



# Presupposition Triggers: Iraqi EFL Students' Strategies in Approaching Presupposition

Abbas Lutfi Hussien, Hiba Ibrahim Mohammed

College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University, Iraq

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**Abstract** —EFL students are observed to face various difficulties in approaching pragmatic issues; therefore, they resort to numerous strategies to arrive at convincing pragmatic interpretations, among these issues, presupposition constitutes one of the problematic areas for students. Thus, this paper aims at detecting the most common strategies taken on by Iraqi EFL university students in approaching the pragmatic interpretations of presupposition, eliciting the reasons behind presupposition failure and find out the possible solutions. Fifty Iraqi EFL students of the Department of English, College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University during the academic year 2021-2022 have been administered to a test. The paper concludes that Counterfactual Conditionals trigger ranks first since it scores the highest ratio while Implicative verbs trigger represents the lowest ratio. Most EFL students succeed to derive the suitable pragmatic interpretations of presupposition. Consequently, it can be noted that resolution strategy is preferred to the accommodation and rejection strategies.

**Keywords**— Iraqi EFL, Counterfactual Conditionals, pragmatic issues.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pragmatics, as Yule (2006, p.3) argues, covers topics like speaker meaning, contextual meaning, how more gets communicated than is said, and the expression of relative distance. Presupposition represents the category of how hearers can draw conclusions about what is said to arrive at appropriate interpretations of presupposition. In addition, detecting how hearers realize what is unsaid as part of what is communicated. Presuppositions are sometimes defined as a linguistic means to convey background information, which requires very little cognitive effort to be interpreted (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p.706). In other words, the speaker presents these requirements of the utterances which are not subject to discussion.

Iraqi EFL university students are expected to face difficulty in approaching the pragmatic interpretations of presupposition. Further, they might use inappropriate responses through the adoption of unsuitable strategies which do not match the given situations of the utterance, a point which is worth-investigating in this study. In other words, the difficulty lies in the fact that when the Iraqi

EFL university students may show total or partial lack of pragmatic and linguistic knowledge. This in turn leads them to arrive at the presupposition failure which the present study attempts to identify and explain.

## II. PRESUPPOSITION

As a language property, presupposition is one of the most important concepts that occupies a prominent discussion related to pragmatics. The term presupposition is sought when an utterance presupposes and implies another utterance. A satisfactory definition is offered by Frege (in Finch, 2000, p.165), who describes presupposition as “implicit information of proposition embedded in a sentence or utterance”. Language users do not fully disclose all pertinent details of the topic being addressed, hence presumption is employed as a communication technique to avoid this. This means that presupposition can be employed as a language economy method. If a speaker has to lay out all the details every time he or she spoke, communication would be exceedingly long and monotonous. It is possible to take shortcuts if one can

presume a certain level of knowledge of the recipient. Then, presupposition can be thought of as background information necessary for processing the new information asserted (or implicated) in the utterance (Culpeper & Haugh, 2014, p.74). However, presupposition can be used to foreground information and to communicate new information implicitly. There are various linguistic components known as presupposition triggers that allow the speakers to express intended information without explicitly declaring the presuppositions. These components either cause presuppositions to occur or they indicate that they exist. It is crucial that listeners or readers are aware of these triggers in order to realize presuppositions. As they become true in context, these presupposition triggers might be thought of as potential presuppositions. Because listeners are presumed to be aware of some pieces of information, speakers may not feel the need to mention them. Both a positive and a negative impact may result from this on how the information is interpreted. In that vein, some presuppositional triggers seem geared towards presupposing new, rather than old, information, e.g. cleft constructions and factive verbs (ibid). In certain cases, a speaker may act as if certain propositions are part of the common background when s/he knows that they are not. This, indeed, gives rise to a potentially manipulative use of presupposition.

### III. SEMANTIC AND PRAGMATIC PRESUPPOSITION

The study of human language meaning is usually divided into two components. The study of the underlying meaning of words and phrases as linguistic expressions is known as semantics. Pragmatics, on the other hand, is concerned with the aspects of meaning that are obtained from the way words and sentences are employed.

Semantic presupposition is frequently defined in terms of entailment along the lines of the following. Entailment is a relationship between two statements in which the truth of the second is inextricably linked to the truth of the first. One cannot assert one's truth while denying the others'. Another way to say it, S1 implies S2 semantically if and only if any condition that makes S1 true also makes S2 true. If S2 is false, thus, S1 must also be false. However, S1 semantically implies S2 if and only if S2 is true in all cases where S1 is true and false in all situations where S1 is false (Lyons, 1977, p.232). The semantic approaches to presupposition deal with sentences as bearers of presuppositions (Huang, 2017, p.85). In this sense, presupposition of a sentence can be triggered regardless of contextual factors or speaker's intention.

On the other hand, pragmatic presuppositions are conditions on the proper use of sentences and lexical objects, as the name implies. By stating that "an utterance of a sentence pragmatically assumes that its context is acceptable." According to Levinson (1983, p. 217), the difficulty of pragmatic presupposition stems from the fact that it is a diverse and heterogeneous collection of occurrences. To make things easier, Akmajian, et al. (1997, p. 383) and others specify three basic forms of pragmatic presupposition phenomena:

- (1) It is a type of addresser's attitude (belief) toward a proposition,
- (2) It makes a sentence or a proposition conditional on achieving felicities, and
- (3) It is a mutual understanding between the addresser and the addressee.

Because pragmatic presuppositions fluctuate depending on the context and the interlocutors' beliefs, they cannot be described just by referring to the sentence. One method to limit the concept is to speak about propositions to the truth of which the addresser is committed, rather than requirements that the utterance must meet.

Furthermore, Yule (1996, p. 25) argues that pragmatic presupposition is "something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance. Speakers, not sentences, have presuppositions", for example:

- *Mary's brother bought three horses.*

In the above example, the addresser is typically required to have presuppositions that a person named Mary exists and that she has a sibling while creating this speech. The addresser might also assume Mary has only one brother and that he is wealthy. All of the addresser's assumptions are valid, but any of them could be incorrect. As a result, a presupposition is a set of ideas that addressers believe are proper background, drawn from the context of dialogue or from their commonplace knowledge, which differs from person to person. To simply matters, Stalnaker (1999, p.8) gives a definition of addresser presupposition by reference to sentence presupposition. For him:

a sentence has a presupposition p just in case the use of that sentence would for some reason normally be inappropriate unless the speaker were disposed to act in his linguistic behavior as if he took the truth of p for granted and as if he assumed that his audience recognized that he was doing so.

This suggests that in order for a sentence to be read correctly, there must be a significant interplay between sentence presupposition and addresser presupposition. Consider:

*- I need to pick up my daughter at the airport*

The example assumes that the addressee has a daughter. Unless the addresser presupposes that he has a daughter or prepared to act as if he does, this remark will be seen as improper. As a result, a sentence in this situation requires presupposition, and the sentence's appropriateness is judged only by the addresser's internal state.

#### IV. PRESUPPOSITION FAILURE

In order to comprehend a sentence that contains one of the presupposition triggers correctly, one must be able to recognize and access relevant shared information between speakers and listeners, such as linguistic context, situational context, and global knowledge. Context is an important factor in determining if an assumption is valid, whether it will be challenged, refuted, or whether it will result in a lack of understanding. A "presupposition failure" occurs when the proposition assumed to be true is in fact false.

Presupposition failure, as Saeed states (2003, p.105), occurs when a presupposed proposition fails to hold. If  $q$  does not belong to the background of common presuppositions in a discourse, a sentence  $P$  assumes  $q$  would be unsuitable (Stalnaker 2002, p 716). When a speaker utters a statement  $p$  that contains a presupposition, that presupposition  $q$  is activated, and  $q$  does not belong to the common ground, the speaker is said to have failed. Speakers are expected to remedy this shortcoming in order to understand the felicity of the utterance. In addition, Glanzberg (2003, p.5) mentions that in the situation of presupposition failure, there are two subcategories of infelicity that can occur. Strong presuppositions, for example, are activated when certain syntactic structures or lexical items are used. The failure of these types of presuppositions necessitates the context's restoration. Weak presuppositions, on the other hand, are activated when other types of triggers are present. The failure of these kinds of presuppositions results in the context being optionally repaired. Take a look at these utterances:

1 - *That palm tree is about to fall.*

i. Context: no salient palm tree.

2- *Even John solved the problem.*

i. Context: assumes John was most likely to solve the problem. (Glanzberg, 2003, p.5)

In the first utterance, there is a complex demonstrative which gives (activates) a strong presupposition, since the context lacks the presupposition of existence of a relevant palm tree. Thus, the utterance fails to give a full proposition and to have truth-values, because it induces or

creates an obligatory repair. As a result, Glanzberg introduces the two categories of being infelicitous described above, which are based on the type of presupposition triggers present in the statement. Glanzberg presents a setting in which presuppositions are not part of the common ground, resulting in a presupposition failure, to demonstrate the distinction between mandatory and optional presupposition triggers. Elaborately, Von Stechow (2008, p.21), expounds "at the pragmatic level, speakers need to consider what it takes for an assertion of such a sentence to be successful" and that the information conveyed by the presupposition should be uncontroversial.

To summarize, common ground accounts of presuppositions have highlighted the unique epistemic status of presuppositions in discourse. Presuppositions are introduced as information that is accepted, or acceptable, by all participants in the conversation, and thus felicitous uses of presuppositions necessitate interlocutors' willing to take this epistemic stance. This is why presuppositions, whether informative or not, are only useful for transmitting information if it is non-controversial.

#### V. METHODOLOGY

The method of this paper is a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) in which the data are analyzed both descriptively and statistically. The sample of the current study is fifty Iraqi EFL university students at English Department, College of Arts, Mustansiriyah University. All of the participants are fourth-year students in the academic year (2021-2022). In order to collect the data, a test consisting of 24 items is administered to the participants to ask them to deduce the appropriate pragmatic interpretations of presupposition. The test is designed according to Archer et al. s' (2012) presupposition triggers for constructing the items of the test and Domaneschi (2016) model for eliciting strategies that EFL university students employ to approach the pragmatic interpretations of presupposition. The test is designed in the form of question- answer technique. That is, the students should give appropriate responses. Each trigger type consists of three different utterances which intend to test the EFL students' ability in giving a suitable presuppositional interpretations. Thus, investigating the most common strategies adopted by Iraqi EFL students in guessing the pragmatic interpretations of presupposition are detected. In this case, the students have to give more than one interpretation.

## VI. MODELS OF ANALYSIS

As mentioned above, the proposed model consists of two sub-models; for construction a test, Archer et al.'s (2012) presupposition triggers is made use of while for accounting the pragmatic strategies followed by students in providing appropriate presuppositional interpretations, Domaneschi (2016) model is conducted.

### 6.1 Archer et al.'s Presupposition Triggers (2012)

Linguistic presuppositions are triggered by linguistic elements, whose function is to constrain the construction of the context of the interpretations of the utterance. These linguistic constructions have been isolated by linguists as sources of presuppositions known as presuppositions or lexical triggers. Levinson argues (1983, p.179), that a presupposition trigger is a construction or item that denotes the existence of presupposition. Based on Archer et al.'s (2012, p. 30) classification, triggers, are categorized into eight main kinds: *definite descriptions*, *factive verbs*, *change of state verbs*, *implicative verbs*, *temporal clauses*, *cleft sentences*, *comparatives*, and *counterfactual conditionals*.

#### A. Definite descriptions

Definite descriptions are basically words or phrases that indicate definite meaning. They presuppose the presence of an entity that matches the descriptions even though there are not said, or that there is such an entity. By simple means, they express the statement that there is a real entity in an utterance. The following are examples of definite descriptions from Levinson (1983, p.181)

- John didn't see *the man* with two heads
- » *there exists a man with two heads*

The above example is a sentence "the man with two heads" triggers the presupposition "there exists a man with two heads". Whether John see or did not see the man, the presupposition is still going to be, "there exists a man with two heads".

#### B. Factive verbs

Factive verbs are verbs that presuppose their complement to be true. Verbs, such as *realize*, *know*, *witness*, *understand*, *do*, and many other verbs indicate the factual truth of their objects. These verbs show that finding a presence of presupposition in the utterance with something that is true or already happens. The following example includes a factive verb as a trigger:

- John *knows* that Mary passed the exam
- » assumes that Mary passed

In the above example, the word *knows* triggers the presupposition in the utterance. Whether John knew or he did not, does not change the fact that he knows about

Mary's passing. Thus, it triggers the presupposition that "*Mary passed*."

#### C. Change-of-state verbs

Change of state verbs are verbs that involve a change shift of the kind of behaviors or states.

- Mary has *stopped* revising
- » *Mary has revised previously*

In the light of the example, "Mary stopped or she did not stop revising" presupposes that Mary had been revised previously. This means that the utterance presupposes something that had been happened.

#### D. Implicative verbs

Implicit verbs are another fascinating category of verbs that includes words like "*mange*". These verbs carry the presupposition that some necessary and sufficient condition existed, and that this condition alone determines whether the event stated in the complement actually occurred.

- John *didn't manage* to pass the exam
- » *assumes John tried to pass*

In the light of this example, the utterance presupposes that "*John tried to pass*". It triggers the presupposition of the implied meaning that is happening. Thus, it is because the sentence implies the meaning of what John doing from the utterance.

#### E. Temporal clauses

Temporal clause refers to the use of conjunctions in the presupposed utterance, such as *after*, *since*, *during*, *while*, *whenever*, *as*, etc. The situation described in a clause that starts with the temporal clause constructor is usually considered as backgrounded information. The following is an example referring to temporal clause.

- John consoled himself in the pub, *after* he failed the exam
- » *John failed the exam*.

#### F. Cleft sentence

Cleft sentence structures focus on certain points of aspects in the sentence and regard the information around it as backgrounded knowledge. Such sentences are usually not spoken to strangers, but rather to the recipient who knows the current situation. The following is an example of cleft sentences.

- *It wasn't* Mary who got drunk » *someone other than Mary got drunk*

The above example indicates that the speaker in the utterance states that it was not Mary who got drunk. It triggers the presupposition in the utterance that "someone had gotten drunk".

## G. Comparatives

Comparisons may be marked by comparative constructions:

- Mary is **better at** revising than John      » *both*  
*Mary and John revised*

In the light of this example, there is a comparative trigger that triggers the presupposition "*Both Mary and John revised.*"

## H. Counterfactual conditionals

Counterfactual conditional is the kind of presupposition triggers where the situation in the sentence mentioned is not happening before. The condition that mostly triggers it is the if-clause sentence. To make it simple, the meaning of the mentioned sentence is contrary to what is happening.

- **If** John were better at revising, he would have passed the exam    » *John isn't good at revising*

The sentence mentions that the word if clause in "**If** John were better at revising, he would have passed the exam" triggers the presupposition in the sentence which is "*John isn't good at revising*". Because if John were better at revising, he would have passed the exam, but what was happening he weren't.

### 6.2 Domaneschi's Presuppositional Strategies

Based on Domaneschi (2016, p.102), when a hearer interprets and encounters utterances with presupposition triggers, s/he will follow one or more of the three strategies:

#### 1. Resolution

According to the first strategy, the hearer identifies the proposition in an utterance as common ground. In other words, this strategy is equal to identifying a proposition that is demanded by the trigger with the proposition which is already within a context. For instance, "*last night, Henry went to Sam's house again*". If the hearer believes, at the time of the utterance, that Henry went to Sam's house previously, this belief will function as a presupposition resolution. If s/he does not believe it at that time, either accommodation or rejection employs.

#### 2. Accommodation

The second strategy explains the case when a hearer accepts as presupposition the proposition that is demanded by the trigger, but is not common ground. This happens especially in case the demanded presupposition cannot be

specified with any proposition in the context. Presuppositions can be exploited to convey information in an assertion-like fashion, by appeal to the use of accommodation (Lewis, 1979, p. 340). Drawing upon the work of Stalnaker (1976), the term *accommodation* is used to describe the process whereby an utterance felicitously presupposes information that is not taken for granted in the context. Accommodation may repair misalignment between speaker and hearer that is due to the fact that hearer does not possess information that is known to the speaker and relevant to the current discourse.

#### 3. Rejection

In the third strategy, the hearer rejects the trigger and therefore does not regard what is common ground as presupposition of the trigger. In other words, the third strategy is to ignore the trigger. Hearers often manage to adopt resolution first, since it is a default strategy. When hearers cannot adopt the resolution strategy, they select accommodation or rejection. This means that resolution is the basic strategy and others are secondary ones.

## VII. RESULTS ANALYSIS

The statistical analysis of presupposition triggers classification reports the depiction of the correct and incorrect responses arranged across various utterances for each trigger. The results indicate that the total percentages of the students' responses for producing the appropriate interpretations of presupposition for all the items amounts to (72.5%) as indicated in table (1). Generally speaking, this percentage illustrates that most of the EFL students can do well in deducing the pragmatic interpretations of presupposition. Surprisingly, this suggests a developmental level in the students' general pragmatic and linguistic abilities. However, it can also be noted that (27.5%) of the students cannot provide appropriate pragmatic interpretations of presuppositions. *Counterfactual Conditionals* trigger represents the highest rank, which means it surpasses the first mostly dominant presupposition trigger with rate (85.3%). This can be due to the use of certain words and phrases which are easy to comprehend for triggering the appropriate presuppositions. In addition, it seems that the EFL students are familiar with this type of triggers.

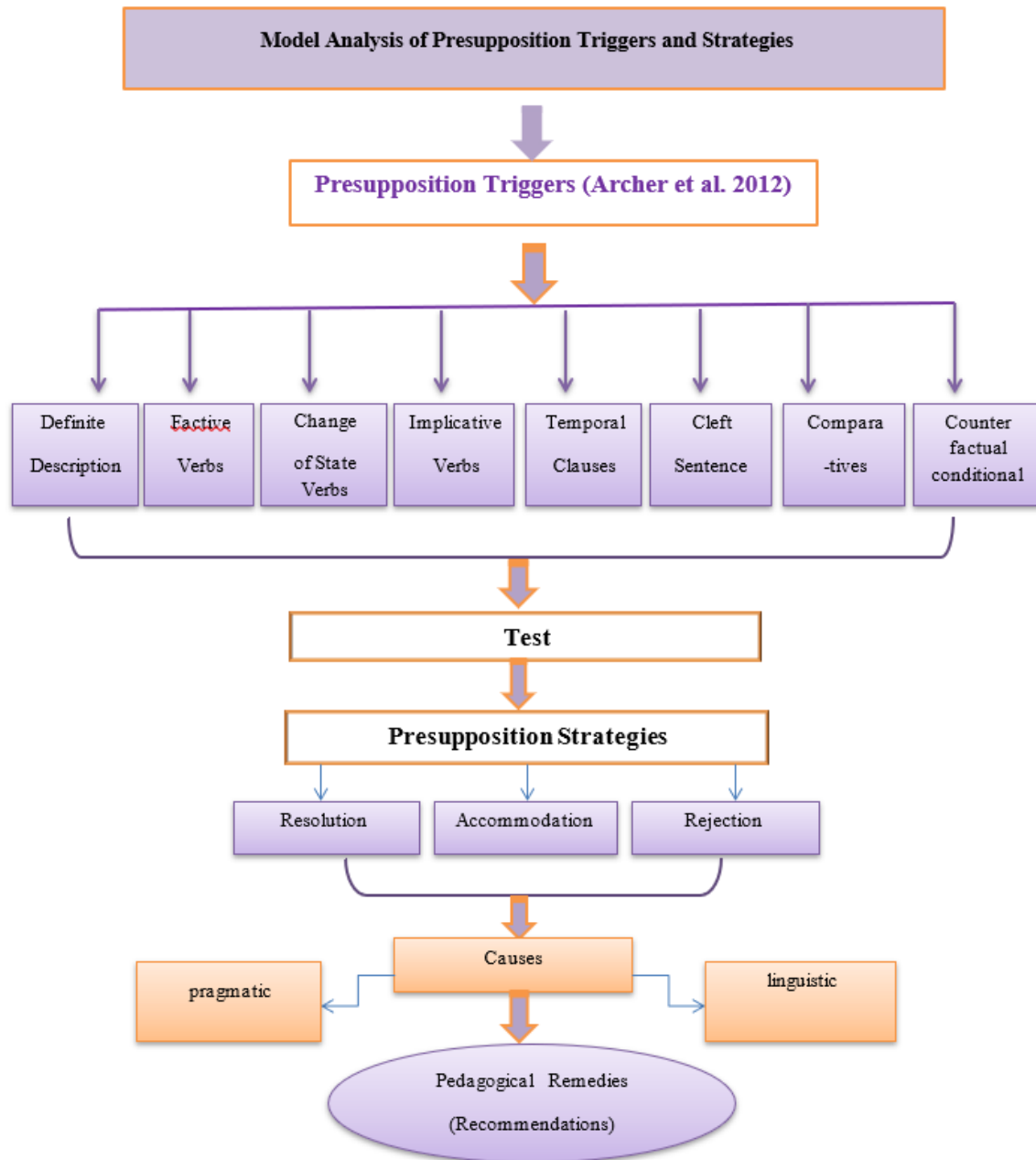


Fig.2: Model of Analysis

Table 1: Overall Results of Presupposition Triggers and Strategies

Trigger No.	Per. of correct Responses	Per. of incorrect Responses	Resolution	Accommodation	Rejection	No Strategy
1	74%	26%	20%	44%	10%	26%
2	78%	22%	42%	25.3%	10%	22%
3	81.3%	18.6%	44%	26%	11%	18.6%
4	50%	50%	23.3%	14.7%	12%	50%
5	71.3%	28.7%	35.3%	19.3%	16.6%	28.7%
6	76.6%	23.3%	37.3%	27.3%	12%	23.3%

7	63.3	36.6%	15.3%	22.6%	25.3%	36.6%
8	85.3%	14.7%	46.6%	25.3%	13.3%	14.7%
Total	72.5%	27.5%	33%	25.63%	13.63%	27.5%

On the contrary, *Implicative Verbs* kind of trigger scores the lowest rate among other triggers as it records (50%). This failure may be due to the students' unfamiliarity of the use of the implicative verbs or perhaps they have misunderstood the context of the utterance. Other kinds of triggers are arranged descendingly as follows: Change of state verbs with (81.3%), Factives with (78%), Cleft sentences with (76.6%), Definite descriptions (74%), Temporal clauses with (71.3%), and Comparatives with (63.3%). The analysis of the 24 items with respect to the strategies used to deduce the appropriate presuppositions reveals that the students utilize a variety of strategies as seen in chart (1).

Generally speaking, the total analysis of the twenty-four items of the test displays that (33%) of the testees prefer the resolution strategy; (25.63%) of the EFL student resort to the accommodation strategy. In addition, (13.63%) stands for the rejection strategy, and finally (27.5%) of the students decide to follow no strategy (i.e. they are unable to follow any suitable strategies) as indicated in table (1).

Table (1) above reveals that EFL students mostly have tendency to the resolution strategy. The analysis of the students' choices of the strategies indicates that the average percentage of the students amounts to (33%) for the resolution strategy. The students' use of the mentioned strategy proves their capability to pragmatically interpret the presuppositions of the utterances especially when they encounter with triggers like *factives*, *change of state verbs*, and *counter factual conditionals*, as illustrated in table (1) and chart (1).

As a matter of fact, resolution strategy tend to give a sense of certainty to the interpretations of the presupposition. When the students deduce the presuppositions, they first, specify if the whole information expressed by an utterance through a presupposition trigger is familiar. Second, they assume if there are some parts of the information referred to in the utterances which have already common ground information i.e can be identified from information within the context, they follow resolution strategy. (For an overview, see Masaya Sato, 2019).

Chart 1: Participants' Responses to Presupposition Triggers

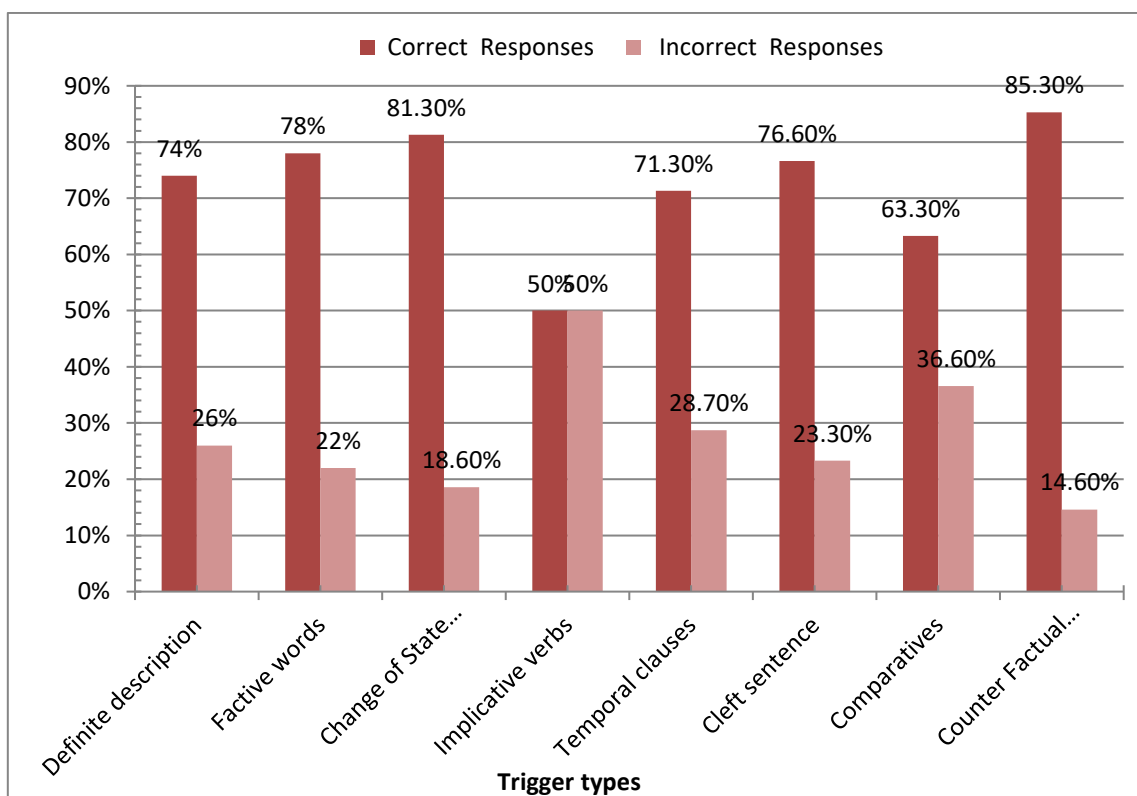
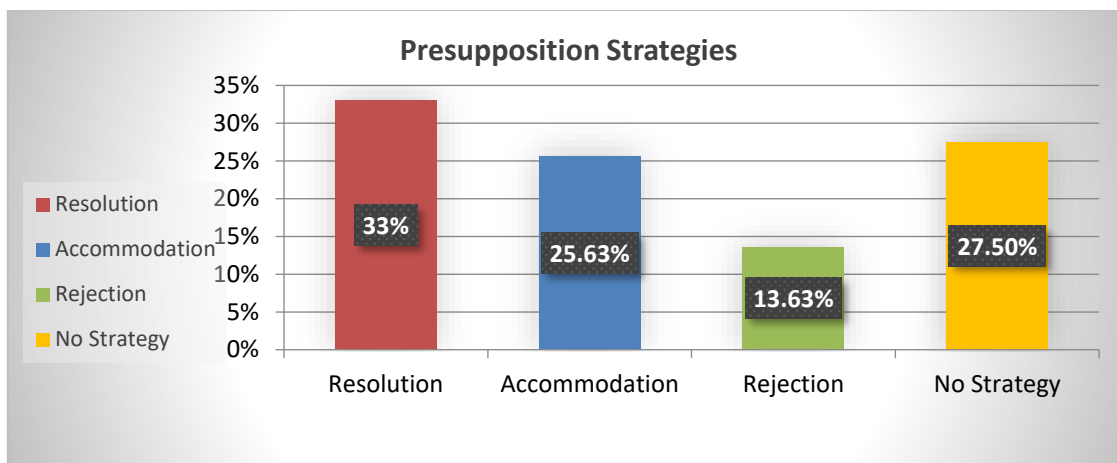


Chart 2: Overall Results of Strategies



Another result the study yields is that the accommodation strategy comes in the second rank, (25.63%) of the students prefer to tend to. Accordingly, it can be noted that definite descriptions trigger presuppositions are interpreted through the accommodation strategy. This strategy is employed when the student regroup the common ground presuppositions. In other words, the students pretend to think of information in the utterances (except for the trigger and the focus item). In the same time, they adjust the area of the trigger to the phrases expressing a new common ground.

Compared with the results of previous strategies, rejection strategy is one of the least presupposition strategies that the students follow scoring (13.63%). The third strategy is applied as the need for the interpretation of the presupposition of the information structure is achieved when the students ignore the presence of the trigger. If the rejection strategy is followed, the utterance's interpretation is achieved as having a sentence focus. A sensible pragmatic interpretation of the focus is thus plausible. Further inquiry reveals that (27.5%) of EFL students decide to follow none of the previous strategies when they give wrong interpretations of the presupposition.

### VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Based on eliciting the strategies followed by Iraqi EFL fourth-year college students for the items of the test, here are the main conclusions:

1. Most of Iraqi EFL university students are aware of presupposition triggers classification. The results reveal that the students succeed to drive the suitable pragmatic interpretations of presupposition.
2. *Counterfactual Conditionals* trigger ranks first since it scores the highest ratio, followed by Change of state verbs that scores the second highest ratio, the third rank is taken

by *Factives*. The fourth rank is for *Cleft Sentences*, followed by *Definite Descriptions* which is the first trigger, and the *Temporal Clauses* type of trigger comes in the sixth rank. The analysis also shows that some triggers are rarely understood by the EFL students like *Comparatives* and *Implicative verbs* as they represent the lowest ratio.

3. In their deducing the pragmatic interpretations of presupposition, Iraqi EFL university students show a higher preference to employ the *resolution strategy* (to identify information in the utterance as that of the context).
4. Some Iraqi EFL university students' responses present nonsensical interpretations owing to students' pragmatic inability to grasp the situation that calls for appropriate interpretations of presupposition. As a result, only misinterpreted responses are given.

### IX. PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1- It is essential to improve the learner's pragmatic competency by emphasizing pragmatic use in EFL sessions and incorporating it into the curriculum. Instead of focusing solely on grammatical issues, teachers should help students become more pragmatically competent.
- 2- Iraqi EFL university students should be taught that not all presupposition strategies can be followed in all circumstances and they need to observe the contextual conditions in using those strategies appropriately.
- 3- Teachers should place equal emphasis on the pragmatic and contextual components as well as syntactic and semantic components related to the interpretation of utterances of presupposition.

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