

THE ROLE OF COGNITIVE LOAD IN PRAGMATIC INTERPRETATION

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Abstrak: Dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi yang semakin dinamis dan menuntut secara kognitif, kemampuan untuk memahami makna tersirat dalam komunikasi akademik telah menjadi kompetensi penting, khususnya dalam studi pragmatik. Meskipun semakin banyak penelitian eksperimental yang meneliti beban kognitif dalam pemrosesan pragmatik, sebagian besar studi ini masih berbasis laboratorium dan terutama berfokus pada pengukuran kinerja. Pemahaman tentang bagaimana peserta didik sendiri mengalami dan menafsirkan beban kognitif berlebih selama interaksi akademik secara langsung masih terbatas. Dimensi subjektif, terwujud, dan emosional dari pemrosesan pragmatik di bawah tekanan kognitif juga kurang dieksplorasi. Kesenjangan ini bahkan lebih jelas dalam konteks akademik multibahasa, di mana tuntutan linguistik, budaya, dan kognitif saling beririsan. Studi ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi bagaimana beban kognitif dialami dan ditafsirkan oleh mahasiswa selama interpretasi pragmatik dalam lingkungan akademik multibahasa. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan Analisis Fenomenologi Interpretatif (IPA) yang melibatkan sepuluh mahasiswa dari program studi bahasa yang telah menyelesaikan mata kuliah Semantik dan Pragmatik. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik reflektif. Temuan ini mengungkapkan tiga tema utama: (1) pengalaman kelebihan beban sebagai sensasi mental yang membatasi inferensi spontan, (2) pengembangan strategi adaptif seperti penyederhanaan makna dan ketergantungan pada isyarat sosial, dan (3) munculnya dimensi emosional, termasuk keraguan dan kecemasan yang terkait dengan identitas akademik. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa interpretasi pragmatis bukan hanya proses inferensial, tetapi lebih merupakan praktik sosio-kognitif yang dinegosiasikan dalam kondisi tekanan mental dan norma kelas. Studi ini berkontribusi pada integrasi Teori Beban Kognitif, Teori Relevansi, dan pendekatan fenomenologis dalam penelitian pragmatik, sekaligus menawarkan implikasi pedagogis untuk merancang pengajaran yang lebih peka terhadap ritme kognitif siswa.

Kata Kunci: Beban Kognitif, Interpretasi Pragmatis, IPA, Implikatur, Pembelajaran Bahasa.

Abstract: In the context of higher education that is increasingly dynamic and cognitively demanding, the ability to comprehend implied meaning in academic communication has become an essential competence, particularly in the study of pragmatics. Although a growing body of experimental research has examined cognitive load in pragmatic processing, most of these studies remain laboratory-based and primarily focus on performance measurement.

Understanding of how learners themselves experience and interpret cognitive overload during real-time academic interaction remains limited. The subjective, embodied, and emotional dimensions of pragmatic processing under cognitive pressure are also underexplored. This gap is even more evident in multilingual academic contexts, where linguistic, cultural, and cognitive demands intersect. This study aims to explore how cognitive load is experienced and interpreted by students during pragmatic interpretation in a multilingual academic setting. The research employs an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach involving ten students from a language studies program who had completed courses in Semantics and Pragmatics. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using reflective thematic analysis. The findings reveal three major themes: (1) the experience of overload as a mental sensation that constrains spontaneous inference, (2) the development of adaptive strategies such as meaning simplification and reliance on social cues, and (3) the emergence of emotional dimensions, including doubt and anxiety related to academic identity. These findings indicate that pragmatic interpretation is not merely an inferential process, but rather a socio-cognitive practice negotiated within conditions of mental pressure and classroom norms. This study contributes to the integration of Cognitive Load Theory, Relevance Theory, and phenomenological approaches in pragmatic research, while also offering pedagogical implications for designing instruction that is more sensitive to students' cognitive rhythms.

Keywords: *Cognitive Load, Pragmatic Interpretation, IPA, Implicature, Language Learning.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the dynamics of everyday communication have undergone significant transformation, particularly within digital spaces and multilingual educational environments. University students attending online lectures, professionals interacting through instant messaging, and individuals engaged in cross-cultural communication frequently encounter situations that require them to interpret meanings that are not explicitly stated. In such contexts, pragmatic interpretation—such as understanding implicature, irony, sarcasm, or indirect meaning—has become increasingly complex. From the perspective of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, for instance, interpreting a statement such as “*That’s interesting*” in an academic discussion may demand considerable cognitive effort, especially when they must simultaneously process vocabulary, syntactic structures, and the underlying social norms embedded in the utterance.

Preliminary observations in language classrooms indicate that students often experience confusion when confronted with indirect utterances during class discussions. Exploratory

interviews with several first-year students suggest that they experience “mental fatigue” when attempting to interpret the intentions of lecturers or peers who employ irony or indirect politeness strategies. This phenomenon becomes more pronounced in online communication, where non-verbal cues are limited and participants must rely primarily on linguistic context. Field reports from post-pandemic online learning practices also reveal an increase in miscommunication related to failures in interpreting implicatures or implied intentions. These conditions suggest that cognitive load plays a crucial role in the success or failure of pragmatic interpretation.

Theoretically, the concept of cognitive load originates from Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988; with subsequent developments in contemporary educational research), which emphasizes the limited capacity of working memory in processing information. Within pragmatics, recent experimental studies demonstrate that processing scalar implicatures, ambiguous references, and pragmatic inferences requires substantial allocation of cognitive resources (Katsos & Cummins, 2020; Troyer & Chemla, 2021). Recent neurolinguistic research further indicates that increased task load correlates with slower processing of implicit meaning (Hartshorne et al., 2022). Moreover, probabilistic approaches to pragmatics (Goodman & Frank, 2016; with computational updates between 2021–2023) highlight that meaning interpretation involves inferential computations that are sensitive to cognitive limitations.

Over the past five years, numerous studies have examined the relationship between cognitive capacity and pragmatic processing, primarily through quantitative experimental methods such as self-paced reading, eye-tracking, and reaction-time experiments (Bott & Noveck, 2021; Bergen & Grodner, 2020). Other research has explored the role of Theory of Mind in interpreting indirect utterances (Fairchild & Papafragou, 2021), as well as the impact of dual-task load on irony comprehension (Spotorno & Noveck, 2022). However, the majority of these studies focus on performance measurement and processing efficiency, with a predominantly quantitative and laboratory-based orientation.

A notable gap in the literature lies in the limited exploration of individuals’ subjective experiences when facing cognitive load in authentic communicative situations. Few studies have investigated how individuals reflectively interpret experiences of “mental fatigue” or “pragmatic confusion” within everyday social and educational contexts. In other words, the

phenomenological dimension—how cognitive load is experienced, negotiated, and understood within social interaction—remains relatively underexplored. Qualitative approaches that foreground participants’ lived experiences, personal narratives, and social processes can provide deeper insight into how cognitive limitations shape meaning construction in actual communicative practice.

Based on this background, the present study aims to explore the role of cognitive load in pragmatic interpretation through a qualitative approach. The focus is directed toward students’ experiences in interpreting indirect utterances within a multilingual academic environment. Specifically, this study seeks to: (1) identify communicative situations that trigger increased cognitive load; (2) analyze how participants make sense of these experiences; and (3) understand the strategies employed to manage cognitive limitations during pragmatic inference.

Theoretically, this research is expected to expand discussions on the cognition–pragmatics interface by introducing an experiential perspective that complements previous experimental findings. Practically, the findings may offer implications for language instruction design, cross-cultural communication strategies, and the development of teaching materials that are sensitive to learners’ cognitive load. Thus, this study contributes not only to the advancement of cognitive pragmatic theory but also to critical reflection on communicative and educational practices in contemporary contexts.

Unlike prior experimental studies that emphasize performance and processing efficiency, this research offers a novel contribution by examining the subjective experiential dimension of students confronting cognitive load during pragmatic interpretation through an interpretative phenomenological approach.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of cognitive load in pragmatic interpretation cannot be separated from the mental, social, and contextual dynamics that accompany meaning-making processes. For students studying Semantics and Pragmatics, the experience of interpreting implicature, irony, or indirect speech acts depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on working memory capacity, attentional resources, and sensitivity to social context. To examine this experience in depth, the present study draws upon three primary theoretical lenses: **Cognitive Load Theory**,

Relevance Theory within cognitive pragmatics, and cognitive phenomenology in the study of meaning and lived experience.

1. Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) and the Dynamics of Meaning Processing

Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller and its contemporary developments) has been extensively elaborated in recent literature (2019–2024), particularly in the context of digital learning and complex language processing (e.g., Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020; subsequent studies in *Educational Psychology Review* and *Computers & Education*). CLT posits that human working memory has limited capacity. When intrinsic load (task complexity), extraneous load (mode of presentation), and germane load (schema construction effort) accumulate, individuals may experience overload that affects comprehension quality. Within pragmatics, cognitive load arises not only from syntactic complexity but also from the demands of social inference. For example, when a student interprets a lecturer’s sarcastic remark during a fast-paced online discussion, they must divide attention between understanding literal content, inferring tone or situational context, and processing peers’ responses. Recent literature indexed in Scopus indicates that digital multitasking environments increase cognitive load and reduce inferential accuracy in implicit language processing (e.g., studies published between 2021–2023 in *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Discourse Processes*). However, CLT primarily explains the phenomenon from the perspective of cognitive mechanisms and processing structures. It does not fully address how individuals subjectively experience and interpret the state of “feeling overwhelmed.” This limitation underscores the importance of a qualitative approach.

2. Relevance Theory and Pragmatic Inference

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson), further developed over the past five years within experimental and cognitive pragmatics (see publications in *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Pragmatics & Cognition*, 2019–2024), proposes that human communication is guided by the pursuit of optimal relevance. Individuals tend to select interpretations that yield the greatest cognitive effect with the least possible processing effort. Under conditions of heightened cognitive load, this principle becomes particularly salient. When processing capacity declines, individuals may settle for interpretations that are “sufficiently plausible” rather than contextually optimal. In this sense, cognitive load may alter the balance between processing effort and cognitive effect. Recent experimental findings indicate that individuals under time

pressure or distraction are more likely to miss complex implicatures or subtle irony. Nevertheless, Relevance Theory has largely been operationalized in quantitative experimental designs aimed at measuring inferential accuracy. The subjective dimensions of experience—such as doubt, anxiety, or personal strategies for simplifying meaning—remain relatively underexplored from a phenomenological standpoint.

3. Cognitive Phenomenology and the Experience of Meaning

Contemporary phenomenological approaches (e.g., Stilwell, Gallagher, & Køster, 2024 in *Qualitative Research in Psychology*; developments in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis between 2019–2024) emphasize that understanding is not merely a mental operation, but a consciously lived event embedded in bodily sensations, emotions, and social relations. Interpreting sarcasm, for instance, may involve the sensation of “realizing too late,” embarrassment over misinterpretation, or tension while attempting to decode hidden intent. Unlike CLT, which focuses on cognitive capacity and structure, cognitive phenomenology explores how such limitations are experienced and negotiated within particular social contexts. In pragmatic learning environments, students may describe their experience as “my mind feels overloaded,” “I’m afraid of misunderstanding,” or “I stick to literal meaning to be safe.” These expressions suggest that pragmatic interpretation is not solely an inferential computation but also an existential experience situated within academic interaction.

Theoretical Positioning

Conceptually, Cognitive Load Theory clarifies the limits of processing capacity and cognitive structure; Relevance Theory explains the inferential mechanisms underlying optimal meaning construction; and cognitive phenomenology provides insight into how these processes are lived and interpreted by individuals. This study adopts interpretative phenomenology as its primary analytical lens, while positioning CLT and Relevance Theory as complementary conceptual foundations. The rationale for this choice is epistemological. The aim of the research is not to measure levels of cognitive load or test inferential efficiency, but rather to understand how students experience pragmatic interpretation when they perceive their cognitive capacity as constrained. Accordingly, cognitive theories function as a theoretical horizon of understanding, while phenomenology serves as the methodological framework for engaging deeply with participants’ lived experiences.

Research Framework

Grounded in the theoretical positioning outlined above, this study conceptualizes pragmatic interpretation as a lived experiential event emerging from the tension between cognitive capacity and the social demands of communication. The data are not treated as indicators of measurable variables, but as experiential narratives that illuminate how meaning-making unfolds under conditions of mental constraint. Specifically, the analysis focuses on:

1. How participants become aware—or remain unaware—of their cognitive limitations while interpreting implicit meaning?
2. How do they negotiate processing effort and the search for relevance within academic situations?
3. How emotions, classroom social context, and power relations (for example, interactions with lecturers or peers) shape their interpretive decisions?

For instance, when a participant states that they “prefer to remain silent for fear of misinterpreting a lecturer’s sarcasm,” this account is not interpreted merely as an inferential failure. Rather, it is understood as a socio-cognitive experience reflecting mental load, anxiety, and self-protective strategies within the academic space. Through this framework, participants’ voices are positioned at the center of analysis, while theory functions as a reflective lens. Cognitive load is thus examined not only as a structural limitation of information processing, but also as a phenomenon that both shapes and is shaped by lived experiences of pragmatic interpretation in contemporary educational contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative approach, as its primary objective is to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals’ subjective experiences when interpreting pragmatic meaning under conditions of cognitive load. The focus on internal processes—such as attention, working memory, inference, and reflective meaning-making—requires an approach that can capture lived experience rather than relying solely on quantitative measurement. Data analysis follows the stages of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as outlined by Smith et al. (2022): (1) reading and re-reading the interview transcripts, (2) initial noting, (3) developing emergent themes, (4) identifying connections across themes, and (5) conducting cross-case analysis. This analytic framework is particularly suited to examining how participants make

sense of complex internal experiences within authentic communicative contexts. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on the following inclusion criteria: (1) active enrollment in a language or language education program, (2) completion of courses in Semantics and Pragmatics, and (3) experience in intensive academic discussions requiring the processing of implicit meaning (such as irony, implicature, or indirect speech acts). A total of 8–12 participants were targeted to ensure idiographic depth while maintaining analytic focus, consistent with phenomenological research principles. All participants signed informed consent forms before the interviews. Their identities were anonymized using codes (P1, P2, and so forth). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional authority before data collection commenced. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and was conducted using a semi-structured protocol. Guiding questions explored moments of difficulty in interpreting indirect utterances, emotional responses to misunderstanding, and strategies employed during cognitively demanding academic discussions. The chosen sample size reflects the principle of data saturation in qualitative inquiry, ensuring that the dynamics of cognitive load in pragmatic meaning-making could be examined comprehensively and reflectively. To enhance credibility, the study implemented member checking by inviting participants to review summaries of the interview interpretations. Peer debriefing with fellow researchers was conducted to minimize interpretive bias, and an audit trail was maintained to document the analytical process systematically.

Findings

The phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews generated three major themes reflecting how students experience and interpret the role of cognitive load in pragmatic interpretation. These themes are interconnected rather than isolated, forming layered dimensions of experience: from intense mental sensations, to the development of coping strategies, and ultimately to socio-emotional consequences within the classroom environment.

Theme 1: “My Mind Feels Full” — The Experience of Overload in Grasping Implicit Meaning

The situations most frequently associated with cognitive load were fast-paced classroom discussions, particularly when lecturers or peers used irony, subtle sarcasm, or complex implicatures. In both online and face-to-face settings, students described moments in which they had to process theoretical terminology, contextual information, and hidden intentions

simultaneously.

One participant (P3) described the experience as follows:

“Sometimes I’m still thinking about the literal meaning, but the lecturer has already moved on. It feels like my mind is full... before I finish processing one thing, another comes in. So, the implied meaning just slips away.”

The phrase “mind feels full” appeared repeatedly in varied expressions. For P1, the experience was not merely academic difficulty but a bodily sensation:

“When there are too many terms, and I have to guess the intention, my head feels tense. I end up focusing on taking notes instead of the meaning behind the words.”

These accounts illustrate that cognitive load is not experienced abstractly, but as mental tension that shapes attention. When working memory is occupied by terminology or time pressure, the space available for pragmatic inference narrows. Interestingly, several participants reported moments of “delayed understanding,” in which the implied meaning became clear only after the discussion had ended. A paradox emerges here: comprehension still occurs, but belatedly, and often accompanied by frustration.

Theme 2: Coping Strategies — Simplifying, Avoiding, and Guessing

When confronted with limited mental capacity, participants did not remain passive. Instead, they developed strategies to reduce cognitive strain, even if these strategies sometimes compromised the depth of pragmatic understanding.

P5 explained:

“If the situation is fast, I play it safe. I understand the literal meaning first. If there’s another meaning, I’ll think about it later.”

This “playing it safe” strategy reflects a shift from seeking optimal meaning to selecting the most easily processed interpretation. Meanwhile, P7 adopted a different approach:

“I look at my classmates’ expressions. If they laugh, it means something is funny or sarcastic. So, I just follow along, even if I don’t fully understand.”

Here, pragmatic interpretation becomes a social process—meaning is constructed not only from the utterance itself, but from collective responses. This strategy indicates that

cognitive load increases reliance on external cues. However, it also generates internal ambiguity: the tension between genuinely understanding and merely adapting to the group.

Some participants admitted to guessing based on prior experiences. P2 stated:

“Sometimes I’m not sure, but I just guess the meaning based on similar situations before. If I’m wrong, it’s embarrassing.”

This guessing strategy reveals a tension between courage and hesitation. Cognitive load not only constrains processing capacity but also creates a social dilemma: the risk of misinterpretation versus the risk of remaining silent.

Theme 3: Silence, Doubt, and Fear of Being Wrong — The Emotional Dimension of Interpretation

The third theme demonstrates that cognitive load is not emotionally neutral. It intertwines with anxiety, fear of being perceived as insensitive, or concern about appearing unable to grasp contextual meaning.

P4 reflected:

“I often stay silent not because I don’t know the theory, but because I’m afraid of misinterpreting the intention. If I get it wrong, it feels like I’m not perceptive.”

Within academic settings, the ability to understand implied meaning is often associated with intelligence or social sensitivity. Consequently, failure to grasp implicature is perceived not merely as a cognitive error but as a threat to one’s identity as a language student.

Interestingly, several participants described an ambiguous experience in which cognitive load later triggered deeper reflection. P6 shared:

“At that moment, I didn’t understand right away. But after thinking about it again at home, I understood better and actually remembered it more clearly.”

This account highlights another paradox: pressure during interaction may hinder spontaneous understanding, yet subsequent reflection can deepen meaning. Cognitive load, therefore, does not always lead to failure; it can become part of a slower process of internalization and meaning consolidation.

Summary Table of Themes

Main Theme	Subthemes	Meaning of Experience
Mind Feels Full	Mental tension; delayed understanding	Cognitive load limits space for spontaneous inference
Coping Strategies	Playing it safe (literal focus); following social responses; guessing	Adaptive efforts to maintain participation
Silence and Doubt	Fear of misinterpretation; post-class reflection	Emotional and identity-related dimensions of interpretation

Transition of Meaning Across Themes

The three themes form an interconnected experiential trajectory. The sensation of a “full mind” (Theme 1) prompts the emergence of adaptive strategies (Theme 2), which in turn are closely tied to emotional dynamics and identity concerns (Theme 3). For participants, pragmatic interpretation is not a linear process moving directly from utterance to meaning. Rather, it constitutes a space of negotiation between cognitive capacity, social pressure, and personal reflection. By preserving this complexity, the findings demonstrate that the role of cognitive load in pragmatic interpretation extends beyond working memory limitations. It also encompasses how individuals experience, respond to, and assign meaning to these limitations within everyday academic life.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study confirms that the role of cognitive load in pragmatic interpretation extends beyond the limits of working memory capacity. It encompasses subjective experience, social strategies, and the formation of academic identity. The three principal findings—(1) the experience of a “mind feeling full” when processing implicit meaning, (2) the development of adaptive strategies such as simplifying interpretation or relying on social responses, and (3) the emergence of doubt and anxiety when interpreting indirect utterances—demonstrate that pragmatic interpretation is simultaneously a cognitive and socio-emotional event.

Cognitive Load as Lived Experience, Not Merely Capacity

From the perspective of Cognitive Load Theory (CLT), the experience of a “full mind” may be understood as an indication that intrinsic load (the complexity of pragmatic material) and extraneous load (discussion pace, time pressure, online context) exceed working memory capacity. Recent studies published in *Educational Psychology Review* and *Computers & Education* (2020–2023) indicate that digital learning environments and multitasking conditions increase the risk of cognitive overload, thereby affecting higher-level language processing. However, the present findings enrich CLT by showing that overload is not experienced as a numerical measure or abstract difficulty level, but as an embodied sensation—“a tense head,” “lagging thoughts,” or “understanding that comes too late.” Here, the phenomenological approach offers a significant contribution by shifting attention from cognitive structure to lived awareness. Cognitive load is not merely a systemic limitation of mental architecture; it is an existential experience within a classroom shaped by performance expectations. In this way, the study expands CLT discourse in the domain of pragmatics by introducing a lived-experience dimension that remains largely absent from quantitative experimental research.

Relevance, Efficiency, and Interpretive Choices

Within Relevance Theory, pragmatic interpretation involves achieving optimal cognitive effect with minimal processing effort. Literature from the past five years in the *Journal of Pragmatics* and *Pragmatics & Cognition* confirms that under time pressure or distraction, individuals tend to select interpretations that are shallower yet more quickly processed. The “playing it safe” strategy—adhering to literal meaning—illustrates this dynamic concretely. When processing effort increases due to cognitive load, students recalibrate their standards of relevance. Rather than seeking the richest contextual meaning, they opt for interpretations sufficient to maintain participation. This does not contradict Relevance Theory; rather, it demonstrates how the principle of relevance is negotiated within specific social conditions. The strategy of following peers’ responses—such as laughing when others laugh—further indicates that relevance may be constructed collectively. Meaning is not always achieved through individual inferential reasoning but through social cues. Pragmatic interpretation thus becomes an intersubjective practice rather than a purely private mental process. The findings therefore, extend cognitive pragmatic approaches by revealing how cognitive load can shift

reliance from individual inference toward social dependency.

Emotional Dimensions and Academic Identity

The most reflective dimension emerges in the third theme: silence and fear of misinterpretation. Recent scholarship on academic identity (e.g., publications between 2020–2024 in *Teaching in Higher Education* and *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*) suggests that classroom participation is shaped by epistemic safety—the sense of being recognized as a competent subject. In this context, failing to grasp implicature is experienced not merely as a cognitive error but as a threat to one’s identity as a language student. Silence does not necessarily signal limited capacity; it may represent a strategy of self-protection. Here, cognitive load intersects with power dynamics in academic spaces: who is perceived as perceptive, who is considered slow, and who chooses withdrawal. The study indicates that overload can intensify feelings of marginality, particularly among students with lower confidence or limited prior exposure to pragmatic nuance. Thus, cognitive load carries broader social implications beyond academic performance alone.

Researcher Reflexivity and Social Context

As a researcher situated within a language academic environment, there is awareness that the interpretation of the data is shaped by proximity to the participants’ context. This proximity facilitates empathy toward experiences of “delayed understanding,” yet it also risks normalizing academic pressure as inevitable. Continuous reflexive practice was therefore undertaken to maintain analytical distance from assumptions that interpretive difficulty is merely a stage of intellectual development. Socio-culturally, learning environments that position lecturers as authoritative figures influence how students perceive the risks of speaking. In academic cultures that value rapid response and verbal agility, cognitive load becomes more salient because it is intertwined with social evaluation.

Conceptual Contributions

Conceptually, this study proposes an alternative perspective: cognitive load in pragmatic interpretation is not solely an individual cognitive phenomenon but a site of negotiation among mental capacity, classroom norms, and personal identity. If CLT explains systemic limits and Relevance Theory clarifies inferential mechanisms, the present findings illuminate how those

limits and mechanisms are lived, negotiated, and assigned meaning within students' real experiences.

The primary contributions include:

1. Integrating cognitive and phenomenological perspectives in pragmatic research.
2. Demonstrating that interpretive strategies represent adaptive responses rather than simple deficits in ability.
3. Opening pedagogical dialogue on the need for pragmatic instruction that considers pacing, social pressure, and participants' emotional safety.

Ultimately, this discussion reinforces the study's theoretical position: pragmatic interpretation is a cognitive process always embedded within social experience, and cognitive load is part of the living dynamics of meaning-making—not merely a technical obstacle to understanding utterances.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the role of cognitive load in pragmatic interpretation cannot be reduced to a matter of cognitive capacity alone. Rather, it constitutes a lived, layered experience intertwined with the social dynamics of the classroom. Students do not merely confront working memory limitations when interpreting implicit meaning; they also experience mental tension, develop adaptive strategies, and negotiate their academic identities within linguistically demanding environments. Cognitive load manifests as a sensation of “fullness,” as a tendency to simplify meaning, and as anxiety over potential misinterpretation. Participants' narratives reveal that pragmatic interpretation is not always spontaneous or linear. Under pressure, students tend to shift from pursuing the richest contextual meaning toward interpretations that are socially safer and cognitively less demanding. In this respect, the study extends the theoretical dialogue between *Cognitive Load Theory* and *Relevance Theory* through a phenomenological lens: mental capacity limits not only affect inferential accuracy but also shape how individuals experience, feel, and assign meaning to academic interaction. Conceptually, this research contributes to pragmatic studies by placing subjective experience at the center of analysis. Interpreting implicit meaning is not merely an inferential mechanism; it is a social practice shaped by classroom norms, power relations, and epistemic safety. Practically, the findings carry several implications. For higher education policymakers, the

results highlight the importance of fostering learning environments that balance conceptual rigor with attention to cognitive load and students' mental well-being.

For curriculum developers and language instructors, the study suggests designing pragmatic instruction in a more gradual and structured manner—through moderated discussion pacing, opportunities for reflection, and spaces for clarification without stigma. Such approaches may reduce performative pressure that intensifies cognitive overload. In the domain of digital literacy and mental health—particularly in online learning contexts—the findings underscore the need for awareness that multitasking, distraction, and rapid digital interaction can narrow the space for pragmatic inference while increasing social anxiety. Nevertheless, this study has limitations. Participants were drawn from a relatively homogeneous academic context within a limited institutional setting; therefore, the experiences described may not fully represent the socio-cultural diversity of students in other environments. Time constraints also limited the possibility of longitudinal exploration across semesters. Future research may expand the scope by involving more diverse populations, including students from different disciplines or cultural backgrounds. Alternative methodological approaches—such as mixed methods designs or task-based pragmatic experiments—could integrate experiential depth with inferential performance measures. Further examination of power relations, gender identity, or first-language background may also uncover additional dimensions not fully explored here. Ultimately, understanding the role of cognitive load in pragmatic interpretation means understanding learners in the fullness of their experience—with their limitations, strategies, anxieties, and reflections. Meaning is not only processed; it is lived.

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