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► To cite this version:

Béatrice Godart-Wendling, Frédéric Isel, Maria Kihlstedt, Maria Pia Bucci. Difficulties understanding implicitness in French elementary priority education classes. Colloque PIAGET-RIPSYDEVE 2023, Psychologie du développement et de l'éducation : enjeux actuels et défis pour le XXIème siècle, Université de Genève, Jun 2023, Genève (CH), Switzerland. hal-04262692

HAL Id: hal-04262692

<https://hal.science/hal-04262692v1>

Submitted on 27 Oct 2023

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Difficulties understanding implicitness in French elementary priority education classes

The comprehension of written or oral language is a complex cognitive activity which results for the individual from the construction of a coherent mental representation of what is written or said (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). To construct this representation, the reader or listener must not only consider what the writer or speaker expresses explicitly, but also what he or she prefers to convey implicitly. International and national assessments (Andreu et al. 2016; OECD, 2019; Mullis et al., 2017) show that pupils from a low socio-economic status encounter more difficulties detecting and interpreting implicitness. Consequently, the children's cognitive development is delayed.

Our goal was to compare the understanding of three forms of implicitness (i.e., presupposition, implicatures, and irony) that begin to be cognitively accessible to pupils as early as age 5-6 (Scoville & Gordon, 1980; Pouscoulous et al., 2007; Loukusa & Leinonen, 2008; Eiteljoerge et al., 2018). For this purpose, we tested 124 pupils aged 7-8 years in a first- and second-grade elementary class. To do so, we used as linguistic materials a contemporary album *Un peu beaucoup* (Tallec, 2020), from which we selected 4 presuppositions, 4 implicatures, and 5 ironical sentences. The experimental protocol was as follows. In a first step, the teachers of six classes (three of them belonged to the French priority education network) read the album aloud to the whole class. A Multiple-Choice Questionnaire (MCQ) containing 13 items was then administered to the pupils (test phase) who answered in writing. In a second session, the teachers guided the pupils to detect and interpret the three forms of implicitness. Then, the MCQ was administered to the pupils again (retest phase).

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed on the number of correct answers with the factors Structure (implicature, presupposition, irony), and Time (test, retest) as within-subjects factors, and School as a between-subjects factor (priority education, ordinary school). In average, the understanding of implicitness was rather poor (Presupposition: 1.3 hits on 4 responses; Implicature: 2.2/4; Irony: 2.5/4). Only the factors Structure and Time were significant. For the factor Time, in average the performances were significantly better in the retest session (2.2/4) than in the test one (1.9/4). For Structure, unexpectedly, irony was the best understood of the three forms of implicit meaning by the pupils regardless of Time or School. Moreover, we found a significant three-way interaction between Structure, Time and School. This means that only irony was significantly better understood in the retest phase for pupils in priority education classes. Taken together, these findings suggest that 7-8 years-old have difficulties understanding implicitness regardless of their socio-economic status. Moreover, irony was the best understood. Unexpectedly, only pupils in the priority education classes took advantage of the teachers' explanations (retest) for improving the understanding of irony. These results highlight the relevance of targeted training to reduce educational inequalities and contribute to enhancing the cognitive development of socio-economically disadvantaged pupils.

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