GeoScienceEd *7(4) (2026)*

Jurnal Pendidikan, Sains, Geologi, dan Geofisika

http://jpfis.unram.ac.id/index.php/GeoScienceEdu/index

Unveiling Speech Acts in Dead Poets Society (1989): A Pragmatic Analysis of Educational Discourse in Film

Imam Mujahid[1], Arifuddin[1], Dewi Satria Elmiana[1]

[1] English Education Program, Department of Language and Arts' Education, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Mataram, Mataram, Indonesia.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.29303/goescienceed.v7i4.3577

Article Info
Received: August,12th2026
Revised : August, 31st2026
Accepted: October, 1st2026

Correspondence:

Phone: +62 823-4004-1569

Abstract: This study investigates the operation and impact of speech acts within the educational discourse of the film Dead Poets Society (1989), focusing on the utterances of the main character, Mr. Keating. Using a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in Speech Act Theory and Cognitive Pragmatics, the research analyzes how poetic, symbolic, and implicit speech acts function to foster character development in students. The sample was selected through purposive sampling from key classroom and outdoor interaction scenes. Findings reveal that Mr. Keating employs poetic speech acts to deconstruct rigid academic dogmas, symbolic speech acts (bound to physical actions) to challenge institutional conformity, and implicit speech acts to prompt cognitive self-reflection and internalize moral reasoning. Rather than relying on authoritarian mandates, his communicative style systematically cultivates critical thinking, autonomy, self-actualization, and self-control among students. The study concludes that layered pragmatic communication in pedagogical settings serves as a powerful vehicle for holistic character education.

Keywords: Speech Acts; Pragmatics; Educational Discourse; Dead Poets Society; Character Education.

Citation: Mujahid, I., Arifuddin, A., & Elmiana, D. S. (2026). Unveiling Speech Acts in Dead Poets Society (1989): A Pragmatic Analysis of Educational Discourse in Film: A Pragmatic Analysis of Educational Discourse in Film. *Jurnal Pendidikan, Sains, Geologi, Dan Geofisika (GeoScienceEd Journal)*, *7*(4), 6440–6444. https://doi.org/10.29303/goescienceed.v7i4.3577

Introduction

In the modern educational landscape, pedagogical focus has shifted from mere knowledge transfer toward character building and practical skills. Integrating character education through a pragmatic lens frames language as an active social instrument rather than a rigid set of grammatical rules. Every utterance carries a social intent and function that can nurture critical thinking, empathy, and personal responsibility.

Speech act theory, originally proposed by Austin and refined by Searle, emphasizes that speaking constitutes performing actions such as advising, commanding, or inspiring. Within educational settings, these communicative actions form an educational discourse—a structured system of language used to negotiate knowledge, values, and institutional norms.

The film Dead Poets Society (1989) provides a compelling representation of holistic teaching through language use. The protagonist, Mr. John Keating, employs unconventional communication styles that transform his students' perspectives. While prior studies have categorized speech acts into basic illocutionary types (Rumaria, 2015), explored moral values (Qaniu, 2024), or examined teaching models (Taufiq & Islam, 2021), this study explores how poetic,

Email: mujahidimam010@gmail.com

Copyright © 2020, Author et al.
This open access article is distributed under a (CC-BY License

symbolic, and implicit pragmatic styles operate within educational discourse to drive student character formation. Specifically, this study addresses two main questions: (1) How do poetic, symbolic, and implicit speech acts operate within the educational discourse in Dead Poets Society? (2) Why does Mr. Keating's communication style significantly impact student character building?

Method

This research utilized a descriptive qualitative research design to interpret speech acts in context. The primary data source was the feature film Dead Poets Society (1989) and its transcribed dialogue. The population comprised all pedagogical exchanges involving Mr. Keating, while the sample was selected using purposive sampling focused on scenes rich in educational discourse.

The main research instrument was the human researcher, supported by transcription sheets and a Speech Act Classification Matrix. Data collection involved repeated viewings, verbatim transcription annotated with non-verbal cues (e.g., intonation, gestures), and recording of situational context. Data analysis followed qualitative procedures: data reduction, classification based on Searle's taxonomy (representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, declaratives), pragmatic style categorization (poetic, symbolic, implicit), contextual interpretation, and analytical comparison with conventional pedagogical discourse.

.

Result and Discussion

Findings

The analysis identified nine primary data units representing three distinct pragmatic styles in Mr. Keating's utterances:

1. Poetic Speech Acts: Poetic speech acts utilize literary devices, metaphors, and aesthetic phrasing to convey philosophical values:

- Data 1 (Scene 3): "We're not laying pipe, we're talking about poetry." (Representative act contrasting mechanical work with artistic appreciation; causes students to recognize that art cannot be measured quantitatively).
- Data 2 (Scene 3): "Keep ripping gentlemen. This is a battle, a war. And the casualties could be your hearts and souls." (Directive act using military metaphors to elevate textbook tearing into a liberating mission for emotional autonomy).
- Data 3 (Scene 3): "We don't read and write poetry because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race... filled with passion." (Representative act asserting that literature is central to human existence).
- Data 4 (Scene 3): "That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?" (Directive/interrogative act using Whitman's theatrical metaphor to prompt self-actualization).

2. Symbolic Speech Acts: Symbolic speech acts combine verbal utterances directly with non-verbal physical actions to subvert authority or institutional dogmas:

- Data 5 (Scene 5): "I stand upon my desk to remind yourself that we must constantly look at things in a different way." (Representative act linked to climbing the desk, converting a symbol of teacher authority into a platform for changing perspective).
- Data 6 (Scene 9): "Now, I want you to find your own walk right now. Your own way of striding." (Directive act during a courtyard walking exercise, symbolizing resistance to social conformity and the development of personal principles).

3. Implicit Speech Acts: Implicit speech acts rely on indirect illocutionary force, requiring students to perform cognitive inferences to decode the pedagogical advice:

- Data 7 (Scene 11): "I always thought the idea of education was to learn to think for yourself." (Representative act delivering an indirect critique of rote memorization in institutional education).
- Data 8 (Scene 12): "Sucking the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking on the bone..." (Directive act warning students to balance courage/freedom with moral responsibility and self-control).
- Data 9 (Scene 13): "Then you're acting for him, too. You're playing the part of the dutiful son." (Representative act using theatrical metaphors to compel deep self-reflection regarding passive compliance).

Tabel 1: Format of Table (Pragmatic Styles, Speech Acts, and Analyses Meaning in Mr. Keating's Utterances)

No/Scene	Utterance (Data)	Pragmatic Style	Types of Illocution	Perlocution Impact	Analyses Meaning
1 (Sc. 3)	"We're not laying pipe, we're talking about poetry."	Poetic	Assertive/Representative (Contrasting)	Students reject quantitative measurement of art.	Rejects mechanical, rigid institutional paradigms.
2 (Sc. 3)	"Keep ripping gentlemen. This is a battle, a war..."	Poetic	Directive (Commanding/Urging)	Inspires students to break absolute textbook conformity.	Frames academic resistance as a liberating war.
3 (Sc. 3)	"We don't read and write poetry because it's cute..."	Poetic	Assertive/Representative (Stating)	Shifts perception of poetry into a vital human endeavor.	Presents language and art as life-sustaining elements.
4 (Sc. 3)	"That the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse..."	Poetic	Directive (Challenging)	Drives students toward identity reflection and self-actualization.	Asserts individual responsibility to define life purpose.
5 (Sc. 5)	"I stand upon my desk to remind yourself..."	Symbolic	Assertive/Representative (Explaining)	Prompting physical and cognitive stepping out of comfort zones.	Physical subversion of teacher desk authority to alter viewpoints.
6 (Sc. 9)	"Now, I want you to find your own walk right now..."	Symbolic	Directive (Urging)	Encourages resistance against peer pressure and conformity.	Physical stride selection symbolizes unique life principles.
7 (Sc. 11)	"I always thought the idea of education was to learn..."	Implicit	Assertive/Representative (Defining)	Establishes autonomous thinking as primary goal of learning.	Indirect criticism of passive institutional rote learning.
8 (Sc. 12)	"Sucking the marrow out of life doesn't mean choking..."	Implicit	Directive (Advising/Warning)	Guides students toward self-control and prudent evaluation.	Teaches that freedom must be balanced with responsibility.
9 (Sc. 13)	"Then you're acting for him, too. You're playing..."	Implicit	Assertive/Representative (Concluding)	Forces student into self-reflection on passive compliance.	Hiding authentic passion reduces life to a fake performance.

Discussion

Deconstructing Institutional Conformity through Poetic Framing

Mr. Keating's poetic speech acts challenge Welton Academy's rigid educational discourse. As Kodelja (2023) notes, educational discourse shapes institutional values. By replacing Dr. Pritchard's mathematical evaluation of poetry with aesthetic metaphors ("war", "battle", "laying pipe"), Keating elevates literal statements into evocative emotional experiences (Arcilla, 2024). Language becomes an active social instrument that fosters critical thinking, validating Sudjalil et al. (2022).

Activating Autonomy and Independence through Symbolic Performance

Keating's symbolic speech acts blend speech with non-verbal performance. Standing on the desk or finding an individual stride in the courtyard directly demonstrates Cognitive Pragmatics (Kasher, 1994; Domaneschi & Bambini, 2020), where non-verbal context enriches linguistic meaning. These acts bridge abstract character values (independence, courage) with concrete experiential actions, expanding Taufiq & Islam's (2021) classification of Keating as a facilitator/delegator.

Internalizing Moral Reasoning through Implicit Scaffolding

By utilizing implicit speech acts, Keating avoids authoritarian dictation. Instead, students must perform cognitive inferencing to decode metaphors like "choking on the bone" or "playing the part" (Li, 2021; Sadock, 2006). Requiring students to extract the moral meaning ensures that values such as self-control, integrity, and critical thinking are internalized as personal convictions rather than externally imposed rules.

The culmination of this approach is manifested in the film's resolution when students stand on their desks chanting "O Captain! My Captain!". This final action synthesizes all three pragmatic styles: poetic in phrasing, symbolic in physical posture, and implicit in its message of systemic resistance.

Conclusion

The educational discourse in Dead Poets Society operates through a layered combination of poetic, symbolic, and implicit speech acts. Mr. Keating's communicative style replaces one-way authoritarian commands with internalized moral scaffolding. Poetic acts challenge academic dogmas, symbolic acts foster active subversion of conformity, and implicit acts promote independent moral reasoning. Together, these strategies build student character by cultivating critical thinking, autonomy, self-actualization, and self-control. Educators are encouraged to incorporate layered communication styles to make learning an active site for character development.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the English Education Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Mataram, as well as all parties who provided support during the preparation of this research.

References

Arcilla Jr, F. E. (2024). Poetic devices, thematic significance and social realities in poetry: A critical literature review. Randwick International of Education and Linguistics Science Journal, 5(1), 70-85.

Austin, J. L. (1975). How to do things with words. Harvard University Press.

Dey, M. D. (2023). Four main characteristics of English pragmatics. LLT Journal: A Journal on Language and Language Teaching, 26(2), 510-519.

Domaneschi, F., & Bambini, V. (2020). Pragmatic competence. In The Routledge handbook of philosophy of skill and expertise (pp. 419-430). Routledge.

Kodelja, Z. (2023). Slogans as an integral part of educational discourse: Two examples. Policy Futures in Education, 21(7), 800-808.

Li, B. Z., Nye, M., & Andreas, J. (2021). Implicit representations of meaning in neural language models. arXiv preprint arXiv:2106.00737.

Manoliu, M. N. (2015). Educational discourse analysis. International Journal of Communication Research, 5(3), 200-208.

Qaniu, A. (2024). Exploring moral values of the main character in "Dead Poets Society". Journal of English Language Teaching and Literature, 5(1), 12-25.

Rumaria, C. (2015). An analysis of speech acts in the Dead Poets Society (Unpublished undergraduate thesis). State University of Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Sadock, J. (2006). Speech acts. In The handbook of pragmatics (pp. 53-73). Blackwell Publishing.

Searle, J. R. (1976). A classification of illocutionary acts. Language in Society, 5(1), 1-23.

Sudjalil, S., Mujianto, G., & Rudi, R. (2022). Pengintegrasian pendidikan karakter melalui pendekatan pragmatik dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Indonesia daring. Diglosia: Jurnal Kajian Bahasa, Sastra, dan Pengajarannya, 5(1), 49-70.

Taufiq, A., & Islam, S. (2021). Teaching style portrayed in Dead Poets' Society film. International Journal of English Education and Linguistics (IJoEEL), 3(2), 98-114.

Wijana, I. D. P. (2021). On speech acts. Journal of Pragmatics Research, 3(1), 14-27.

Yule, G. (1996). Pragmatics. Oxford University Press.