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Manipulative Discourse Strategies in EFL Teaching: A Cognitive-Pragmatic Analysis

ABSTRACT

The paper evaluates the prevalence, examines various forms, and studies the cognitive-pragmatic mechanisms underlying manipulative discourse strategies within English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom environments. Employing frameworks such as Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975, 1979; Purtseladze, 2024), the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1978, 1989), Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95a; Wilson and Sperber, 2004; Carston & Powell, 2009), and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Van Dijk, 2006; Maillat & Oswald, 2011), the study investigates the manner in which teachers' linguistic choices may subtly exert psychological pressure on learners. Data for this research were obtained through a survey administered to 100 undergraduate students enrolled across various faculties at Tbilisi State University.

The results demonstrate that manipulative discourse is both widespread and multifaceted: gaslighting accounts for 42% of reported instances, followed by shaming (28%), guilt-tripping (20%), and triangulation (10%). These strategies frequently overlap, producing complex perlocutionary effects that students cannot pragmatically ignore. Through explicit, covert, and inclusive assertives, teachers often generate cognitively inescapable implicatures that violate conversational maxims, prompting students to internalize blame, experience anxiety, and question their competence. The findings indicate that manipulative communication in educational contexts extends beyond traditional pragmatic models, revealing how evaluative cues, sarcastic remarks, and comparative framing affect students' state of mind and academic performance. By identifying these communicative patterns and their psychological impact, the study underscores the need for increased pedagogical awareness and the development of ethical, supportive classroom discourse practices.

The research findings were partially presented at the Sixth International Conference on Second Language Teaching/Acquisition in the Context of Multilingual Education (SeLTAME 2025).

The results of this study, both theoretical and practical, are applicable across a wide range of educational contexts. By identifying and analysing the cognitive-pragmatic mechanisms underlying manipulative discourse strategies, the research addresses a significant gap in existing pedagogical and pragmatic scholarship.

Keywords: *cooperative principle; classroom discourse; gaslighting; manipulation; relevance theory; speech acts.*

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Introduction

Mental well-being and psychological self-awareness have become vital concerns in today's fast-paced, globalized world. People are becoming more aware of their emotional states, while society as a whole is gaining a deeper understanding of the psychological processes that influence human interaction. In

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recent years, both public discussion and scholarly research have focused on the phenomenon of psychological manipulation, reflecting a growing awareness of emotional abuse not only in personal relationships but also in broader social and institutional settings. Linguistic pragmatics is no exception: a significant amount of research has been dedicated to manipulative communication as a unique, complex form of discourse. (Fairclough, 1989; Mooney, 2004; Van Dijk, 2006; Maillat & Oswald, 2011; Sorlin, 2017, etc.)

The classroom constitutes a distinctive environment for communication, characterized by the integration of professional procedures and interpersonal dynamics. Interaction within this environment does not always proceed harmoniously, as certain pedagogical practices may employ manipulative tactics. Such strategies are frequently implicit and unintentional; however, they can be profoundly detrimental to students. While the majority of research in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pedagogy has focused on effective teaching methodologies and learner-centered strategies, considerably less attention has been paid to the more problematic aspects of classroom discourse — those involving manipulation, control, or psychological pressure exerted upon learners.

The current study aims to identify the types of manipulative discourse strategies used in EFL classroom settings and to assess their effects on students' academic performance and emotional well-being. The study relies on the theoretical framework of linguistic pragmatics, drawing on Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975, 1979; Purtseladze, 2024a) and the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1978, 1989), while also including key concepts from Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95a; Wilson and Sperber, 2004; Pickrell et al., 2004; Carston & Powell, 2009) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989; Mooney, 2004; Van Dijk, 2006; Maillat & Oswald, 2011; Sorlin, 2017). It also integrates contemporary psychological insights, including Birch's (2015) work on emotional manipulation and Vaknin's (2014) examinations of narcissistic behavior.

The research is based on empirical data collected from a survey completed by 100 undergraduate students representing the Faculties of Humanities, Psychology and Educational Sciences, as well as Social and Political Sciences at Tbilisi State University.

Understanding manipulative communication within educational settings is especially significant, as the classroom serves not merely as a venue for knowledge dissemination but also as a formative environment where students' identities are shaped. When manipulative discourse becomes ingrained in teacher–student interactions—whether intentionally or unintentionally—it can erode learners' confidence, distort their self-perceptions, and foster an emotionally unsafe atmosphere. These effects are particularly pertinent in EFL classrooms, where language anxiety, diverse proficiency levels, and

heightened reliance on the teacher inherently render students more susceptible to psychological influence.

Despite these challenges, manipulative strategies in pedagogical communication remain insufficiently examined, especially in non-Anglophone academic contexts. By identifying these strategies and assessing their consequences, this research fills a critical gap in both linguistic pragmatics and pedagogy. Moreover, the findings have practical implications: they can inform teacher training programs, contribute to the development of ethical communication guidelines, and promote more supportive, transparent, and psychologically safe educational environments. In doing so, the study not only advances the theoretical and practical understanding of manipulative discourse strategies and harmful pedagogical practices but also supports the broader goal of enhancing students' well-being alongside their academic performance.

Theoretical Framework

Fairclough (1989, p. 6) characterizes manipulation as "a devious way to control the others," highlighting its covert and strategic nature. Van Dijk (2006, p. 359) expands this definition, describing manipulation as the *illegitimate domination* by a more powerful group over less powerful individuals, typically to maintain social or institutional inequality. Within educational environments — and particularly in EFL contexts — such asymmetries are structurally embedded. Teachers, administrators, or more proficient interlocutors possess greater linguistic, institutional, and interactional power, which can create conditions in which manipulative strategies may operate unnoticed and uncontested.

From a relevance-theoretic perspective, the effectiveness of manipulation is closely linked to the cognitive mechanisms that underlie communication. Relevance Theory posits that the relevance of an input depends on the ratio of cognitive effects to processing effort (Sperber & Wilson, 1995b; Wilson & Sperber, 2004). Crucially, every utterance carries a *presumption of optimal relevance*: speakers implicitly guarantee that their contributions are worth processing, and hearers rely on this guarantee when interpreting them. As Carston and Powell (2009) note, this presumption supports a particular comprehension procedure in which the hearer follows a path of least effort, testing interpretations in order of accessibility and stopping once one fits his/her expectation of relevance.

Manipulative strategies leverage this cognitive framework. Given that listeners assume speakers to be *cooperative* (Mooney, 2004; Sorlin, 2017) and that their utterances are optimally relevant, they tend to accept interpretations that the speaker subtly guides them toward — even when the speaker's intentions are not benevolent.

This dynamic is intensified in EFL settings, where the inherent power asymmetry between teachers and students increases students' vulnerability. The teacher's epistemic superiority is not only socially acknowledged but also structurally embedded in the educational environment. As a result, students are institutionally positioned as epistemically dependent, which raises their susceptibility to manipulative communicative tactics.

Numerous accounts of manipulative communication, particularly from a discourse-analytical perspective, emphasize the conditions under which discourse may be deemed manipulative. A primary focus is placed on the external contextual setting of the communicative event, including the broader social context: the relationship between speaker and audience, their respective roles and prerogatives, the relative status of their knowledge, and the purpose of the interaction. This social-contextual perspective is exemplified by Van Dijk's assertion that "it only makes sense to speak of manipulation […] when speakers or writers are manipulating others in their role as a member of a dominant collectivity" (2006, p. 364). A secondary focus pertains to the discursive and linguistic devices that speakers strategically deploy to gain consent through partially uncooperative means, often outside the audience's awareness. (Maillat and Oswald, 2011).

In EFL settings, the educator assumes the role of "a member of a dominant collectivity" precisely because of the contextual structures. In this regard, context is not merely an incidental element but an active component of manipulative strategy, influencing the meanings that students are able to interpret as relevant.

In the context of EFL teaching, subtle forms of pedagogical manipulation may depend on what Maillat and Oswald (2011) describe as *cognitive black holes* — situations so emotionally charged and cognitively dominant that they limit learners' interpretive options. Drawing on Pickrell et al.'s (2004, pp. 352–353) description of *flashbulb* contexts like 9/11, which serve as "highly salient memories" with a "highly emotional, meaningful, and subjectively permanent nature," such contexts can overshadow competing information and steer learners toward a predetermined evaluative stance. From a relevance-theoretic perspective, these emotionally intense frames effectively "erase" alternative interpretations by overwhelming the learner's cognitive environment, making certain meanings not only more accessible but also seemingly inevitable or natural. In EFL classrooms, emotionally charged contexts are often already assumed: low grades, public teacher criticism, peer comparison, academic deadlines, and constant competition routinely increase affective pressure. Therefore, manipulation in EFL settings does not necessarily require the deliberate introduction of emotionally extreme content; instead, it can operate through the existing affective climate, which quietly absorbs learners' attention and constrains their interpretative choices.

Research in cognitive psychology and Argumentation Theory demonstrates how certain assumptions can be rendered so salient that they become *cognitively inescapable*. (Maillat and Oswald, 2011). In EFL classrooms, this implies that some implicatures—particularly those related to evaluation or feedback—may attain such prominence that learners are compelled to interpret the teacher's input in the prescribed manner.

Regarding the linguistic devices employed in manipulative discourse, it can be argued that, from a pragmatic perspective, most manipulative strategies depend on ***indirect speech acts,*** particularly assertives. Purtseladze (2024a, see also 2025a) identifies three types of indirect assertives that are prevalent in gaslighting discourse: ***explicit assertives,*** where the encoded illocution aligns with the literal illocutionary act; ***covert assertives,*** where an assertive speech act is conveyed via a different illocutionary act; and ***inclusive assertives,*** in which the encoded message is embedded within an assertive speech act realized through a distinct illocutionary act, such as a directive or a commissive. Considering that gaslighting, as a form of psychological manipulation, constitutes a complex cognitive and communicative phenomenon (Purtseladze, 2025a) involving additional manipulative strategies (to be discussed further in this paper), it is reasonable to assert that this classification, as a tool for pragmatic analysis, can be more generally applied to manipulative discourse.

The peculiar and notably effective nature of these types of assertives lies in their ability, within manipulative discourse, to acquire a ***double direction of fit***—an attribute not commonly ascribed to assertives in traditional pragmatics. In this configuration, the utterance **ostensibly describes reality (*word-to-world*);** concurrently, it **compels the hearer to modify his/her beliefs, emotions, or behaviour to align with the speaker's perceived version of reality (*world-to-word*)**. This dual functionality enables manipulative assertives to alter the interlocutor's mental model while maintaining the superficial appearance of mere factual assertions, thereby serving as potent instruments of covert influence. (Purtseladze, 2024a)

Relevance Theory (RT) reconceptualizes communication as an **inferential, ostensive** process rather than a straightforward code-based transmission of meaning (Wilson & Sperber, 2004). In cognitive pragmatics, the interpretation of **indirect speech acts** in interactional communication is initiated by the hearer's assumption that the speaker is acting cooperatively (Grice, 1978) and by the detection of a disparity between the literal utterance and the surrounding context. According to Bara, Bosco, and Bucciarelli (1999), hearers initially endeavour to interpret the speaker's utterance literally; only when this interpretation fails—typically because it results in insufficient relevance—do they seek an alternative meaning that aligns with the speaker's primary illocutionary intent. Significantly, this inferential process is not conducted consciously or deliberately: as Searle (1979, p. 34) observes, the

reasoning involved in interpreting indirect speech acts operates automatically, drawing on deeply ingrained cognitive capacities.

This automatic inferential mechanism is of significant importance in manipulative discourse. When the speaker utilizes **indirect assertive speech acts** that ostensibly meet the felicity conditions of cooperation, the listener's cognitive system compensates for perceived gaps, rationalizes inconsistencies, and reconstructs the speaker's message to maintain coherence. The manipulator thus exploits the hearer's expectation of cooperation and his/her reliance on the ***presumption of optimal relevance***. What appears to be a mutually cooperative exchange is, in fact, an *illusion of cooperation*, with its perlocutionary force mimicking genuine cooperation precisely because it is processed as such. (Purtseladze, 2025b)

In this context, manipulative discourse systematically **violates Gricean maxims** — specifically the maxims of *quality* and *relation* — while maintaining sufficient surface plausibility to sustain the hearer's engagement in cooperative inferencing. The perceived cooperativeness encourages the hearer to exert greater cognitive effort, whereas the concealed violations enable the manipulator to direct interpretation and limit access to alternative contextual assumptions.

These effects become even more pronounced in EFL contexts, where learners face increased cognitive load and an intensified epistemic dependence on the teacher. The teacher's presumed authority reinforces students' expectations of cooperation and relevance, making them less likely to notice maxim violations and more susceptible to coercive influence. As a result, cognitive mechanisms that typically support efficient communication — automatic inference, relevance-oriented processing, and the assumption of cooperative intent — can be redirected to facilitate manipulation.

Taken together, these propositions demonstrate that manipulative communication in EFL settings arises from the interaction of structural power asymmetries, cognitive constraints, and pragmatic mechanisms. The teacher's institutionally preestablished authority influences learners' expectations of cooperation and relevance, while relevance-driven inferencing and the automatic processing of indirect implicatures make violations of maxims difficult to detect. Consequently, the very cognitive and pragmatic capacities that usually facilitate effective communication become channels through which manipulation can be enacted and sustained. Notably, despite the significant awareness of manipulative tactics among Georgian youth (Purtseladze, 2024b), such practices continue to present challenges not only within second-language classrooms but also across various educational contexts, where institutional hierarchies increase learners' vulnerability to implicit discursive influence.

Methodology

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses to investigate the prevalence and cognitive-pragmatic mechanisms of manipulative discourse strategies in EFL classrooms. The design combined survey-based data collection with detailed discourse analysis, allowing both statistical assessment of strategy frequency and in-depth examination of their linguistic realization. The methodology was guided by a cognitive-pragmatic framework grounded in Relevance Theory, Speech Act Theory, and the Cooperative Principle, which facilitated the interpretation of manipulative effects on students' emotional state and classroom engagement.

The study involved 100 EFL students, aged 18–25, enrolled in intermediate and upper-intermediate English courses across the Faculties of Humanities, Psychology and Educational Sciences, and Social and Political Sciences at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. All participants had completed at least one term of EFL instruction, thereby ensuring sufficient exposure to classroom interactions to provide reliable accounts of manipulative practices. The gender of participants was not considered, as the analysis concentrated on manipulative discourse patterns rather than potential gender-based differences in perception.

Data were collected through a structured survey that incorporated open-ended questions aimed at capturing both the frequency and qualitative characteristics of experiences with manipulative discourse. The survey included:

1. *Quantitative items* assessing the occurrence of four primary manipulative strategies — gaslighting, shaming, guilt-tripping, and triangulation — using a five-point Likert scale (1 = never, 5 = very frequently).
2. *Qualitative prompts* inviting participants to provide examples of specific utterances or classroom interaction fragments they perceived as manipulative, to describe the context, and to report their cognitive and emotional responses.

Quantitative data were analyzed employing descriptive statistics to ascertain the prevalence of each manipulative strategy. Percentages were computed to illustrate the distribution of reported practices.

Qualitative data were subjected to a cognitive-pragmatic analysis. Each reported utterance was examined for:

1) Speech-act type (explicit assertive, covert assertive, inclusive assertive).
2) Conversational maxim violations (relation, quality, quantity, manner).
3) Perlocutionary effect, including cognitive, emotional, and social impact on the student.

4) Functional category – a thematic classification of manipulative utterances, characterized by the specific implicatures it aims to communicate.

To ensure reliability, all qualitative data were carefully analyzed, with repeated checks to maintain consistency in classifying speech acts and maxim violations. Validity was supported as multiple students reported similar utterances and emotional effects across classrooms. To enhance trustworthiness, the research findings were partially presented at the Sixth International Conference on Second Language Teaching/Acquisition in the Context of Multilingual Education (SeLTAME 2025), and peer feedback was used to confirm the validity of the analysis and conclusions.

The study was conducted in accordance with the American Psychological Association (APA) Research Ethics Code. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and performed in the participants' mother tongue to ensure clarity, comfort, and accurate reporting of experiences. Data were anonymized, and identifiers were removed to preserve confidentiality. Care was taken in reporting illustrative examples to avoid exposing specific individuals or creating reputational harm. All personal names used in examples throughout this study (e.g., Maria, John, Tina) are pseudonyms, randomly assigned to preserve the realism of the classroom contexts.

Results and Discussion

The study demonstrates that the most frequently employed manipulative tactics, such as gaslighting, guilt-tripping, shaming, and triangulation, are peculiar to classroom discourse. According to the survey, practices which may superficially resemble routine pedagogical feedback can, in fact, function as covert forms of manipulation.

The analysis reveals that *gaslighting* constitutes the most prevalent form of manipulative behavior, accounting for 42%. It is followed by *shaming* (28%), *guilt-tripping* (20%), and *triangulation* (10%), the latter of which generally involves comparisons or third-party involvement. Collectively, these findings position gaslighting as the predominant manipulative pattern within classroom discourse. Its significance extends beyond frequency; gaslighting also appears to be the most impactful tactic, capable of encompassing or co-occurring with other identified strategies. This suggests that gaslighting may serve as an overarching manipulative framework rather than a standalone technique, warranting particular analytical focus in educational settings.

The following sections provide a cognitive-pragmatic analysis of the aforementioned manipulative strategies, based on survey data.

Gaslighting in EFL Teaching

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines ***gaslighting*** as a form of psychological manipulation whereby an individual or group persistently seeks to undermine another person's perception of reality. This process often results in the victim questioning his/her own memories, perceptions, or understanding of events, which can lead to confusion, diminished confidence or self-esteem, and an increasing dependence on the manipulator for validation.

Within the context of classroom discourse, gaslighting pertains to instances whereby an educator's verbal or non-verbal conduct causes students to question their own understanding, competence, or interpretation of events. This may manifest through the denial of prior statements, the dismissal of concerns, or the suggestion that the student's perception is inaccurate. Throughout the dataset, numerous representative examples demonstrate how gaslighting functions pragmatically. In one instance, a student expressed confusion, to which the educator responded that *all explanations had been provided clearly*. In this case, the statement functions as an *explicit assertive*, as its literal and encoded illocutionary forces are aligned, thereby infringing upon the maxims of quality and manner. The pragmatic impact resides in the implied assertion that the student was inattentive. Such implicature serves a manipulative purpose by denying the student's experience and fostering self-doubt.

In a different instance, an educator asserted that an idiom employed by a student did not exist. This statement can be categorized as an explicit assertive, violating the maxim of quality. Although it appears as a factual correction, the implicature of this remark serves as an implicit assertion regarding the student's lack of proficiency, functioning as epistemic dominance by superseding the student's linguistic evaluation.

A further set of examples involves emotional invalidation. When a student expressed anxiety about presenting, the teacher responded, You're just exaggerating; everyone else is fine. The explicit assertive, in this case, violates the maxims of relation and manner. It encodes an evaluative illocution portraying the student as oversensitive, thereby reframing a legitimate emotional state as irrational.

Gaslighting can also manifest through covert assertive speech acts. For example, the interrogative directive illocution How come you don't know it by now?! implicitly conveys an assertion—You are inadequate—and breaches the maxims of quality and manner. This statement induces guilt and deters subsequent inquiries.

In more severe cases, such as Maybe English just isn't your thing, the teacher produces an inclusive assertive that covertly performs a directive illocution: You should consider switching departments. By violating the maxims of relation, quality, quantity, and manner, this statement undermines the student's sense of belonging and induces self-doubt.

Such examples are particularly insidious because a single suggestion can violate all four maxims simultaneously. First, it breaches the maxim of *relation* by introducing an irrelevant evaluative implication that is not connected to the student's initial concern — for example, confusion caused by instructions or a request for clarification. Second, it breaches the maxim of *quality* because the utterance is not evidence-based but serves as an unfounded negative evaluation of the student's overall linguistic competence. Third, it breaches the maxim of *quantity* by providing considerably more evaluative content than is pragmatically necessary. Instead of addressing a specific difficulty within the classroom, the teacher elevates it into a comprehensive judgment regarding the student's academic aptitude. Finally, it breaches the maxim of *manner* because the statement is framed ambiguously and indirectly, leaving the underlying invalidating illocution (*You should not be studying this subject*) implicit rather than explicitly articulated. This layered pattern of violations enhances the manipulative potential of the utterance, allowing it to appear superficially harmless while exerting significant psychological pressure on the student.

Taken together, the corpus reveals four recurrent functional categories of gaslighting:

1) ***Memory distortion**, including utterances such as I already explained this, you just weren't paying attention; We talked about this yesterday, don't you remember; That's not what I said, you must've misunderstood again; You understood it perfectly before, so what happened now; You're misremembering what I said, which erode the students' trust in their own cognitive reliability;*
2) ***Causing self-doubt**, exemplified by statements like You're the only one who doesn't understand; Nobody else seems confused, maybe you just need to focus more; It's not that the instructions were unclear, you just didn't listen properly; You're making a big deal out of nothing. Such statements shift responsibility from instructional clarity to student inadequacy;*
3) ***Emotional invalidation**, including You're overcomplicating things, it's actually very simple; You always take things too personally; I didn't raise my voice, you're being too sensitive; I wasn't criticizing you, you just can't take feedback, which minimizes emotional responses and inhibits open communication.*
4) ***Authority-based gaslighting**, wherein educators invoke their status or expertise — I'm the teacher here, I know how this language works; Native speakers don't say it that way, trust me; I've been teaching English for twenty years; I believe I know what's correct — serves to override students' perceptions. The perlocutionary effects associated with these strategies*

include the erosion of epistemic self-trust, the suppression of emotional expression, and an increased reliance on the teacher's validation.

Ultimately, gaslighting induces cognitive dissonance, diminishing students' linguistic autonomy by encouraging them to doubt their interpretive abilities and to depend on external authority rather than cultivating internal self-assessment mechanisms.

Shaming in EFL Teaching

Shaming is among the most frequently reported manipulative strategies observed in classroom discourse. It typically manifests through mockery, public embarrassment, or belittling comments, thereby creating an atmosphere of fear and insecurity rather than motivating students. From a pragmatic standpoint, shaming statements often breach the maxim of *relation* (irrelevance to the pedagogical objective) and the maxim of *manner* (lack of clarity, tact, or empathy). Furthermore, these utterances primarily serve as, but are not limited to, *explicit* and *covert assertives*—evaluative judgments disguised as neutral observations. In the dataset, shaming utterances can be categorized into two broad functional groups: (1) *mocking and ridicule*, and (2) *competence shaming*.

Within the initial category, humor, sarcasm, or exaggerated tones are frequently employed to conceal criticism, thereby undermining students' dignity while maintaining an appearance of playfulness. For instance, when a student mispronounced a word, the teacher repeated it in a mocking voice, ostensibly as a joke. The student reported feeling embarrassed and self-conscious, experiencing a sudden loss of confidence in his/her speaking ability. Similarly, when a student requested clarification, the teacher rolled her eyes and said, *You really don't get anything, do you?* — a *covert assertive,* containing an implicature of mocking the student's cognitive abilities, which violates the maxims of *manner* and *quality*. This left the student feeling belittled and anxious, reluctant to ask further questions, and hesitant to participate in future classroom interactions. Another example is an *explicit assertion*: the teacher laughed and remarked, *This is so basic — you can't be serious*, violating the maxims of *relation* and *manner*. Consequently, the student reported feeling humiliated and intellectually inferior, perceiving the classroom as an unsafe environment for expressing uncertainty.

Pragmatically, the literal humor of such utterances conceals an evaluative illocution: *You are inadequate or incapable*. The manipulative function of such discourse resides in normalizing humiliation, discouraging students from expressing uncertainty or seeking further clarification, and fostering enduring self-doubt that impacts both academic performance and engagement.

Within the second functional category, shaming may target students' abilities, effort, or perceived potential, typically through definitive or comparative judgments that implicitly position the learner as deficient. For instance, one student reported that the teacher looked at his/her essay and asked, *Did you even try?* — a ***covert assertive*** that violates the maxims of *relation* and *manner* and produces an immediate sense of diminishment, as its implicature is that the student's work is so inadequate that it barely qualifies as an attempt. Another recalled being told, *You should be embarrassed to make such a basic mistake* – an *explicit assertive* breaching the maxims of *relation*, *manner*, and *quality*, which induced a strong sense of personal inadequacy.

Explicit assertives manifest as comments such as *I expected more from you,* delivered publicly and thereby intensifying humiliation through social exposure. Similarly, the remark, *You are the only student who received a mark this low,* violates multiple maxims and singles out the student as uniquely incompetent; as the student observed, this resulted in a complete loss of motivation. Pragmatically, these utterances encode evaluative assessments of the student's competence and serve manipulatively to induce shame, erode self-confidence, and foster long-term linguistic insecurity. By discouraging students from asking questions, attempting challenging tasks, or engaging openly in classroom discourse, such practices contribute to patterns of learned helplessness. Both mocking and competence-based shaming diminish willingness to participate and cultivate a classroom environment characterized by fear, conformity, and dependence on the teacher's approval.

Guilt-tripping in EFL Teaching

According to Merriam-Webster, *to guilt-trip* means "to cause feelings of guilt in (someone): to try to manipulate the behavior of (someone) by causing feelings of guilt."

In the context of EFL teaching, *guilt-tripping* involves inducing students to feel personally accountable for the teacher's emotional well-being, workload, or perceived shortcomings in the educational process. For instance, one participant recalled the teacher stating, *I spend hours preparing lessons, but some of you clearly don't care. It's very disappointing.* This statement functions as an ***explicit assertion,*** subtly assigning blame to the group while implicitly targeting individuals. It breaches the maxim of *manner* through ambiguous generalizations and emotional appeals, and the maxim of *relation* by diverting focus from instructional objectives to the teacher's personal sentiments.

Another student reported the statement, *I've explained this so many times; it's frustrating that you still don't get it,* which constitutes an ***explicit assertive*** that portrays the student not as a learner facing challenges but as the source of the teacher's emotional frustration.

A *covert assertive* is exemplified by the statement, *You are not interested at all, are you?* — a rhetorical question that serves as an implicit accusation. Although it is grammatically an interrogative directive, it functions as an assertive illocution by presupposing the student's disengagement, thus eliciting guilt without explicit articulation.

Guilt-tripping is also evident through more explicit accusations, such as *If you had studied properly, you wouldn't keep making this mistake.* These statements violate the maxims of *quality* and *relevance* by overestimating personal responsibility and portraying academic difficulties as moral shortcomings. Pragmatically, guilt-tripping operates as a form of emotional manipulation rather than constructive feedback: students internalize responsibility for the teacher's frustration, which over time results in emotional exhaustion, reduced participation, and a distorted perception of accountability.

Consequently, two primary functional categories of guilt-tripping in EFL classrooms can be identified. The first, ***imposing emotional responsibility***, occurs when students are held accountable for the teacher's emotions, frustration, or workload, thereby shifting the instructor's emotional burden to the learner. The second, ***imposing blame***, involves attributing underperformance or a perceived lack of effort to the student, even when the learner may be sincerely engaging with the material. As demonstrated in the examples above, both categories operate through subtle cognitive-pragmatic mechanisms, generating implicatures that compel students to internalize responsibility for pedagogical outcomes. In doing so, they influence emotional states and classroom behavior in ways that go beyond the legitimate scope of instructional feedback.

Triangulation in EFL Teaching

Triangulation is an interpersonal strategy characterized by manipulation, wherein an individual fosters or intensifies competition or alliances amongst others to achieve control, influence, or advantage. (Holland, 2023) In EFL settings, ***triangulation*** refers to the creation or reinforcement of competition, rivalry, or favoritism among students as a means of exerting control. One participant reported, *The teacher always praises the same two students and compares the rest of us to them. It makes everyone anxious and resentful.* Another noted, *We're compared to other classes constantly. When I struggled, the teacher said, 'Last year's students learned this in one lesson.' It made me anxious and ashamed. It's demotivating.* Furthermore, praise can inadvertently contribute to triangulation: when a student is singled out as an exemplary figure and compared to less capable peers, feelings of pressure or isolation may arise. As one participant remarked, *When the teacher praised me and compared me to the weaker students, I felt awkward and distant from the rest of the class.* Another confessed, *Even though I was praised, it didn't feel good; I didn't want to draw attention to myself.*

A standard illustration of triangulation involves **direct comparisons** among students, as in the statement, *Why can't you be more like Maria? She's always well-prepared.* This expression acts as a ***covert assertive***: although it appears as an interrogative directive, it implicitly implies that the student addressed is inferior to Maria. Another form, **involving comparison** at the class level, is evident in statements such as, *Last year's students learned this in one lesson, and you're still struggling.* Here, the teacher makes an ***explicit assertive*** statement suggesting that previous students demonstrated greater competence.

Additionally, triangulation may be conveyed through **praise**, as demonstrated by, *I'm so impressed with John's essay. Some of you should take notes.* This exemplifies an ***inclusive assertive***, where the indirect command masks the assertion that other students are inferior to John.

Consequently, the data reveal two primary functional categories of triangulation within EFL classrooms. The first, ***comparison by diminishment***, encompasses explicit or implicit contrasts that position one student (or group) as inferior to another, thereby fostering competition, anxiety, and shame. The second category, *creating* ***inequality through praise***, transpires when a positive evaluation of one student implicitly renders others inadequate, even in the absence of direct criticism.

From a pragmatic perspective, triangulation functions as a manipulative strategy that primarily breaches the maxim of *relation* (though other maxims may also be simultaneously violated): the instructor's comments no longer serve an educational purpose but manipulate interpersonal relationships. These practices undermine social cohesion in the classroom, fostering distrust, rivalry, and anxiety rather than encouraging cooperation within a shared learning environment. By strategically accentuating differences among students, triangulation not only exerts pressure on individuals but also divides the class, fostering distance and eroding both confidence and collaborative engagement.

Pragmatic Observations

It is noteworthy that, within EFL classroom settings and likely in other contexts as well, the manipulative strategies previously discussed often overlap. In other words, an interflow of manipulative functions across these tactics can be observed. For example, guilt-tripping often integrates elements of shaming, producing a complex perlocutionary effect on the listener, whereas triangulation may imply both shaming and guilt-tripping. Collectively, these strategies may contribute to the cognitive-pragmatic manifestation of gaslighting.

Furthermore, in the context of shaming and guilt-tripping, both explicit and covert assertives frequently share the illocutionary force of inclusive assertives, as they impose specific emotional responses on the listener, thereby inducing particular behaviors. This observation reinforces the

perspective that, within manipulative discourse, assertive speech acts demonstrate a *double direction of fit*. It further emphasizes that the linguistic mechanisms underlying manipulative discourse strategies extend beyond the explanatory capacity of conventional pragmatic frameworks.

In the course of data analysis, a distinct type of "manipulative" speech act was identified. The utterance *Go on, carry on like this!* functions as a *countermanding directive*: superficially permissive, it implicitly communicates disapproval while simultaneously requesting the opposite behavior, effectively combining elements of shaming and guilt-tripping. This classification is deemed appropriate because, although the literal form appears to endorse the student's behavior, the illocutionary force indicates that the behavior is inappropriate and warrants correction. For instance, such utterances may occur when a student repeatedly submits poorly prepared work or underperforms; the instructor employs sarcasm to underline the disparity between the student's effort and the expected standard.

This concept aligns with Zhang's (2024) description of *impositive irony*. Nonetheless, within manipulative discourse, the illocutionary force of such directives surpasses the ironic tone, bearing a more potent and coercive implicature. Unlike irony, in which the listener may resist or ignore the implied directive, manipulative utterances evoke an emotional reaction that effectively prompts a behavioral response. As a result, the perlocutionary force is not solely ironically suggestive but functionally coercive, leading to specific actions or compliance from the student. Therefore, I employ a distinct term to capture the peculiar pragmatic dynamics of this type of directive speech act.

From a **Relevance Theory** perspective, these multifunctional manipulative speech acts generate ***cognitively inescapable implicatures***: the intended meanings — such as the student's inadequacy, failure to comply with expectations, or inferiority to other students — must be inferred to make sense of the utterance within its context. Even innocently phrased statements, such as *You should follow Tina's example*, are processed by students as disapproval rather than encouragement, because contextual cues and prior classroom interactions (previous discourse experience) render alternative interpretations irrelevant or implausible. **It is precisely because these implicatures are cognitively inescapable that even unconscious manipulation can be so harmful within the classroom,** undermining students' confidence and autonomy.

Conclusion

The current research elucidates the prevalence and intricacy of manipulative discourse strategies within EFL classroom environments. Gaslighting is identified as the predominant tactic, representing 42% of documented cases, followed by shaming (28%), guilt-tripping (20%), and triangulation (10%). These

statistics not only reflect frequency but also underscore functional significance: gaslighting emerges as the most impactful strategy, often integrating or co-occurring with elements of shaming, guilt-tripping, and triangulation. This indicates that gaslighting may function as a comprehensive manipulative framework, rather than a singular category, capable of encompassing various evaluative, corrective, and comparative illocutions.

From an analytical perspective, the findings demonstrate that these manipulative strategies infrequently operate independently. Instead, they display considerable overlap and fusion. Shaming systematically involves guilt-inducing implicatures; triangulation often incorporates comparative shaming; and guilt-tripping commonly elicits evaluative judgments analogous to covert shaming. Collectively, these tactics generate cumulative perlocutionary effects that amplify their psychological influence.

The analysis further revealed that each strategy comprises distinct functional categories that shape its manipulative force. Gaslighting operates through four core functions — ***memory distortion, inducing self-doubt, emotional invalidation,*** **and** ***authority-based epistemic domination*** — each of which systematically erodes epistemic trust and destabilizes students' interpretive capacities. Shaming comprises two primary functions **—** ***mockery and ridicule,*** and ***competence shaming*** — both of which undermine students' confidence, discourage inquiry, and foster participation anxiety. Guilt-tripping is realized through ***imposing emotional responsibility*** and ***instilling blame***, shifting the instructor's emotional or instructional burden onto learners, and pressuring them to internalize guilt. Triangulation, likewise, manifests in two key forms — ***comparison by diminishment*** and ***creating inequality through praise*** — which strategically restructure peer relations and generate interpersonal competition, mistrust, and insecurity.

From a speech-act perspective, these tactics are enacted through explicit, covert, and inclusive assertives, often violating multiple conversational maxims. Notably, the study delineates a specific subtype of manipulative speech act — the *countermanding directive* (e.g., "*Go on, carry on like this!"*) — which employs sarcasm to shame, blame, and correct the learner's behavior concurrently. Its pragmatic structure largely conforms to traditional taxonomies but diverges in function by simultaneously permitting and censuring, thereby producing a coercive implicature that transcends the typical scope of directive force. Moreover, both *explicit* and *covert* assertives converge in their pragmatic effect, functioning similarly to *inclusive* assertives and thereby producing a directive perlocutionary impact on the student. This underscores the necessity for a revised conceptual framework for speech acts within manipulative discourse.

From the perspective of Relevance Theory, the implicatures arising from manipulative utterances are inherently unavoidable cognitive phenomena: students are compelled to deduce evaluative, corrective, or comparative implications, which lead to internalizing blame, experiencing self-doubt, and depending on educators for validation. Even seemingly benign statements, such as comparisons or ostensibly encouraging directives, are perceived as critical or corrective owing to contextual cues and preceding classroom interactions.

These findings highlight that manipulative discourse within educational settings extends beyond the explanatory capacity of conventional pragmatic models. The convergence and multifunctionality of these strategies enhance their influence, undermining students' confidence, autonomy, and willingness to engage, thereby fostering learned helplessness. Therefore, it is essential to increase awareness of such practices to promote reflective teaching, prevent both conscious and unconscious manipulation, and establish a learning environment that is supportive both mentally and emotionally.

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