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Research Article

Pragmatic Emphasis as A Scaffolding Tool: A Relevance Theoretic Analysis of Instructional Communication

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the use of micro-level pragmatic emphasis strategies of teachers as online cognitive scaffolding devices to negotiate working memory limitations and to mark the instructional salience of dense lectures. Based on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, it analyzes a corpus of spontaneous discourse from a Senior High School Creative Writing lesson to classify spoken emphasis markers evaluative adjectives, assertive adverbs, intensifiers, and directives into functional sub-types. The findings indicate that these markers function as real-time cognitive regulators, with forms tailored to the level of processing demand at hand: affirmative descriptors provide low-effort validation and consolidate abstract writing standards into easily memorable anchors; high-certainty adverbs eliminate ambiguity in subjective concepts; and pre-task intensifiers act as attentional triggers prior to complex task execution. The choice of marker aligns with the pedagogical phase in which it is employed, while localized Taglish code-switching combined with structured repetition reduces both processing effort and social distance. The research ultimately shows that conscious vocal emphasis in the teacher's speech is a crucial pedagogical device for handling cognitive load and optimizing student processing in the moment.

Keywords: *Online Cognitive Scaffolding Devices, Pragmatic Emphasis Strategies*

Introduction

Classroom instruction is effective when the teacher can focus students' attention on a complex field of information. Rather than a mere transfer of facts, communication is an interactional process of scaffolding in which

teachers utilize linguistic cues to emphasize critical points, organize learning activities, and manipulate cognitive processing (Radzuan et al., 2026; Libunao, 2025).

Cognitive load theory also tells us that working memory is limited; without clear

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directional cues students can become overloaded with extraneous details (Baxter & Feldon, 2024; Canhasi-Kasemi & Greefrath, 2024; Ma & Sun, 2026).

In pragmatics, Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory provides a powerful model of this dynamism (Johnson, 2024; Slonimska et al., 2026). In Relevance Theory, human communication is driven by the pursuit of optimal relevance, wherein listeners focus on utterances that provide the greatest cognitive impact with the least processing effort (Johnson, 2024). Direct verbal cues from the teacher in a classroom are ostensive signals, intentional signals that help learners to focus on high-value information and minimize the cognitive load of sorting essential concepts from secondary detail (Slonimska et al., 2026).

A significant gap exists between pragmatic theory and pedagogical scaffolding, even though a lot of research has been done on classroom discourse and cognitive load. While previous research has noted that teachers use emphasis for discipline or enthusiasm (Surjowati et al., 2024), little research has systematically explored how specific pragmatic strategies of emphasis (i.e., intensifiers such as "extremely," "crucial"; evaluative adjectives such as "vital," "essential"; and assertive adverbs such as "definitely," "clearly") explicitly function as cognitive scaffolding tools (Cahyani & Surjowati, 2024).

Most pragmatic analyses of emphasis have concerned themselves with political discourse, informal conversation or written academic prose (Barbulet, 2024; Damayanti et al., 2026). Therefore, most research on classroom discourse views teacher emphasis as a general stylistic feature rather than a deliberate and functional device to optimize cognitive processing. Furthermore, very few empirical studies have classified these linguistic markers into functional typologies and/or examined variation in their use across different pedagogical contexts (e.g., direct instruction vs. task delivery or feedback loops). In the absence of such granular understanding, the precise communicative mechanics whereby pragmatic emphasis reduces cognitive load remain under-theorized and under-explored.

The present study seeks to address this gap by investigating, from a Relevance-Theoretic perspective, the use of pragmatic emphasis strategies as instructional scaffolding by teachers. This study examines the use of spoken teacher discourse in light of Sperber and Wilson's (1986/1995) theory to investigate how teachers deliberately manipulate the cognitive context of their students to signal instructional relevance and enhance processing efficiency.

Review of Related Literature

Teacher discourse is an important interactional resource for the construction of cognitive scaffolding for complex information in classroom instruction. Teacher discourse is more than a channel of transmitting information. Rather, it serves to direct student engagement by emphasizing appropriate learning goals (Barbulet, 2024). Libunao (2025) claims that teachers utilize a range of vibrant linguistic cues to guide classroom activities, to emphasize salient ideas, and to facilitate students' comprehension of complex academic topics. To understand teacher discourse, it is not enough to talk about content. Rather, it needs to consider how particular language choices function as tools of teaching to actively manage, organize, and shape student learning in the moment of classroom interaction.

In educational context, the spoken discourse mechanism is often explained by mixing linguistic and cognitive frameworks (Susanto et al., 2025). Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) considers teacher discourse as an interpersonal and textual metafunction, illustrating how teachers build social rapport and at the same time organize clear and cohesive instruction (Haritsyah et al., 2024). At the same time, sociocultural theories see teacher utterances as verbal mediation that scaffolds the student's learning within the Zone of Proximal Development until conceptual independence is achieved (Radzuan et al., 2026). These discourse models are complemented by Cognitive Load Theory, which notes that the working memory has a strict capacity limit (Baxter & Feldon, 2024;

Canhasi-Kasemi & Greefrath, 2024). Students are easily distracted by irrelevant details without clear directions from the teacher (Ma & Sun, 2026). Strategic teacher discourse serves as a cognitive filter to reduce processing friction, which in turn frees up mental bandwidth for the core learning processes.

Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory offers a robust pragmatic framework for understanding the systematic manipulation of cognitive focus that teachers employ to alleviate this processing burden (Johnson, 2024; Slonimska et al., 2026). As it is, human cognition strives for optimal relevance and listeners inherently want utterances that give the maximum cognitive impact for the minimum processing effort (Johnson, 2024). A teacher's direct verbal cues in the classroom are ostensive signals, which are intentional communicative markers that explicitly signal the speaker's informative intent (Slonimska et al., 2026). The ostensive markers point out to the students which concepts are of high instructional value. This allows the students to quickly identify the core objectives of the lesson while putting little cognitive effort into filtering out secondary or background information.

The role of specific pragmatic strategies of emphasis as scaffolding tools is still not well understood despite the extensive research on the relationship between discourse signals and cognitive processing (Cahyani & Surjowati, 2024). Teacher discourse is traditionally seen as a style to control the class or to show enthusiasm (Surjowati et al., 2024). However, specific pragmatic categories directly regulate cognitive intake. Like intensifiers (eg "extremely", "crucial") and evaluative adjectives (eg "vital", "essential") and assertive adverbs (eg "definitely", "clearly"). Pragmatic markers have been extensively investigated in political discourse, informal speech and written academic prose (Barbulet, 2024; Damayanti et al., 2026). However, few empirical studies have systematically classified these markers into functional typologies in spoken classroom discourse.

Furthermore, the use and realization of pragmatic emphasis are heavily influenced by the particular pedagogic contexts in which they

occur. The language of a teacher naturally varies at different stages of the teaching process, such as when giving direct instruction, assigning tasks, explaining difficult ideas, or giving feedback. How these different instructional contexts determine the choice, frequency and pragmatic sub-types of emphasis markers is under-theorized. This current research that examines spoken teacher discourse from a Relevance-Theoretic perspective can help elucidate the exact communicative mechanics through which pragmatic emphasis functions as cognitive scaffolding, providing a more nuanced understanding of how teachers optimize student processing in different pedagogical contexts.

Research Questions

For this purpose, the following research questions are to be answered:

1. How do teachers employ pragmatic emphasis strategies (intensifiers, evaluative adjectives, and assertive adverbs) to signal instructional significance and reduce students' cognitive load in identifying key learning objectives?
2. How can the pragmatic emphasis strategies used by the teachers be classified into different linguistic categories, and what functional sub-types are formed within each category to mark instructional importance?
3. Within what specific instructional contexts do teachers most often use these pragmatic emphasis strategies, and how do these contexts influence their usage patterns?

Significance of the Study

In addressing these questions, this study contributes to the theoretical and applied areas of educational linguistics. It theoretically extends the scope of Relevance Theory by operationalizing its core assumptions in spoken instructional discourse. In practice, it provides a grounded taxonomy of pragmatic emphasis strategies which could be used as a reference in teacher training programs. The more subtle language choices students make, the better the message will be cognitive effort, this research ultimately equips educators to

communicate core learning objectives with greater precision, clarity, and pedagogical effect.

Methodology

The present study is based on the paradigm of Pragmatic Discourse Analysis as a qualitative descriptive research design to get authentic and spontaneous classroom discourse. This improves ecological validity as it does not change the dynamics of the classroom and captures naturalistic and unscripted language choices in authentic instructional settings, presenting a comprehensive, low-inference summary of everyday language (Zuindra et al., 2026). The design presents a qualitative investigation into how teachers employ spoken pragmatic markers to guide students' attention, attribute epistemic weight, and affect conceptual understanding in live instruction. Nuanced contextual clues are highly important to effective communication in the classroom environment (Global Academic Journal of Linguistics and Literature, 2024).

To investigate the micro-level pragmatic real-time decisions made by teachers in dense lectures, the dataset for this study consists audio recording collected during the direct instruction phases of one core Senior High School (SHS) subject namely, Creative Writing. This academic discipline is intentionally selected because it is text-rich, conceptually complex domains in which students frequently experience high cognitive load, making real-time teacher scaffolding particularly important (Kim et al., 2024).

Experienced teacher with a minimum of three years' experience was selected to observe stable pedagogical routines during a 1-hour session. The main data sources are two parallel and complementary streams, namely: (a) high quality audio recording of direct instruction to preserve natural prosodic, temporal and contextual speech environments, and (b) verbatim orthographic transcriptions of this spoken data to create clean text for systematic coding and micro-level pragmatic analysis.

To maintain empirical integrity and limit disruption to the research environment, data collection occurs in three systematic,

deliberate phases: (1) before class, with school administration approval and teacher and student consent, and preparation of recording equipment to reduce observer bias; (2) during core lecture phases, with audio recording in situ, with detailed field notes on non-verbal context and slide materials; (3) creating verbatim orthographic transcripts, with basic discourse features such as pauses and emphatic stress, to preserve the spontaneity of the spoken interactions.

The linguistic analysis is strictly limited to the identification and classification of four specific classes of pragmatic signals conceived as cognitive guiding tools: intensifiers (adverbs such as "very" used to boost speaker commitment and increase conceptual weight), evaluative adjectives (explicit descriptors such as "crucial" or "vital" that frame some specific data as mandatory learning targets), assertive adverbs (modifiers such as "successfully" or "undeniably" that present processes or theories as settled and beneficial to actively reduce student skepticism and ease conceptual acceptance), and directives and discourse markers (attention-focusing cues such as "again" and structural repetition used to anchor attention and reinforce core terminology).

Data were analyzed using a two-stage Pragmatic Discourse Analysis combining qualitative coding and cognitive relevance mapping. The first phase included systematic coding of transcripts for target intensifiers, evaluative adjectives, assertive adverbs**, and directives**, with sub-coding to identify localized pedagogical function. As the analysis was conducted by a single coder, coding consistency was supported through a predefined codebook with explicit category definitions and illustrative examples. The second phase includes evaluation of each coded marker using Sperber and Wilson's framework of Relevance Theory to evaluate how it changes the context, specifically whether the signal successfully constrains intended meaning, prevents alternative or divergent readings or raises the epistemic status of key information to help students process it with minimal cognitive friction (Eragamreddy, 2024).

Limitations of the Study

This study has certain limitations. First, the corpus was derived from a single one-hour session of a Creative Writing class taught by an experienced teacher. Although this focused design captures rich, micro-level pragmatic choices within an authentic instructional setting, the findings cannot be broadly generalized without multi-teacher corpora spanning various disciplines and grade levels. Second, the identification and classification of markers were performed by a single coder; while a structured codebook was used to ensure consistency, the absence of independent inter-coder verification is acknowledged as a limitation affecting the reliability of the classification. Future research could address these limitations by employing multiple coders and utilizing a broader corpus that encompasses several teachers, subjects, and instructional sessions.

Results and Discussion

Pragmatic Emphasis Strategies

The analysis of the teacher's classroom discourse reveals that pragmatic emphasis strategies are used strategically not only to mark instructional importance but also to manage the cognitive load of the students. These language cues assist students in processing, prioritizing, and completing learning objectives by highlighting important details and offering explicit qualitative standards. The strategies are divided into four main linguistic classes: evaluative adjectives, assertive adverbs, intensifiers and degree words, and directives and discourse markers. Each category includes certain functional sub-types, designed to serve a variety of instructional purposes in the lesson, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Variety of Instructional Purposes in The Lesson

Pragmatic Emphasis Strategies	Functional Sub-Type	Pragmatic Function in Context	Cognitive Load Reduction Mechanism	Exemplars from Data
Evaluative Adjectives	Positive Validation	Validating student responses to encourage participation.	Reduces Extraneous Load: eliminates ambiguity regarding performance accuracy.	"Very good!", "Good point.", "That's interesting!", "That's nice!"
	Criterion Marking	Highlighting effective or key attributes of writing tasks.	Facilitates Germane Load: provides clear conceptual targets without long explanations.	"peculiar", "polished"
Assertive Adverbs	Epistemic Certainty	Stating instructional facts and rules with definitive authority.	Prevents Cognitive Hesitation: removes doubt and second-guessing on core concepts.	"Definitely", "definitely not true"
	Execution & Quality	Emphasizing the ideal output or quality of creative execution.	Directs Selective Attention: clarifies visual/descriptive goals for task execution.	"vividly" ("vividly imagine it"), "successfully"
Intensifiers & Degree Words	Priority Signaling	Signaling immediate urgency or high priority for core directives.	Manages Intrinsic Load: signals immediate focus, priming working memory.	"again", "really", "important" ("this is important")
	Localized Amplification (Taglish)	Emphasizing conditions or degree of classroom environments/states.	Lowers Processing Effort: translates abstract norms into familiar linguistic frames.	"sobrang" ("sobrang tahimik"), "magandang maganda"

Pragmatic Emphasis Strategies	Functional Sub-Type	Pragmatic Function in Context	Cognitive Load Reduction Mechanism	Exemplars from Data
Directives & Discourse Markers	Attention-Focusing Directives	Anchoring student attention immediately prior to pivotal instructions.	Primes Working Memory: reserves capacity for incoming task parameters.	"Again, class"
	Repetition & Recapitulative Anchors	Reinforcing core terminology and conceptual retention.	Supports Germane Load: promotes active recall of foundational concepts.	Repeating "Think-write", "writing process", "Again, what's..."

The pragmatic strategies used in the instructional dialogue show a systematic way to control student attention and cognitive capacity during complex creative activities.

Evaluative adjectives as cognitive anchors and feedback shortcuts

Evaluative adjectives serve as the quickest form of instructional feedback from a teacher, effectively reducing unnecessary cognitive load. When students respond, micro-evaluations such as "Very good!" or "Good point" can be delivered immediately. This instant feedback conserves mental energy that might otherwise be spent worrying about the correctness of an answer; consequently, extraneous load is minimized, allowing the student to keep pace with the lesson's flow (M. Kamelabad, 2026). From the perspective of Relevance Theory, a single word of praise suffices to elevate the epistemic status of a student's answer at a minimal processing cost, validating its relevance without disrupting the lesson's momentum.

On the other hand, domain-specific adjectives function as conceptual shortcuts. A teacher might summarize abstract literary standards such as effective narrative backgrounding and a distinctive writing identity by simply describing them as "peculiar." These adjectives act as cognitive anchors, enabling students to retain key writing standards in their working memory without the need for lengthy explanations; in doing so, they support germane load by providing a solid conceptual target for the student to draw upon (Zhang, 2025).

Clear-cut adverbs for the removal of ambiguity

The strategic use of assertive adverbs (e.g., "definitely") reduces processing hesitation, particularly when fundamental concepts are first being introduced to students. Creative writing has subjective boundaries; thus, teachers employ high-certainty adverbs to establish inviolable rules for instance, "It is definitely not true that two students have identical writing styles." By presenting core principles as absolutes and eliminating ambiguity, teachers enable students to internalize essential truths without mental friction (Newton, 2025). From the perspective of Relevance Theory, these high-certainty markers rapidly elevate the epistemic status of a concept, limiting alternative interpretations and thereby reducing the extraneous cognitive load caused by uncertainty.

Conversely, operational adverbs pertaining to execution and quality articulate clear qualitative objectives for the task at hand. For example, the word "vividly" (as in "really vividly imagine it") directly instructs students on how to employ descriptive imagery in their writing (Crossley, 2025). Rather than establishing epistemic boundaries, these adverbs provide concrete performance standards that serve as a guide for students while they carry out the task.

Code switching and intensifiers for selective attention

Intensifiers serve as acoustic and semantic cues that direct selective attention toward key instructions (Taguchi & Li, 2024). Phrases such

as "again, class" act as explicit attentional cues provided immediately before task parameters are presented. Such signals prompt students to disregard distractions and dedicate their working memory to the upcoming instructions. From the perspective of Relevance Theory, these markers function as ostensive signals indicating informative intent; consequently, students save on processing effort because their attention is immediately focused on the information with the highest instructional value.

Furthermore, the use of localized degree markers through code-switching (Taglish—e.g., "sobrang tahimik," "magandang maganda") lowers the barrier to linguistic processing. Instead of formal terms, the teacher employs familiar, high-frequency words to emphasize degree or quality, thereby eliminating the need for students to translate the message and reducing extraneous cognitive load (Firdaus et al., 2024). Moreover, the use of the local language narrows the social distance between teacher and student, allowing instructions to be processed more quickly and with less effort.

Didactic structuring devices: directives and repetition

Directives serve as pragmatic anchors that focus students' attention prior to important instructions. Attention-focusing directives such as "Again, class" are issued immediately before a pivotal instruction, thereby preparing the students' working memory for incoming

information. Rather than simply presenting information, the teacher actively directs attention at the precise moment needed, thereby reducing the extraneous load caused by distracting details.

Furthermore, the teacher employs structured repetition and recapitulative anchors to reinforce key terminology and assess conceptual retention. By repeating key terms like "writing process" and "think-write" or by asking, "What's the writing process?" the teacher does not merely prompt the repetition of information but encourages active recall. This signals to students that the concept is foundational and a priority for assessment, elevating its epistemic status while consolidating it within working memory. From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory, such repetition acts as scaffolding that enhances germane load rather than adding an unnecessary burden.

Instructional Contexts

The analysis of the instructional discourse shows that the teacher's employment of pragmatic emphasis strategies (i.e., evaluative adjectives, assertive adverbs, and intensifiers) is closely linked to four specific instructional contexts: Feedback Loops, Direct Instruction, Task Instructions, and Relational Framing/Classroom Management. The situational needs of every stage of pedagogical application have a systematic impact on the selection and use of these markers of emphasis.

Table 2. The analysis of the instructional discourse of pragmatic emphasis strategies

Instructional Context	Dominant Pragmatic Strategies	Primary Functional Goal	Usage Pattern & Structural Trigger	Exemplars from Data
Feedback Loops & Validation	Evaluative Adjectives	Provide immediate affective reinforcement and validate student responses.	Rapid, Short Sequences: Deployed immediately after student output to build confidence without breaking lesson flow.	"Very good!", "Good point.", "That's nice!", "That's interesting!"
Direct Instruction & Concept Clarification	Assertive Adverbs & Epistemic Adjectives	Establish foundational, non-negotiable principles as objective facts.	Declarative Certainty Markers: Paired with core theoretical concepts to eliminate student doubt and ambiguity.	"Definitely", "definitely not true", "peculiar",

Instructional Context	Dominant Pragmatic Strategies	Primary Functional Goal	Usage Pattern & Structural Trigger	Exemplars from Data
Task Instructions & Execution Directives	Attention Directives, Intensifiers & Action Adverbs	Direct focus, prime working memory, and establish qualitative execution standards.	Imperative Cues: Used when transitioning from passive listening to active task execution.	"really vividly imagine it", "successfully"
Relational Framing & Management	Code-Switched (<i>Taglish</i>) Intensifiers	Lower social distance and frame environmental norms in familiar terms.	Conversational Degree Markers: Embedded during informal check-ins or student habit discussions.	"sobrang tahimik", "magandang maganda"

The distribution of pragmatic emphasis strategies across specific classroom contexts shows how teachers dynamically adjust their language to the changing pedagogical goals throughout a lesson.

Student validation and feedback loops

With a feedback loop, the usage pattern is short, immediate evaluative adjectives ("Very good!", "That's nice!"). These are micro-evaluations done right after student read-alouds or oral answers. Instead of extended critical expositions, the teacher relies on these pragmatic markers for short-term emotional validation. This pattern builds on momentum, reduces anxiety, and communicates to the class that the student's output successfully meets the learning requirements (Sydorenko et al., 2024).

Direct instruction and epistemic certainty

During direct instruction and concept clarification, the teacher's language changes to assertive adverbs (e.g., "definitely," and domain-specific adjectives, e.g., "peculiar"). This pattern emerges when abstract literary concepts are introduced, such as personal writing style or setting development. The teacher uses high-certainty markers to set clear objective limits on subjective concepts (e.g. the teacher says that it is 'definitely not true' that students write in the same style, and that each person has a 'peculiar' style of their own). This eliminates ambiguity for the learners.

Attentional priming and task instructions

When students move to actually doing things (writing narrative expositions), the

pattern of usage shifts to imperative attention markers and execution adverbs. The pragmatic triggering function of "again, class" signals an immediate need for selective attention prior to the task parameters being explained (Damayanti et al., 2026). The next step includes qualitative adverbs such as "really vividly imagine it" that make operational targets explicit.

Relational framing with localized intensities

Informal check-ins on student writing habits also include the use of code-switched (*Taglish*) intensifiers such as "sobrang tahimik" and "magandang maganda" by the teacher. The context change to local degree markers helps to fill the gap between formal academic requirements and familiar conversation patterns. In relational moments, the teacher relaxes linguistic rigidity, building rapport and lowering student anxiety without losing instructional clarity (Domalewska, 2017).

Overall, the teacher strategically changes linguistic strategies depending on the pedagogical phase, manages cognitive load, provides clear quality criteria, and fosters a supportive learning environment. Repetition and structural anchors knit together these contextual adaptations and keep core concepts front and center throughout the lesson. Thus, the pragmatic orientation in instructional discourse emerges as an important pedagogical tool, linking teacher intention and student understanding, allowing complex literary instruction to be made accessible, organized and engaging.

Conclusion

This study shows that the teacher discourse in the creative writing classroom relies on the systematic use of pragmatic emphasis strategies: evaluative adjectives, assertive adverbs, intensifiers, and directives. These markers function as cognitive regulators that reduce extraneous load and eliminate processing hesitation. When a teacher condenses an abstract literary standard into a single word like "peculiar," the standard is instilled without the need for a lengthy explanation. The same applies to "definitely," which reinforces a concept, and "again," which refocuses the class's attention before the next instruction.

Marker selection also shifts according to context. During feedback, evaluative adjectives are brief and rapid; this maintains the flow and alleviates student anxiety. In direct instruction, assertive adverbs present fundamental principles as certain truths, whereas during the transition to an activity, the teacher relies on imperative directives and execution adverbs to guide the process. In relational moments, Taglish degree markers like "sobrang" reduce social distance and foster a sense of familiarity within the classroom environment. The teacher's choice of words appears deliberate, adapting the discourse to the cognitive and communicative needs of each stage of the lesson.

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