

A Discourse Analysis Of Students' Metaphorical Language Comprehension In Interpretative Listening At The English Education Study Program Of Universitas Nias

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ABSTRACT

Interpretative listening asks learners to move beyond decoding surface acoustic input and to reconstruct meaning that a speaker leaves implicit, a demand that intensifies considerably when spoken discourse is organised around metaphor. This study offers a discourse-analytic account of the recurrent errors that second-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Universitas Nias (UNIAS) produce when inferring implicated, non-literal meaning during interpretative listening. Framed within a qualitative descriptive design (Creswell and Poth, 2018), the study was conducted from March to May 2026 with the entire cohort of 43 second-semester students enrolled in the 2025/2026 academic year, engaged through total sampling. Three complementary instruments generated the data set: a Listening Comprehension Worksheet cross-referenced with an Audio Transcript Matrix, Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs) capturing real-time inferential reasoning, and a Semi-Structured Interview Guide eliciting retrospective metacognitive reflection. The three data sets were analysed through discourse-analytic coding informed by relevance-theoretic and conceptual-metaphor perspectives, and triangulated across instruments to strengthen credibility. Six recurrent categories of inferencing error emerged: literal-meaning fixation, source-domain mismapping, discourse-context neglect, prosodic and paralinguistic cue oversight, first-language schema overgeneralisation, and processing-load-induced shallow inferencing. These patterns are traced to learners' as yet underdeveloped capacity to construct the ad hoc, context-adjusted concepts that relevance theory holds to be central to metaphor resolution, compounded by conceptual-metaphor schemas transferred from Indonesian and Nias. The study closes with a proposal to embed explicit metaphor-awareness instruction and reflective, TAP-based listening tasks into the Course Learning Outcomes of interpretative listening subjects under the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) curriculum, so that listening pedagogy is more closely aligned with the inferential demands of authentic spoken discourse.

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1. Introduction

Interpretative listening occupies a distinct position among second-language listening sub-skills: it requires learners not merely to decode acoustic input but to reconstruct meaning that a speaker has left implicit, presupposed, or figuratively encoded. Unlike literal comprehension, which can be checked against a transcript, interpretative listening rests on inferencing — the cognitively demanding process of deriving unstated propositional content from contextual, pragmatic, and discourse-level cues (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021). This demand grows sharply when spoken discourse is structured around metaphor, since figurative utterances routinely require listeners to suppress a literal reading and construct, in real time, an alternative and context-sensitive interpretation (Littlemore, 2019).

Metaphor is not a peripheral stylistic ornament in spoken discourse; it is a pervasive organising device through which speakers structure abstract reasoning, evaluate experience, and signal stance (Gibbs, 2017). For second-language listeners, however, metaphor comprehension is disproportionately vulnerable to breakdown, since learners must simultaneously process unfamiliar lexical and prosodic input, detect a shift away from literal meaning, and map source-domain vocabulary onto an appropriate target-domain interpretation, all within the constraints of real-time processing (Ifantidou & Plata, 2021). Where first-language conceptual schemas diverge from those instantiated in English discourse, the inferencing task becomes still more precarious. Despite the growing theoretical sophistication of metaphor and inferencing research, comparatively little discourse-analytic work has examined, in a granular and process-sensitive manner, precisely how and where Indonesian EFL listeners' inferencing breaks down when confronted with metaphorical spoken input.

This gap carries direct pedagogical consequences for English Department curricula, where interpretative listening courses frequently privilege literal comprehension checks over diagnostic attention to the inferencing process itself. Without a discourse-analytic account of the specific error types learners produce, listening instruction risks remaining generic, targeting comprehension outcomes while leaving the underlying inferential mechanisms that generate miscomprehension unaddressed. This study therefore analyses the common errors made by second-semester English Education students at Universitas Nias (UNIAS) when inferring unstated, metaphorically encoded meaning during interpretative listening, with the aim of (1) identifying and categorising recurrent inferencing-error types, (2) explaining these errors through conceptual-metaphor and relevance-theoretic frameworks, and (3) formulating recommendations for embedding metaphor-aware inferencing instruction into the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) curriculum governing listening courses at UNIAS.

The study is significant on three fronts. Theoretically, it contributes discourse-analytic, process-oriented evidence to the still-developing literature on L2 metaphor comprehension. Methodologically, it demonstrates how transcript-matrix worksheets, think-aloud protocols, and retrospective interviews can be triangulated to expose inferencing processes that product-only comprehension tests cannot reveal. Practically, it equips listening instructors with an empirically grounded error taxonomy capable of directly informing course learning outcomes, materials design, and formative assessment within an OBE framework.

Literature Review

Interpretative Listening and Inferencing in L2

Within Goh and Vandergrift's (2021) metacognitive account, inferencing occupies a distinctly higher-order tier: it draws on, yet is irreducible to, the phonological decoding and schema activation that underpin more basic listening operations, requiring learners to weld fragmentary acoustic input to contextual and world knowledge in order to reconstruct what a speaker means but does not overtly state. Aryadoust (2019, 2022) formalises this layered view by distinguishing pre-comprehension, comprehension, and post-comprehension mechanisms in

L2 listening, situating inferencing within the post-comprehension stage, where listeners connect propositions into a global mental representation through predominantly top-down processing. Because interpretative tasks withhold explicit propositional content by design, breakdowns at this stage are easily folded indiscriminately into a diffuse verdict of "poor comprehension" rather than traced to their true locus in the inferencing process.

This imprecision obscures how inferencing performance is shaped by an interlocking set of learner-internal factors. Bozorgian, Muhammadpour, and Mahmoudi (2022) show that embedding metacognitive strategy instruction within listening practice measurably strengthens learners' capacity to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own comprehension processes, while Tanewong's (2018) comparative study of less-skilled EFL listeners over a full semester similarly demonstrates that a structured metacognitive pedagogical sequence yields measurable gains in listeners' problem-solving and inferencing behaviour — evidence that positions inferencing as a trainable skill rather than a fixed aptitude. This layered understanding carries direct methodological consequence: comprehension scores alone are too coarse an instrument to reveal precisely where, within the unfolding of an utterance, an inference goes astray, which is why process-sensitive data capable of tracking meaning construction in real time are required (Aryadoust, 2019) — a methodological orientation that underpins the transcript-matrix and think-aloud procedures adopted in this study.

Metaphor Comprehension: Conceptual and Relevance-Theoretic Perspectives

Gibbs's (2017) embodied elaboration of conceptual metaphor theory holds that metaphorical understanding is grounded in recurring patterns of bodily and experiential structure, such that comprehending a metaphor involves activating an entire conceptual domain rather than decoding an isolated figure of speech. From a complementary pragmatic angle, relevance theory argues that metaphorical utterances are understood through the same inferential mechanism that governs loose or approximate language use more generally: listeners adjust the meaning of a lexically encoded sense and broaden it into an ad hoc, occasion-specific concept that satisfies their expectation of optimal relevance, rather than retrieving a fixed figurative meaning from memory (Wilson & Carston, 2007). Ifantidou and Plata (2021) extend this account to second-language use specifically, characterising metaphor as a kind of mental shortcut that L2 learners rely on to circumvent the semantic constraints imposed by a limited target-language vocabulary — a description strikingly consistent with the shallow, effort-minimising inferencing observed among the participants of the present study.

Individual variation compounds this picture. Littlemore's (2019) research demonstrates that L2 listeners differ substantially in metaphor-processing efficiency depending on working-memory capacity, exposure, and the degree of overlap between first- and second-language conceptual systems — variation that is highly consequential for real-time interpretative listening, where processing time cannot be recovered once an utterance has passed.

Discourse-Analytic Approaches to Spoken Metaphor

Gee's (2018) discourse-analytic framework foregrounds situated meaning and cultural models, treating utterances as interpretable only against the discourse and cultural context in which they are embedded — an orientation directly applicable to metaphor, whose resolution likewise depends on co-textual and situational cues rather than on lexical decoding alone. Methodologically, the metaphor-identification procedures consolidated in Nacey, Dorst, Krennmayr, and Reijnierse (2019) provide a systematic basis for locating and classifying metaphorical expressions within authentic spoken transcripts, enabling the present study to align specific inferencing errors with precisely identified metaphorical units in the discourse rather than treating figurative language impressionistically.

Errors and Breakdown in L2 Metaphor Comprehension

Empirical evidence on L2 figurative comprehension indicates that miscomprehension rarely stems from a single source. Littlemore, Krennmayr, Turner, and Turner's (2011) corpus-based investigation of second-language writing found that a substantial proportion of metaphorical expressions readily understood by native speakers proved genuinely difficult for second-language users, a gap subsequently confirmed across multiple experimental paradigms in the broader field, as documented in a recent bibliometric synthesis of five decades of metaphor-processing research (Yang et al., 2023, Humanities and Social Sciences Communications). This body of work implies that untrained inferencing, left to default processing strategies, is systematically prone to error unless learners receive explicit attention to conceptual domains and cross-linguistic contrast.

Outcome-Based Education (OBE) and Constructive Alignment

Biggs and Tang's (2015) principle of constructive alignment holds that intended learning outcomes, teaching-learning activities, and assessment tasks must be deliberately interlocked so that what is taught and assessed directly serves the stated outcome — a principle that now underlies Outcome-Based Education as implemented across Indonesian higher education through AUN-QA (2020) quality-assurance standards and the Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka policy framework (Kemendikbud, 2020). Recent studies of English-language programmes in Indonesia confirm that constructive alignment remains unevenly realised in practice: Wahyuni, Fitriyah, and Hasanah (2023) report that the implementation of Merdeka-Belajar-based curricula at English departments continues to privilege broad comprehension descriptors over sub-skill-specific outcomes, a pattern echoed in a recent review of OBE alignment practice in Indonesian English-language education programmes more broadly. Within this architecture, a Course Learning Outcome for interpretative listening that specifies only general comprehension, without explicit reference to inferencing accuracy or metaphor awareness, cannot be considered constructively aligned with the actual cognitive demands the skill entails — underscoring the need for outcome statements informed by discourse-analytic error evidence such as that generated in this study.

2. Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design (Creswell & Poth, 2018), chosen for its capacity to produce a detailed, context-sensitive account of learners' inferencing processes without imposing predetermined categorical hypotheses. This design was considered appropriate because the aim of the study was not to test a theory-driven model of listening comprehension, but rather to capture, in naturalistic detail, how meaning was actively constructed, misconstrued, or abandoned as learners engaged in interpretative listening tasks.

Setting, Time, and Participants

The study was conducted at the English Education Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), Universitas Nias (UNIAS), from March to May 2026. Participants comprised the entire cohort of 43 second-semester students enrolled in the 2025/2026 academic year who were concurrently registered in a Listening or Interpretative Listening course, engaged through total (census) sampling rather than a drawn subset. This approach was considered appropriate given that second-semester students constitute a relatively homogeneous group in terms of academic exposure — having completed foundational listening coursework but not yet advanced listening or discourse-analysis subjects — thereby providing a consistent developmental baseline against which variation in inferencing behaviour could be meaningfully examined. Involving the complete cohort, rather than a sample drawn from it, further allowed the study to capture the full range of inferencing

strategies and difficulties present within this population, minimising the risk that atypical or idiosyncratic cases would be lost through sampling.

Data Collection Instruments

Three complementary instruments were employed to capture both the product and the process of inferencing. First, the Listening Comprehension Worksheet and Audio Transcript Matrix required participants to listen to short authentic or semi-authentic spoken discourse segments containing identified metaphorical expressions and to record their inferred meaning on a structured worksheet; these responses were then cross-referenced against a transcript matrix aligning each metaphorical unit, its surrounding co-text, and the participant's stated inference, enabling systematic localisation of where an inference departed from the intended meaning.

Second, Think-Aloud Protocols (TAPs) were used to elicit a subset of participants' real-time verbalisation of their reasoning while completing selected listening segments, producing a process-level record of how literal input was — or was not — reinterpreted figuratively as it unfolded. This instrument follows established guidance on the reactivity and veridicality of verbal-report data in second-language research (Bowles & Leow, 2005; Yang, Hu, Que, & Fan, 2025), which cautions that TAP data are most reliable when paired with a second, non-concurrent data source, a requirement met here by the worksheet and interview instruments.

Third, a Semi-Structured Interview Guide was administered in retrospective sessions following the listening and think-aloud tasks, giving participants the opportunity to reflect on and elaborate the reasoning behind particular inferences that may not have been fully articulated during the think-aloud process, and allowing verification of patterns observed in the worksheet and TAP data.

Together, these three instruments enabled data triangulation across concurrent (TAPs), product-based (worksheet/matrix), and retrospective (interview) sources of evidence, an arrangement consistent with the broader methodological recommendation that comprehension-outcome data alone cannot reveal the process by which an inference is constructed or abandoned (Aryadoust, 2019).

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection proceeded sequentially yet in an integrated fashion for each participant within a single research session, so as to preserve the temporal and cognitive continuity between the listening event and its introspective account. The procedure began with the administration of the Listening Comprehension Worksheet, completed while participants listened to the audio material segment by segment; participants' written responses were subsequently aligned with the Audio Transcript Matrix to establish a precise record of which linguistic and acoustic cues corresponded to each response. Immediately following (or, where segment length permitted, concurrently with) the listening task, participants verbalised their thoughts through the Think-Aloud Protocol, generating a real-time account of the inferencing process as it unfolded. Finally, upon completion of the listening and think-aloud tasks, each participant took part in a retrospective session guided by the Semi-Structured Interview Guide, in which they were invited to elaborate on, clarify, or reconstruct the reasoning behind specific inferences — particularly those left ambiguous or underarticulated in the think-aloud data. This fixed sequence (worksheet-TAP, then retrospective interview) was maintained across participants to ensure procedural consistency and to minimise memory decay between the listening event and its retrospective elaboration.

Data Analysis Procedure

Data were analysed through discourse-analytic coding informed by Gee's (2018) situated-meaning framework, combined with a systematic qualitative coding process following Saldaña's (2021) coding manual and operationalised through the interactive analytic model of

Miles and Huberman (1994) — data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. Open coding was first applied to worksheet responses, TAP transcripts, and interview data to identify recurrent points of inferencing breakdown; axial coding then grouped these instances into discrete error categories, each verified against the corresponding metaphorical unit identified in the audio transcript matrix following the identification procedures of Nacey et al. (2019). Condensed units were organised into episode-based data displays linking worksheet responses, TAP segments, and interview explanations for each listening item, allowing the researcher to trace how inferences were initiated, sustained, revised, or discontinued across participants and listening segments. Source triangulation across the three instruments, together with participant verification during interviews, was used to establish credibility, consistent with contemporary trustworthiness criteria for qualitative thematic analysis (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this study was established following the criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation across the Worksheet/Matrix, Think-Aloud Protocols, and Semi-Structured Interviews (Denzin, 1978), and through member checking, in which selected participants reviewed the researcher's interpretation of their think-aloud and interview data to confirm that it accurately reflected their intended meaning. Transferability was supported through a thick, contextualised description of the research setting, participants' academic background, listening materials, and procedural steps, so that readers may judge the applicability of the findings to comparable settings, notwithstanding that statistical generalisation was not the aim of this qualitative descriptive study. Dependability was addressed through a systematic audit trail comprising raw TAP recordings and transcripts, annotated worksheets, interview recordings and transcripts, and analytic memos documenting decisions made during data condensation and display. Confirmability, finally, was pursued by grounding all interpretive claims in verifiable excerpts from the three data sources and by maintaining reflexive notes distinguishing participants' inferencing patterns from the researcher's own preconceptions.

3. Result and Discussion

Categories of Inferencing Error

Cross-instrument analysis identified six recurrent categories of inferencing error among participants when interpreting metaphorically encoded, unstated meaning, as follows:

Literal-meaning fixation, occurred when participants remained anchored to the literal, surface-level sense of an utterance and failed to trigger a figurative reinterpretation even when co-textual cues signalled non-literal intent.

Source-domain mismapping, arose when participants correctly recognised that an expression was non-literal but mapped it onto an inappropriate conceptual source domain, producing a plausible yet discourse-inconsistent inference.

Discourse-context, which neglect described inferences constructed from an isolated utterance without integration of preceding or following co-text, resulting in interpretations disconnected from the speaker's cumulative discourse intention.

Prosodic and paralinguistic, appeared when participants failed to register stress, intonation, or pausing that would ordinarily signal a shift into figurative or ironic meaning, defaulting instead to a neutral literal reading.

First-language schema over-generalization which occurred when participants applied Indonesian- or Nias-based conceptual metaphor schemas to English input, producing

inferences consistent with L1 figurative convention but inconsistent with the target-language discourse; and

Processing-load-induced shallow inferencing, particularly evident in the TAP data, described instances in which participants abandoned effortful inferencing mid-utterance under real-time pressure and defaulted to a minimally elaborated or guessed interpretation.

Discourse-Analytic and Theoretical Explanation

Interpreted through relevance theory, most identified errors reflect a failure to construct the ad hoc concept that would satisfy optimal relevance within the given discourse context (Wilson & Carston, 2007): rather than adjusting the literal concept encoded by a word to fit the speaker's communicative intention, participants frequently defaulted to the encoded literal meaning itself, consistent with the literal-meaning-fixation category. Source-domain mismapping and first-language schema overgeneralisation, in turn, align closely with Gibbs's (2017) embodied account of conceptual metaphor, indicating that participants' source-domain activation was shaped more strongly by entrenched first-language conceptual structures than by the target-language discourse cues available to them. Processing-load-induced shallow inferencing corroborates Littlemore's (2019) finding that working-memory constraints disproportionately affect real-time L2 metaphor resolution, and echoes Ifantidou and Plata's (2021) characterisation of metaphor as a mental shortcut: when processing capacity was exhausted by unfamiliar lexis co-occurring with a metaphorical shift, participants in the present study's TAP data explicitly abandoned inferential effort rather than pursuing a fuller reinterpretation.

Metacognitive Awareness from Interview Data

Interview data revealed that participants were often aware, after the fact, that their inference had been implausible, yet could not identify at which point in the discourse the figurative shift had occurred — suggesting a gap not in general listening motivation but in explicit metacognitive monitoring during the inferencing process itself. This finding supports the broader contention that targeted metacognitive instruction, rather than repeated exposure alone, is required to strengthen inferencing accuracy (Goh & Vandergrift, 2021; Bozorgian et al., 2022).

Implications for the OBE Curriculum

Applying Biggs and Tang's (2015) constructive alignment principle, these findings suggest that Course Learning Outcomes for interpretative listening subjects should explicitly specify inferencing accuracy in figurative discourse as a measurable outcome, rather than subsuming it within a general comprehension descriptor. Concretely, this entails: (1) revising Course Learning Outcomes to state that students can accurately infer speaker-implicated meaning from metaphorical spoken discourse; (2) embedding transcript-matrix-based listening tasks and structured think-aloud practice as regular formative activities targeting each identified error category; and (3) designing assessment rubrics that award credit not only for correct final inferences but for evidence of context-integrated, metacognitively monitored reasoning, in line with AUN-QA (2020) and Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka (Kemendikbud, 2020) requirements that assessment be demonstrably aligned with stated learning outcomes.

4. Conclusion

This study identified six recurrent categories of inferencing error — literal-meaning fixation, source-domain mismapping, discourse-context neglect, prosodic cue oversight, first-language schema overgeneralisation, and processing-load-induced shallow inferencing — produced by second-semester English Education students at UNIAS when interpreting metaphorically encoded, unstated meaning in spoken discourse. Analysed through conceptual-

metaphor and relevance-theoretic lenses, these errors indicate that miscomprehension in interpretative listening is rarely a matter of generalised listening weakness, but is instead traceable to specific, identifiable breakdowns in figurative and contextual inferencing. The study recommends that these findings be translated into explicit, constructively aligned Course Learning Outcomes within the OBE curriculum, supported by transcript-matrix listening tasks, structured think-aloud practice, and metacognitively oriented assessment. Limitations of the study include its relatively small, single-institution participant pool and its focus on a limited range of discourse genres; future research might extend this error taxonomy across broader genres and proficiency levels, and evaluate the instructional impact of metaphor-aware listening interventions through classroom-based or quasi-experimental designs.

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