

# High School English Reading Teaching from the Perspective of Conversational Implicature Theory

Sijie Li<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, China

## Email Address

876794228@qq.com (Sijie Li)

\*Correspondence: 876794228@qq.com

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## Abstract:

Aiming at the problem of deep semantic interpretation in high school English reading teaching, this study introduces the theory of conversational implicature, analyzes the relationship between its cooperative principle and five characteristics—non-detachability, cancellability, calculability, non-conventionality, and indeterminacy—and college entrance examination question types. By integrating real exam questions and cases, this study validates the application of these characteristics in problem-solving and proposes contextualized, interactive, and task-driven teaching strategies. The goal is to enhance students' logical analysis and implicit meaning inference abilities, providing references for high school reading teaching.

## Keywords:

High School English Reading, Theory of Conversational Implicature, Teaching Strategies

## 1. Introduction

Reading teaching is a core component of high school English instruction, and focusing on cultivating students' reading abilities has become a key research topic for high school English teachers. [1] In high school English reading comprehension teaching, students often stay at the literal interpretation of texts, struggling to grasp implicit logic, cultural metaphors, and authors' intentions beyond the surface of language. This is particularly evident in reasoning-based question types, where insufficient ability to interpret deep semantics leads to score loss. English reading teaching represents an important assessment of students' comprehensive thinking skills. Therefore, in the entire new college entrance examination reading propositions, students' English reading is not only tested on vocabulary and cultural knowledge accumulation but, most importantly, on their comprehensive thinking qualities. [2]

The theory of conversational implicature in discourse analysis, with its core of the cooperative principle, is closely related to key examination points in college entrance reading, such as metaphor comprehension, attitude reasoning, and semantic discrimination. Its five characteristics—non-detachability, cancellability, calculability,

non-conventionality, and indeterminacy—provide practical analytical frameworks for interpreting implicit textual meanings. These help students infer deep meanings from linguistic phenomena by integrating context and logic.

This study explores the practical application paths of this theory in teaching through the exam questions of college entrance examination, aiming to provide theoretical and practical references for improving students' logical analysis and implicit meaning inference abilities and constructing systematic reading teaching strategies.

## **2. Core Framework of the Theory of Conversational Implicature**

American linguist Grice posited that in authentic conversational exchanges, speakers of any cultural background must adhere to the “Cooperative Principle.” [3] Pragmatics, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000. This principle is further refined into four maxims: (1). Maxim of Quantity: Provide information sufficient for the current exchange, neither redundant nor insufficient. (2). Maxim of Quality: Ensure utterances are truthful and credible; avoid statements lacking evidence or known to be false. (3). Maxim of Relation: Utterances must stay on topic and avoid digression from core content. (4). Maxim of Manner: Express ideas clearly and concisely; avoid obscurity, ambiguity, or verbosity.

When one party in communication deliberately violates a maxim of the Cooperative Principle, conversational implicature typically arises. Conversational implicature encompasses five core characteristics: (1). Non-detachability; (2). Indeterminacy; (3). Calculability; (4). Cancellability; (5). Non-conventionality. Learning activities in textbooks should allow students ample opportunities to understand, express, and communicate in English, directing their focus primarily on the meaning of language use rather than merely linguistic forms. [4] The theory of conversational implicature and its core characteristics provide a theoretical framework for high school English reading teaching, from contextual analysis to logical inference, to solve challenges such as metaphor comprehension, attitude reasoning, and semantic discrimination. This helps students transcend literal interpretations and deepen their textual analysis.

## **3. Application of Conversational Implicature Theory Characteristics in College Entrance Exams and Teaching Insights**

### ***3.1. Non-detachability***

The non-detachability of conversational implicature means that implied meanings depend on context and semantic content, rather than linguistic forms. Even if the expression is changed, the implied meaning remains consistent as long as the context stays the same.

#### ***3.1.1. Case Study of Non-detachability in College Entrance Exams***

In the Reading Passage A of the 2024 National English Curriculum Standard I Exam, the text states: “Habitat Restoration Team volunteers play a vital role in restoring sensitive resources and protecting endangered species across the ridges and valleys.” The question asks: “What is the goal of the Habitat Restoration Team?” The options are:

- A. To explore beautiful park sites.
- B. To conduct invasive plant removal only.

C. To restore sensitive resources and protect endangered species.

D. To collect seeds for winter planting.

The phrase “play a vital role in...” indicates the team’s objective is to restore sensitive resources and protect endangered species. Option A “explore park sites” describes a secondary activity, not the main goal; Option B “only remove invasive plants” contradicts the text’s mention of broader tasks; Option D “collect seeds” is a partial task. Only Option C aligns with the core meaning of the original text, demonstrating non-detachability—different expressions convey the same implied meaning despite varied wording.

### ***3.1.2. Teaching Insights from Non-detachability***

In teaching, teachers should guide students to grasp core semantics beyond linguistic forms through three training methods:

(1). Comparative Analysis: Organize “synonymous but different structure” cases from past exams (e.g., the original text’s “vital role in restoring” vs. the option’s “goal is to restore”). Use tables to contrast the semantic correspondence between correct options and the original text, while marking how incorrect options create interference by substituting verbs (e.g., changing “protect” to “collect”) or narrowing scope (e.g., adding “only”). This helps students visually identify the feature of “different expressions but equivalent meanings.”

(2). Rewriting Practice: Select paragraphs with complex sentence structures and ask students to rewrite them in simple sentences, passive voices, or other forms while preserving core meanings. Through hands-on practice, students understand that “meanings are not tied to specific sentence patterns.”

(3). Error Analysis: For typical mistakes caused by over-focusing on expression forms, guide students to reflect from the perspective of “non-detachability.” Summarize problem-solving strategies like “grasping main clauses and identifying core meanings”—for example, locating key actions in the original text (e.g., “restore”, “protect”) and matching them with synonymous verbs in options (e.g., “restore” corresponds to “restore”), reducing excessive attention to modifier differences and improving semantic judgment accuracy.

## ***3.2. Cancellability***

The cancellability of conversational implicature means that implied meanings can be partially or completely negated by additional information or contextual changes, leading to semantic shifts. Original implied meanings become invalid due to subsequent supplementation, revision, or negation, reflecting the dynamic variability of implicature.

### ***3.2.1. Case Study of Cancellability in College Entrance Exams***

In the Reading Passage D of the 2025 National New College Entrance Exam I (English), the text first states: “Now, new research suggests that a simple, cheap measure may significantly reduce the level of microplastics in water from your tap: boiling and filtering it.” Later, it adds: “Crucially, this process relies on the water containing enough calcium carbonate to trap the plastics... Additionally, the research didn’t include all types of plastics.” Finally, it concludes: “Still, the findings show a

potential path forward for reducing microplastic exposure.” The question asks: “What can be inferred from the text about the boiling-and-filtering method?” Options include:

- A. It is the best way to remove microplastic exposure.
- B. It has some limitations but is still promising.
- C. It works better for bottled water than tap water.
- D. It can remove all types of plastics in water.

The initial statement implies the method is effective, but subsequent details (“relies on calcium carbonate,” “didn’t include all plastics”) cancel the “perfect method” implication, highlighting limitations. The final conclusion reintroduces a positive tone (“potential path”), dynamically revising the implied meaning. This demonstrates how cancellability reflects the variability of implicatures and their dependence on context.

### ***3.2.2. Teaching Insights from Cancellability***

In teaching, cultivate dynamic semantic analysis skills through a “three-step approach”:

- (1). Link Contextual Clues: Use color-coding to mark “initial implications” and “revising information” in texts, visually demonstrating how implied meanings shift (e.g., from “effective method” to “conditional effectiveness”).
- (2). Simulate Scenario Changes: Design alternative endings with varying constraints (e.g., “small sample size,” “high cost”) for the same text, prompting students to analyze how implied meanings adjust (e.g., from “optimistic future” to “effectiveness doubted”).
- (3). Identify Revision Signals: Teach students to highlight transition sentences (e.g., “however,” “it should be noted that”) and annotate the logical changes in meaning before and after, enhancing their ability to detect semantic cancellations.

### ***3.3. Calculability***

The calculability of conversational implicature means that implied meanings can be inferred through reasoning. [5] Listeners can deduce speakers’ implicit intentions based on explicit information.

#### ***3.3.1. Case Study of Calculability in College Entrance Exams***

In the Reading Passage D of the 2022 New College Entrance Exam I, the text states: “Some scientists claim that this new theory can solve all the problems in this field. However, a closer look at their research data reveals some flaws.” The question asks: “What is the author’s attitude toward the new theory?” Options include A. Positive, B. Doubtful, C. Indifferent, D. Supportive.

From the perspective of the Maxim of Quality (a core principle of cooperation), scientists’ claim that the theory solves “all problems” is contradicted by the author’s revelation of flaws in their data, indicating a lack of evidence and thus a violation of the Maxim of Quality. Readers can infer the author’s skeptical attitude. Options A and D contradict the critique of flaws; Option C is unsupported (the author actively analyzes the theory). Option B (“Doubtful”) aligns with the inferred attitude, demonstrating calculability—deriving implicit meaning from text and cooperative principles.

### ***3.3.2. Teaching Insights from Calculability***

Teachers can guide students to focus on logical connections in texts, train them to infer implicit meanings from explicit content, and cultivate critical thinking through option analysis. This helps students grasp methods for uncovering authors' attitudes and understanding conversational implicatures, enhancing deep text interpretation and logical reasoning skills.

Taking the Reading Comprehension Passage C of the 2023 National Volume B exam as an example, the text states, "Although the app claims to save time, users report spending more hours managing its complex settings," presenting an explicit contradiction: "claiming to save time" versus "users spending time," which violates the "Maxim of Quality" of the Cooperative Principle. In teaching, students can be guided to:

(1). Mark the contradiction and use a three-step reasoning process—"premise (feedback contradicts the claim)—basis (the Maxim of Quality requires truthfulness)—conclusion (questioning exaggerated effects)" —to infer the implicit attitude.

(2). For options like "approval," conduct reverse verification: if the author approved of the app, positive feedback would be needed, but the text only presents negative data, so such options can be eliminated.

(3). Through questions like "Why is 'claims' in quotation marks?" prompt students to focus on the conflict between statements and facts, and accurately capture the author's critical intention from linguistic phenomena.

### ***3.4. Non-conventionality***

The non-conventionality of conversational implicature means that implied meanings do not rely on fixed rules of linguistic forms (such as dictionary definitions or grammatical structures), but rather depend on specific contexts, cultural backgrounds, or shared knowledge between communicators. Accurate understanding requires integrating non-linguistic factors like cultural customs and situational contexts.

#### ***3.4.1. Case Study of Non-conventionality in College Entrance Exams***

Example: In the Reading Passage C of the 2021 National Volume A Exam, the text states: "He was given the cold shoulder at the party." The question asks: "What does the sentence imply?" The options are:

- A. He was offered a cold drink at the party.
- B. He was ignored by others at the party.
- C. He felt cold because of the air-conditioner at the party.
- D. He was given a cold towel to wipe his face at the party.

"Give the cold shoulder" is an idiom that, in an English cultural context, means "to treat someone coldly, unfriendly, or ignore them"—not the literal meaning of giving something cold. Options A, C, and D interpret "cold shoulder" literally, failing to account for its idiomatic meaning in the cultural context. Option B ("He was ignored by others at the party") aligns with the idiom's true implication in the text,

demonstrating non-conventionality: meanings depend on specific cultural backgrounds, and accurate understanding is impossible without cultural context.

### ***3.4.2. Teaching Insights from Non-conventionality***

Non-conventionality requires students to break free from the fixed rules of linguistic forms and instead rely on cultural contexts, social customs, or shared group understandings to grasp implicit meanings. In high school English reading teaching, the following strategies can be used to strengthen this ability:

#### **(1) Systematic Input of Cultural Knowledge**

Teachers should organize high-frequency cultural elements in college entrance examination readings by theme to build a systematic cultural knowledge base. For example, regarding “festival culture,” they can compare the cultural connotations of “Thanksgiving” and China’s “Mid-Autumn Festival,” analyzing how vocabulary like “Turkey” conveys the implicit meaning of “family reunion” through cultural symbols. For “social customs” they can explain the negative connotation of “queue jumping” in Western culture and guide students to infer implicit critical attitudes by combining it with the context of “being rude” in real exam questions. Additionally, cross-cultural comparison activities such as “Cultural Matching” can be designed—contrasting Chinese proverbs like “springing up like bamboo shoots after rain” with English idioms like “spring up like mushrooms” to help students recognize similar metaphorical logic and understand the cultural commonalities and differences in non-conventional meanings.

#### **(2) Contextualized In-Depth Vocabulary Teaching**

For high-frequency polysemous words in college entrance exams (e.g., “claim,” “address”), teachers can collect example sentences in different contexts to establish a “dynamic semantic archive.” For instance, contrast “He claimed he was innocent” (literal meaning: “to state”) with “The earthquake claimed 500 lives” (non-conventional meaning: “to take,” used in disaster contexts) to reinforce the awareness that “word meanings are determined by context.” Meanwhile, focus on culture-loaded words such as “color words” and “animal words.” For example, “blue” in “blue music” signifies “melancholy,” differing from the emotional association of “blue” in Chinese. Contrast the negative symbolism of “dragon” in Western culture with its positive meaning in Chinese, and analyze the author’s attitude in real exam contexts.

#### **(3) Three-Dimensional Analysis of Real Exam Cases**

To interpret real exam questions, a “language-culture-logic” triangular analysis model can be employed. Take the 2021 National Volume A passage “He was given the cold shoulder” as an example: linguistically, identify the literal meaning of “cold shoulder” and rule out literal distractions in the options; culturally, introduce the Western social etiquette of “deliberately snubbing others” to link with the idiom’s fixed meaning; logically, verify the rationality of the option “being ignored” by combining the character’s “isolation” plot in the text. Additionally, establish a “Cultural Misunderstanding Error Statistics Table” to mark error types such as idiom mistranslation and symbolic meaning misjudgment caused by students’ lack of cultural knowledge, and provide targeted supplementation for weak areas.

#### **(4) Immersive Cultural Experience Activities**

In class, carry out situational short play creation. Select scenes with cultural implicit meanings from textbooks (e.g., “Festivals around the World” in Senior High School English Textbook, Compulsory Volume 3) and ask students to adapt them into short plays, presenting cultural details (such as the symbolism of “something old, something new” in Western weddings) through body language and props. Outside class, assign “cultural blog writing” tasks, requiring students to introduce Chinese culture-specific vocabulary (e.g., “dumplings,” “dragon boat”) in English and contrast the cultural differences with their English equivalents, cultivating cross-cultural semantic deconstruction abilities.

### **3.5. Indeterminacy**

The indeterminacy of conversational implicature means that the same linguistic expression may generate multiple different implied meanings in different contexts. Its specific meaning is dynamically determined by the communicative scenario, the speaker’s intention, and shared information between the parties, lacking a fixed one-to-one correspondence.

#### **3.5.1. Case Study of Indeterminacy in College Entrance Exams**

Example: In the Reading Passage C of the 2023 National English Curriculum Standard I Exam, the question asks: “What does the underlined word ‘ran’ mean in the sentence ‘I’ll draw on an experiment I ran in 2018 in which over 1600 people agreed to perform a digital declutter.’?” The options are:

- A. Moved quickly.
- B. Organized.
- C. Operated.
- D. Continued.

“Ran” is a polysemous word, commonly meaning “to run” or “to operate.” In the sentence, collocated with “an experiment,” the most appropriate meaning is “organized.” Option A (“moved quickly”) is inconsistent with the context; Option C (“operated”) is typically used for equipment and does not fit “experiment”; Option D (“continued”) contradicts the original meaning. Thus, the answer is B, illustrating the indeterminacy of word meanings in specific contexts and the importance of accurate interpretation in discourse analysis.

#### **3.5.2. Teaching Insights from Indeterminacy**

The indeterminacy of conversational implicature requires learners to accurately anchor word meanings through dynamic contexts. The following point-by-point strategies can enhance students’ ability to handle semantic indeterminacy:

##### **(1). Multi-dimensional Context Analysis Training**

Teachers should guide students to deconstruct word meanings from three levels: linguistic context, situational context, and cultural context. For example, when analyzing the meaning of “ran” in “I’ll draw on an experiment I ran in 2018” from the 2023 National Volume I, first eliminate literal meanings such as “moved quickly” or “continued” through the collocation of “ran” and “experiment”, and lock in the potential semantic meaning of “implemented/organized”. Then, combine the description of “1,600 people participating in a digital declutter experiment” in the text

to infer that “ran” is equivalent to “organized” or “conducted”. Finally, supplement the fixed collocation habit of “run an experiment” in English to strengthen cross-linguistic semantic mapping.

### (2). Visual Modeling of Semantic Variation

Use a “polysemy axis diagram” to visually present the evolution of word meanings in different contexts. Take “charge” as an example: in daily scenarios, it means “charge a phone”; in commercial scenarios, it means “charge a fee”; in legal scenarios, it means “charge with a crime”; in emotional scenarios, it means “charge with emotion”. In reading teaching, for polysemous words in college entrance examination questions, teachers can require students to draw “context-meaning correspondence tables”, such as comparing the semantic differences of “charge” in “charge the battery” and “charge customers \$10”. This reinforces the awareness that “word meanings change with contexts”.

### (3). Ladder Modeling of Logical Reasoning

Design a “three-layer questioning method” to guide students to gradually verify semantic rationality: First, at the basic level, determine whether the word meaning conforms to the sentence grammar structure—for example, “ran” in “ran an experiment” must be a transitive verb. Second, at the associative level, check whether the word meaning forms a logical closed loop with key contextual information—for example, “experiment carried out in 2018” must match the semantic meaning of “organized/implemented”. Finally, at the evaluative level, consider whether selecting other options would lead to logical contradictions in the text

### (4). Error Attribution and Targeted Training

Establish an “uncertain semantic error archive” to categorize and record typical student mistakes, such as contextual fragmentation (misjudging the difference of “fine” in “fine weather” and “fine print”), cultural blind spots (misunderstanding “bank” in “river bank” as “bank”), and fixed thinking (sticking to the meaning of “run” as “run” without transferring it to “manage” in “run a company”). For these issues, design “context switching training” to allow students to quickly match semantic meanings of the same word in different thematic texts, such as distinguishing the meanings of “spring” like “spring (season)”, “spring (water source)”, and “spring (bounce/jump)”.

## **4. Optimization of High School English Reading Teaching Strategies from the Perspective of Discourse Analysis**

### ***4.1. Contextualized Teaching Strategies***

As a key teaching concept in foreign language education, contextualized teaching emphasizes cultivating learners’ language communicative competence in authentic linguistic environments. [7] In teaching, teachers must focus on constructing contexts.

#### ***4.1.1. Immersive Infiltration of Macro Cultural Contexts***

Teachers can integrate systematic cultural background resources according to the themes of reading texts to build a macro cognitive framework. For example, when teaching an environmental protection-themed article, in addition to introducing the basic background of international climate summits, they can supplement the stance differences among countries at the summits, such as the game between developed and

developing countries on carbon emission responsibilities, and play live speech clips from the United Nations Climate Conference. This allows students to understand the seriousness and complexity of environmental issues in international discourse by observing speakers' tones, body language, and on-site interactions. Meanwhile, by contrasting the differences between Chinese and Western environmental slogans, such as the poetic expression of "lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets" in Chinese and the concise appeal of "Go Green" in English, students are guided to interpret the rhetorical choices in texts from the perspective of cultural thinking disparities.

#### ***4.1.2. Structured Analysis of Micro Linguistic Contexts***

In the analysis of internal text contexts, beyond focusing on connectives, attention can be refined to micro linguistic elements such as punctuation marks and part-of-speech conversions. For instance, regarding the sentence "The new policy, aiming to reduce pollution, has been praised by environmentalists; however, its high implementation cost—estimated at \$10 billion—has sparked public debate," students are guided to analyze how "estimated at \$10 billion" within the dashes reinforces the semantic meaning of "high cost" through specific data, and how the collocation of the semicolon and "however" constructs the transitional logic of policy evaluation. Additionally, by contrasting the voice differences between "praised" in passive voice and "sparked" in active voice, students explore the implicit attitude conveyed by the author through linguistic forms: "the policy's effectiveness objectively exists, but controversies arise from its implementation."

#### ***4.2. Interactive Teaching Strategies***

Interactive teaching transforms English classrooms into authentic communication spaces, where frequent exchanges between teachers and students, and among students, provide abundant opportunities for English practice. [8] Interactive questioning and group collaboration are key teaching methods.

##### ***4.2.1. Expansion of Classroom Interaction Forms***

Thematic debate activities can be organized with a focus on the core content of the text. For example, regarding controversies over environmental policies, organize students to excavate data, viewpoints, and other evidence from the text for debate—such as using "estimated at \$10 billion" to argue for the policy's costs or long-term value—deepening their understanding of the text's semantics and logic through debate. Meanwhile, set up scenario simulations related to the text, such as an "environmental policy hearing," where students play roles like officials, citizens, and experts. Based on the policy content and stakeholder attitudes in the text, they communicate in English to flexibly apply the language and fully grasp the text's semantics through role-playing.

##### ***4.2.2. Improvement of Interactive Evaluation***

Improve the interactive evaluation system through a combination of student self-assessment and peer review. Students deepen their mastery of the text by writing English reflection logs to self-assess their understanding of the text's semantics, language usage, and inspiration drawn from text details, reflecting on the learning process. At the same time, students exchange interactive outcomes such as debate scripts and role-playing lines, scoring and offering improvement suggestions to each

other based on criteria like the accuracy of text semantics and logical coherence. They identify issues from peers' perspectives and optimize them in conjunction with the text to gain a more thorough understanding of the content.

### ***4.3. Task-Driven Teaching Strategies***

Task-based language teaching involves teachers guiding students to complete tasks in class, emphasizing “learning by doing.” It not only inherits the language view and language acquisition concept of communicative teaching but also overcomes the weakness of communicative approaches that overly focus on meaning expression while neglecting linguistic forms. [9] Designing diverse reading tasks can effectively enhance students' discourse analysis skills. [10]

At the micro level, vocabulary and grammar analysis tasks can be set. For example, for the polysemous word “present,” provide two sentences: “He presented a new plan at the meeting” and “There were 200 people present at the concert,” asking students to distinguish its different meanings (“propose” vs. “attend”) based on context. For complex sentences like “The technology, which has been developed over years and is now widely used in various fields, brings both opportunities and challenges,” guide students to deconstruct sentence structures and clarify how the attributive clause modifies the core technology.

At the macro level, discourse analysis tasks can be carried out. For instance, on the theme of “artificial intelligence,” select texts in two genres—news reports and academic papers—and ask students to draw mind maps to compare and analyze differences in linguistic style, argumentation methods, etc., thereby mastering the organizational rules and communicative functions of discourses in different genres.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study, supported by discourse analysis theory, explores optimized approaches for high school English reading teaching. By analyzing theoretical concepts and integrating practical examples, it uncovers the value of discourse analysis in text interpretation. Contextualized, interactive, and task-driven strategies are proposed to help students move beyond surface-level reading, analyze textual logic and implicit meanings, and cultivate critical thinking and pragmatic competence. In the future, efforts can be made to deepen the integration of theory and practice, develop adaptable teaching resources, and improve evaluation systems, providing new ideas for the innovative development of high school English reading teaching and promoting the coordinated advancement of students' language literacy and thinking qualities.

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