

Violation of Grice's Maxims in Online Classroom Discussion: Implications for Student-Lecturer Interaction Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the violation of Grice's Maxims in a sophomore online academic writing class and examines their implications for student-lecturer interaction dynamics. In the context of online learning, miscommunication is more likely due to the absence of physical cues and asynchronous communication patterns. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews with one lecturer and three students selected via purposive sampling. Instances of maxim violations were identified and analyzed using thematic analysis based on Grice's theoretical framework. The findings revealed that the most frequently violated maxims were Quantity and Manner, often due to vague, minimal, or hesitant student responses. Violations of Relevance and Quality also occurred, especially when responses were off-topic or lacked evidential support. Factors contributing to these violations included linguistic insecurity, abstract question formulation, technical disruptions, and limited non-verbal interaction. Interestingly, the lecturer sometimes intentionally flouted maxims to reduce student anxiety and facilitate participation. These findings highlight the complexity of digital communication and the importance of pragmatic awareness in virtual classrooms. The study underscores the need for adaptive pedagogical strategies that foster clarity, engagement, and mutual understanding. It also contributes to the broader discourse on online pragmatics by illustrating how maxim violations, while seemingly disruptive, can serve functional and pedagogical roles in shaping effective communication within digital academic environments.

Introduction

In the evolving landscape of online education, the nature of interaction between students and lecturers has undergone a significant transformation, particularly in university-level writing classes. As online discussions become an increasingly core component of instructional delivery, new communicative challenges have emerged, influencing the effectiveness of idea exchange and feedback provision. These challenges are especially evident in both synchronous and asynchronous online platforms, where the absence of contextual cues and delays in response often hinder mutual understanding. Such conditions underscore the need to examine communication through a pragmatic lens, particularly using frameworks rooted in discourse analysis. Grice's Maxims—Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner—provide a foundational basis for analyzing communication effectiveness in academic settings. As Grice (1975) proposed, successful conversation depends on the cooperative efforts of interlocutors, guided by these four maxims to ensure that contributions are informative, truthful, relevant, and clear. In the context of virtual classrooms, where miscommunication is more likely to occur, understanding the role and violation of these maxims becomes particularly relevant.

Although Grice's maxims are intended to guide speakers toward coherent and meaningful communication, violations frequently occur in online academic discussions (Wicaksono et al., 2022). A violation refers to the intentional or unintentional failure to observe one or more of the conversational maxims. In online environments, students may feel compelled to contribute actively,

often leading to the overproduction or underproduction of information, vagueness, or irrelevance. Such deviations impair communication clarity, potentially resulting in listener confusion or misinterpretation. As noted by Firda et al. (2021), these violations may manifest in several ways, including irrelevant input (violating the Relevance maxim), ambiguous expressions (violating the Manner maxim), or unnecessarily detailed responses (violating the Quantity maxim). These issues are particularly significant in academic writing classrooms, where peer interaction and instructor feedback play a vital role in learning development.

This study aims to explore the occurrence of Gricean maxim violations in a sophomore-level online writing class and to examine their implications for student–lecturer interaction. The online learning environment presents distinct challenges for fostering engagement and ensuring communicative clarity. Although maxim violations are common, students are often able to rely on contextual cues to derive intended meanings, suggesting a dual nature of online discourse: while such violations may lead to potential misinterpretations, shared understanding can still be achieved through contextual inference. Investigating these violations can therefore provide critical insights into how lecturers and students navigate their interactions, offering opportunities to enhance engagement and communicative quality in writing-focused online courses.

The importance of self-regulation in communication has also been emphasized in online learning contexts. Wardayani et al. (2022) highlight the cooperative efforts of lecturers and students in maintaining effective academic interaction. By identifying where and how conversational maxims are violated, educators can uncover latent communication gaps and adapt their instructional strategies, accordingly, thereby promoting inclusivity and interaction. Enhancing pedagogical practices in online writing instruction requires a nuanced understanding of these pragmatic dimensions. As Hadi and Isa (2023) argue, feedback that is clear, relevant, and appropriately delivered significantly influences students' writing development. Awareness of conversational implicatures, especially those involving maxim violations, enables instructors to formulate feedback that is more impactful and contextually appropriate in virtual learning environments.

Several previous studies have examined the role of conversational implicature in instructional discourse. Zahra and Arianti (2022) identified frequent occurrences of implicature and maxim violations in textbook content, revealing how students interpret communicative cues within structured educational settings. Similarly, Fitria and Setyawan (2023) analyzed lecturer–student interactions in remote classes and reported various instances of implicature that arose during online instruction, highlighting the practical relevance of Grice's theory in digital classrooms. Dewi and Indriani (2021) further noted the complexity of virtual communication among EFL learners and the sociolinguistic and psychological factors contributing to maxim violations.

While these studies have offered valuable insights into the application of Gricean principles within online educational contexts, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the specific forms and underlying causes of maxim violations and how these pragmatic lapses affect the quality of interaction between lecturers and students, particularly in sophomore-level writing classes. To address this gap, the present study focuses on identifying the various factors that contribute to the emergence of such violations during online classroom discussions. It also seeks to examine how these communicative disruptions influence the overall dynamics of interaction in virtual learning environments, especially in terms of student engagement, interpretation of feedback, and the flow of academic discourse. By focusing on these interrelated aspects, the study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of pragmatic failures in digital academic settings and their implications for pedagogical effectiveness.

Method

Research Design

To investigate how Grice's Maxims are broken in online classroom discussions and how this impacts the dynamics of student-lecturer interactions, this study used a qualitative descriptive research approach. Because qualitative methods are better at capturing the interpersonal, contextual, and linguistic subtleties of human interaction that are difficult to measure with quantitative methods, they were selected. Studies examining language use, meaning creation, and discourse tactics in educational contexts are especially well-suited for this design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Twenty-three second-year university students and one lecturer from an Indonesian university made up the participants. These individuals were enrolled in a Google Meet-based online writing course. The participants were chosen using a purposive sampling strategy, which targeted those who were actively participating in class discussions. For follow-up interviews, the professor and three of the most talkative students were chosen from this group. To make sure the data represented significant communication patterns and maxim violations, purposeful sampling was used.

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were used to gather data. All participants gave their permission for a 90-minute online lesson to be watched and videotaped. Data coding was guided by an observation checklist that was based on Grice's four maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. The researchers were able to pinpoint particular instances of maxim violations during verbal exchanges because of this checklist.

Three chosen students and the professor participated in semi-structured interviews after the observation. While the lecturer was questioned in person, the student interviews were done over text messaging. In order to guarantee participant comfort and clarity, all interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia. Throughout the whole data collection procedure, ethical principles such as informed consent, participant confidentiality, and voluntary involvement were closely adhered to.

Data Analysis Techniques

Both observational and interview data were subjected to thematic analysis (Seidman, 2006). To preserve all spoken exchanges, the video recordings were first verbatim transcribed. Grice's theoretical framework was then used to deductively code instances of maxim violations. In order to extract insights from the experiences of the participants, the interview data were processed using a combination of inductive theme development and deductive coding, which was based on Grice's maxims. To improve the validity and comprehensiveness of the results, triangulation between observational and interview data was carried out. The analysis was conducted without the assistance of any program. Every approach used in this study complied with accepted research ethical guidelines, guaranteeing that the results are reliable, repeatable, and consistent with the study's goals.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents the research results and interpretations of violations of Grice's Maxims in online classroom discussions, particularly within a sophomore writing class. A critical discussion follows the findings of relevant literature and theoretical perspectives

Frequency of Maxim Violations

The observation data indicate that the most frequently violated maxims are the Maxim of Quantity and the Maxim of Manner. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of each maxim violation.

Table 1. The frequency and percentage of each maxim violation

Maxim Violated	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Quantity	8	29.6%
Manner	8	29.6%
Relation	6	22.2%
Quality	5	18.5%

These results show that violations of the Maxim of Quantity and Manner each occurred in 29.6% of observed cases. These violations typically involved short, vague, or hesitant responses. Violations of the Maxim of Relation (22.2%) often occurred when students provided irrelevant answers, while violations of the Maxim of Quality (18.5%) were linked to responses that lacked accuracy or evidence.

Examples of Violations

1. Quantity: Students gave minimal responses, such as simply saying “Yes, Miss,” without elaboration. This forced lecturers to request clarification or repeat questions.
2. Manner: Responses like “Maybe in... paragraph two” demonstrated hesitation or ambiguity, hindering comprehension (Putri & Winarta, 2021).
3. Relation: Students sometimes answered partially or off-topic, indicating a lack of understanding or misinterpretation (Kurniadi, 2021; Soni et al., 2022).
4. Quality: Some students provided answers that were unverifiable or inaccurate, such as vague justifications for absence without a clear context (Soni et al., 2022).

Interview Results

1. Student Interviews: The student interviews revealed three dominant themes explaining the causes of Gricean maxim violations:
 - 1) Lack of Confidence in Language Proficiency: Students said that they avoided giving in-depth answers out of concern that they might make grammatical or interpretative errors. This resulted in evasive or hesitant language (violations of Manner) and brief, inadequately informative responses (violations of Quantity). “I’m afraid of being wrong, so I’d rather answer briefly or keep quiet,” said one pupil. This illustrates a defensive communication style in which the speaker puts clarity last in favor of self-defense.
 - 2) Question Difficulty: Several students felt that the lecturers’ questions were too general or abstract, which led to responses that were either irrelevant or poorly focused. For instance, some students gave off-topic answers when questioned about certain textual elements, which is against the Maxim of Relation. “If the question is too broad, I am confused about what to answer,” as one participant put it.
 - 3) Environmental and Technical Distractions: Students cited outside distractions (such as background noise in the home or erratic internet) as having an impact on their capacity to concentrate and react correctly. This occasionally led to delayed, erroneous, or incomplete responses, which were seen as transgressions of the Quality standard. “Sometimes I didn’t hear the questions clearly because the connection was unstable,” a student shared.
2. Lecturer Interview: The lecturer provided insights into pedagogical and contextual factors behind the maxim violations:

- 1) Language and Cultural Barriers: When asked to respond in English, the professor saw that students' anxiety levels rose. "When using English, the students become more animated and less passive when interpreting." Quantity and Manner infractions were frequently the result of this hesitancy.
- 2) Lack of Nonverbal Cues: Effective monitoring was hampered in online environments by inactive cameras and a lack of visual feedback. "We can't see the student's expression because the camera is constantly broken." This made it more difficult for the lecturer to gauge student understanding and modify their delivery in real time.
- 3) Deliberate Flouting for Pedagogical Reasons: The lecturer acknowledged that sometimes intentionally flouting maxims to ease student anxiety and maintain flow. For example, giving longer-than-necessary instructions (violating Quantity) or vague prompts (violating Manner) helped students feel less pressured. "I deliberately made the questions a bit blurred so that students would not feel afraid of being wrong." This aligns with pragmatic flexibility in instructional contexts.
- 4) Adaptive Reformulation Techniques: The lecturer frequently rephrased or simplified questions to support student understanding. "I often repeat or simplify questions if students do not understand." This strategy was aimed at reducing misunderstandings and improving engagement.

Implications

Several strategies can be implemented to enhance the effectiveness of discussions in writing classes when analyzing student texts and to reduce violations of conversational maxims. First, lecturers can pose more analysis-specific questions to encourage students to provide more focused and in-depth responses. Second, allowing students time to think enables them to organize their analyses more structurally in English. Third, the use of reformulated questions can help ensure that students clearly understand the analytical tasks assigned to them. Additionally, promoting active participation by encouraging students to turn on their cameras and utilizing interactive features such as polls or chat boxes can further increase student engagement. The findings of this study support previous research indicating that maxim violations in classroom discussions can be minimized by creating a supportive learning environment that actively involves students. Through these strategies, discussions in writing classes can become a more effective platform for developing students' analytical and communication skills.

The dominance of Quantity and Manner violations reflects student hesitation and lack of clarity during online interactions, consistent with previous findings (Dewi & Indriani, 2021; Fahmi, 2018). The reduced physical cues in online learning settings further complicate communication (Jafari, 2013). Instructors' intentional flouting of maxims aligns with Gricean pragmatics, which recognizes that such deviations can serve conversational goals (Cahyani & Budiati, 2022).

Moreover, this study confirms that context and pedagogical strategy significantly influence whether maxim violations lead to communication breakdowns or stimulate richer interaction. In this regard, the findings support prior work by Ajmal et al. (2023), Arofah & Mubarok (2021), and Aryanathi et al. (2024), who emphasize reformulating questions and fostering an inclusive discussion atmosphere.

Compared to offline (face-to-face) classroom interactions, online learning in this study had a higher frequency of Quantity and Manner violations, owing to the lack of nonverbal cues, unstable internet connections, and delayed feedback, which is consistent with findings that digital environments frequently reduce information provision and clarity (Razzaq, 2024). In offline classroom, multimodal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and tone help maintain cooperative communication and

reduce ambiguity, supporting Grice's Cooperative Principle, which states that effective exchanges are based on the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner (Grice, 1975). However, both settings exhibit Relation violations when questions are extremely broad or abstract, demonstrating that question clarity is a universal factor of pragmatic compliance regardless of delivery medium (Averina, 2023).

Conclusions

This study investigated the violations of Grice's Maxims in a sophomore-level online academic writing class and examined how these pragmatic lapses shaped student–lecturer interaction dynamics. Rooted in the cooperative principle, Grice's framework served as an analytical lens to uncover how the digital nature of classroom discourse affects clarity, relevance, sufficiency, and truthfulness in communication. The primary objective was to explore both the patterns and underlying causes of maxim violations and their pedagogical implications.

The findings revealed that the Maxims of Quantity and Manner were the most frequently violated, often manifesting through brief, vague, or hesitant responses. Violations of Relation and Quality, although less frequent, also emerged when students gave irrelevant or unverifiable answers. Thematic analysis of interviews indicated that these violations stemmed from multiple interrelated factors, including linguistic insecurity, question ambiguity, environmental distractions, and lack of visual cues. Interestingly, lecturers also engaged in intentional flouting of maxims as a strategic approach to reducing student anxiety and sustaining engagement, demonstrating the contextual adaptability of pragmatic norms in online pedagogy.

These results illuminate the complexities of communication in virtual learning spaces, particularly in academic writing settings where clarity and accuracy are vital. The study underscores the necessity for instructors to be pragmatically aware and flexible, especially when interpreting student responses or formulating questions. It also points to the importance of scaffolding communication with strategies such as adaptive question reformulation, use of multimodal cues, and creation of psychologically safe environments for learners. These implications resonate with prior research (e.g., Aryanthi et al., 2024; Cahyani & Budiati, 2022), reinforcing the role of pragmatic competence as essential to effective digital instruction.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the growing body of literature on discourse pragmatics in online education, particularly highlighting how maxim violations do not always signal communicative failure but may serve pedagogical or relational functions. It extends Gricean theory into the realm of virtual EFL classrooms, offering a contextualized understanding of how students and lecturers negotiate meaning under technological constraints.

However, the study is not without limitations. The focus on a single class and the limited number of interview participants restricts the generalizability of the findings. Furthermore, the reliance on observation and interview data without triangulating with written student output may have overlooked certain pragmatic dimensions.

Future research should explore similar maxim violations across diverse academic disciplines and platforms, including asynchronous forums, to provide a broader view of online discourse. Expanding participant demographics and incorporating linguistic analysis of written interaction could yield deeper insights into how pragmatic norms evolve in digital classrooms. In doing so, scholars and practitioners alike can continue to refine communicative practices that support meaningful and inclusive engagement in online academic environments.

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