of L2 pragmatic competence and learners even with advanced language proficiency rely on explicit processing strategies, including conscious attention to ironic utterance. In other words, L2 learners need to pay attention to the literal meaning of an utterance, then they need to detect the figurative meaning of the utterance that may be incongruent with what the speaker said and the context. This process may be difficult and time-consuming for L2 learners and may lead them to fail in their ironic analysis and interpretation due to the lack of

mental data. The mental data refers to accessible information (ideas, social standards, expectations, and norms) that the speaker stores as schema to use in conversational situations based on factual information or encyclopedia (Yus, 2000). Factual information, which includes mental representations and stereotypical information besides which all new incoming information, provides new and updated information, and this renewed information are gained by particular teaching. Therefore, efficient exposure to the use of L2 in real-world social context by L2 learners in the classroom has an essential role in the extent to which learners comprehend irony.

In line with these results, Tabatabaei and Farnia (2015) found that the lack of adequate pragmatic knowledge makes pragmatic comprehending difficult for L2 learners, even for advanced learners. There were insignificant differences between the performance of high and low proficiency learners before explicit metapragmatic instruction. They suggested language teachers, material developers, and syllabus designers should improve the students' awareness of pragmatic knowledge via authentic materials and input for language learners. In this way, the process of comprehending irony as a subcategory of pragmatic will be much easier when the learner better recognizes the incompatibilities between the information supplied by the inferential integration of simultaneously activated contextual sources and the information provided by the proposition expressed by the utterance, and this process needs to be taught. Similarly, Farashaiyan and Hua (2012), asserted there was no significant relationship between pragmatic knowledge and language proficiency. Participants in different levels of proficiency did not have significantly good performance in pragmatic knowledge. Even, higher grammatical knowledge of learners did not correspondingly increase their pragmatic capability. They suggested besides grammatical knowledge other factors such as familiarity with the target culture and society, sufficient exposure to input, direct access to native speakers, are essential in this way.

The second research question asked whether Iranian EFL learners detect written ironic utterances more accurately when those utterances are accompanied by audio-visual contexts or not. The results through three separate paired-samples *t*-tests showed that there are considerable differences between the written and audiovisual mean scores of the learners for all the three groups of upper-intermediate, intermediate, and lower-intermediate learners.

The results of this study are in line with some studies such as Dyzman et al. (2021), who found that participants' response times decrease when they listened to audio-visual and auditory modalities than when they just read the textual modality. Therefore, the availability of visual and vocal cues facilitates irony perception. Moreover, they observed that participants were faster and more accurate in processing irony than non-irony. So, the results showed that modality is a modulated factor in the process of comprehending irony. A similar result was found in the current study; there were five non-ironic utterances as a distractor and most of the participants in all levels were not able to recognize the non-ironic utterance except three participants, who were in upper intermediate level, distinguished just two non-ironic comments correctly. It should be noted that they make this diagnosis after watching the clips. Similarly, Castro et al. (2019) argue whether incorporating multimodal cues and conversational context can improve sarcasm detection. The findings supported the hypothesis that multimodality is important and the use of multimodal information can reduce the relative error rate of sarcasm detection. Zheng and Zhu (2015) also confirmed that in English classes in which teachers use multimodality in terms of visual, audio, and kinesthetic modality, learners' language awareness and improving interlanguage competence have more occurred. So, the application of multimodality teaching can be useful and effective in the second language acquisition procedure.

The findings of the study that was carried out by Derakhshan and Eslami (2019) also supported the current study results. They explored the effects of metapragmatic awareness, interactive translation, and discussion through video vignettes on the comprehension of implicatures. Findings showed that all three intervention groups were more successful than the control group, and the metapragmatic awareness group outperformed the interactive translation group and the discussion group and there was no meaningful difference between the interactive translation group and the discussion group. Also, they claimed that, if learners are exposed to contextually appropriate input through video using methods of pragmatic instruction, the implicature comprehending would be prompted.

The result of this study can be interpreted in light of the principle of optimal access to irony proposed by Yus (2000) based on relevance theory. The human brain can integrate simultaneous activation of contextual information, this activation can lead the hearer to more or less effective processing of the ironic interpretation. Also, some contradiction

between the information that is achieved by these cues and the literal meaning of the utterance is vital. Detecting the ironic utterance will be easier if these contextual cues are activated in large numbers. Therefore, this process will take less effort in comparison with literal decoding. Results of our experiment confirmed that audio-visual cues presented in the clips assisted the participants in detecting irony more accurately.

Finally, the outcome of the current study answered the third question which explored the kind of contextual cues (written cues sub-types or audio-visual sub-types) used most frequently by Iranian EFL learners for recognizing and understanding verbal irony in English. The most frequent written cues employed by Iranian EFL learners were positive words (22.1%). This finding can be consistent with Al-Fatlawi (2018), who defines conversational irony as merely mock politeness (i.e., an appropriate way of being offense friendly). Al-Fatlawi (2018), explains that mock politeness mainly occurred by positive wording, and positive wording is an important prototypical characteristic of sarcasm and irony in English, which has been manifested by some researches (e.g., Colston & Gibbs, 2002; Gibbs, 2000). Neutrally words, as the second most frequent cue in this research (18.4%), are also applicable in everyday situations. So, positive worded and neutrally worded are used in most ironic utterances in everyday life, and the frequency use of them in daily conversation may affect participants' overall understanding. Also, metaphoric irony has taken a good position in our study (13%), also known as the positive worded strategy in ironic comments. Irony can be perceived as a result of the contradiction between context and the statement (Giora, 1997; Attardo, 2001), Colston (2002), elaborated contrast and assimilation theory in verbal irony in which, the perception of ironic situation depended on the extent to which the statement is contrasted with the situation. Additionally, research on L2 irony comprehension necessarily needs to explore these contextual cues one by one, to be able to account for their effects, which was far from the scope of this research. Hence, findings are so general and more research needs to be conducted to support these claims.

Iranian participants in the current study chose visual cues (i.e., facial expression, body movement, and gesture) and prosodic cues (i.e., intonation in the voice, stress in the voice, and pause in the voice) as non-verbal behavior or paralinguistic characteristics. They used facial expression (22.9%), then body movement (21.6%), and intonation in the voice as prosodic cues (20.8%); but pause in the voice (6.6%) as another prosodic cue was used fewer. The participants rely more strongly on

gestural information than prosodic information. This finding was supported Nazem's (2016) study in which, facial expression and body movement were used as the most frequent visual cue; there, intonation in the voice was the most frequently used prosodic cue. However, pause in the voice was used as the least frequent cue. Moreover, Togame (2016) and Fuente (2017) state that gestural cues are strong triggers of implicature strength that help the listener's production and comprehension of verbal irony to a greater extent compared to prosodic cues. It seems that when the linguistic unit is not able to convey the figurative meaning and the speaker's emotion and the hearer's background knowledge is not enough, non-verbal cues perform as the prominent cues and indicators of the speaker's intent to convey an enormous amount of information about the speaker's attitude and emotion. In this regard, if the utilization of contextual resources is not able to indicate the intended meaning of an ironic utterance, the hearer relies on paralinguistic signals, which can encode the contradiction between utterance and context.

6. Conclusion and Implications

The obtained results showed that there was no statistically considerable difference in detecting ironic comments among upper-intermediate, intermediate, and low-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. Although the upper-intermediate learners obtained a higher score in both audio-visual and written tests than the intermediate learners, who in turn outperformed the lower-intermediate learners, the differences among them were not found to be noticeable.

The results from the present study supported a criterion of optimal accessibility to the irony that the more simultaneous incompatibilities gained by the proposition expressed by the speaker's utterance, and the more the information provided by one or several contextual sources, the easier the access and process of the irony. In the current study, this opportunity was provided by the audio-visual modality (clips) that included the non-verbal behavior and prosodic cues which assisted the participants to detect irony more accurately compared to written cues in written texts.

Iranian EFL learners fairly recognized and used written cues in irony processing in the texts. The most frequent cues were positive words and neutrally words. However, the least frequent cues were polite requests and superlative adjectives. Finally, facial expression and body movement were used most frequently in the visual cues; intonation in the voice was

the most frequently used cue among prosodic cues, but pauses in the voice had the least frequency.

The study in hand bears several implications for EFL teachers, material developers, and syllabus designers. Due to the difficulty of interpretation of English ironic utterances even for advanced Iranian EFL learners, it seems that irony is a late acquired aspect of L2 pragmatic competence that should be taught at advanced levels of English proficiency. On the other hand, it is believed that learners learn English through whatever they are exposed to in the classroom and most of the input includes the literal meaning of vocabularies and grammar, suffering from the lack of pragmatic and cultural knowledge in the target language. Therefore, the teaching context should improve the students' awareness of differences that exist in irony production and comprehension in Persian and English by more explicit classroom instruction for English language learners to develop their pragmatic knowledge.

The present study and studies like this support the idea that modality is a modulated factor in the process of comprehending irony, and if learners are exposed to contextually appropriate input through videos, the irony comprehending would be prompted. Thus, instructors can benefit from using video-taped materials to improve their students' pragmatic competence, and English clips as one of the authentic inputs, are effective and appropriate tools for language instructors for providing enough cultural input and pragmatic experience.

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