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Politeness and Power in EFL Thesis Defenses: A Discursive Pragmatic Analysis of Institutional Oral Assessments

Immanuel Kamlasi ^{1,2}, Hendi Pratama ¹, Sri Wahyuni ¹, Seful Bahri ¹

¹ Universitas Negeri Semarang, Semarang, Indonesia

² Universitas Timor, Kefamenanu, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

Background. The study highlights a gap in research on politeness in EFL academic interaction, noting that previous studies focused on classroom discourse analyses. It emphasizes the need to examine real interaction during thesis defenses, particularly the influence of institutional power on sequential politeness practices in high-stakes assessment.

Purpose. This study examines the distribution and negotiation of politeness strategies between examiners and candidates during EFL thesis defenses, highlighting the interactional construction of institutional authority and face management in academic assessment.

Method. The study combines quantitative and qualitative analysis. It is based on eight undergraduate thesis defense sessions involving eleven examiners and eight candidates. The analysis covers 772 utterances coded according to Brown and Levinson's politeness framework. The quantitative results show how politeness strategies were distributed across participant roles, while the sequential discourse analysis shows how these strategies were used and negotiated during the defense interaction. Since the utterances come from the same speakers and sessions, the statistical findings are interpreted cautiously and used mainly to identify patterns in the data.

Results. The findings revealed patterned variation in politeness strategy use between examiners and candidates, $\chi^2(3) = 23.94$, $p < .001$, with a moderate association (Cramér's $V = .346$). Data showed that negative politeness was the most dominant strategy (58.5%). Candidates relied heavily on negative politeness (73%) to minimize imposition and display deference, whereas examiners employed a more varied distribution of strategies, including positive politeness (34%) and bald-on-record forms (20%), to manage evaluation, procedural control, and institutional authority. Sequential analysis further showed that examiner authority was most visible during questioning and challenge phases through turn management, epistemic stance-taking, interruptions, and repair sequences.

Conclusion. In summary, these results demonstrate that politeness strategies function as interactional resources for negotiating institutional power and evaluative relationships in EFL thesis defenses. Thus, the findings contribute empirically to research on institutional discourse and pedagogically support the inclusion of pragmatic preparation in EFL thesis defense training.

KEYWORDS

EFL thesis defense; politeness strategies; institutional discourse; power asymmetry; oral academic assessment

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Correspondence:

Immanuel Kamlasi
ikamlasi@students.unnes.ac.id

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INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic competence promotes appropriate language usage in specific social and cultural contexts. To convey one's message accurately, both linguistic skills and sociocultural knowledge must

be combined. Here, social and cultural knowledge is as crucial as language skill. In second language attainment, learners' exposure to the language frequently enhances their social and commercial skill competencies (Pratama et al., 2017; Yang & Maarof, 2024). On the other hand,



the lack of exposure to language praxes rises the possibility of communication breakdown and inefficiency. The disparity in exposure and skills that involve the language praxes is especially pronounced in critical academic contexts like the EFL thesis defense examination (TDE), where both the defense presenters and the jury are required to demonstrate that they possess relevant language competencies to avoid communication breakdowns. The subsequent examination tackles the nature of the communication competencies and the use of politeness strategies in academic communication.

The TDE highlights the importance of polite, formal communication, as graduates present and defend their research to examiners in an oral, question-and-answer format that emphasizes politeness and power dynamics (Samad et al., 2024; Samad & Adnan, 2017). TDE offers students to demonstrate both their linguistic competence and their critical thinking abilities under the guidance of examiners (Kamlasi et al., 2025). While Mahmud (2019) found that English students employed various expressions to convey politeness in class, including greetings, expressions of gratitude, addressing terms, apologies, and fillers. Politeness strategies influence communication during EFL thesis defenses. Examiners and candidates use greetings, expressions of gratitude, and apologies to reduce misunderstandings and maintain harmony. Markers like «thank you,» «excuse me,» and «sorry,» as well as hedging (e.g., «That is an interesting question; perhaps we could consider it from this angle»), demonstrate respect. Politeness helps candidates interpret questions, respond appropriately, and develop pragmatic skills. It also plays a crucial role in fostering positive academic relationships. In summary, hedging, polite language, and gratitude support a productive academic environment for both parties.

EFL learners often face challenges in applying politeness conventions in academic settings. For instance, they may have difficulty following target-language norms during thesis defenses, where demonstrating proper politeness is crucial amid cultural and linguistic obstacles. Attempts to show respect or soften statements can sometimes affect their credibility. Misunderstanding power dynamics may result in ineffective communication. Limited language skills can lead to the misuse of polite markers such as «please,» «thank you,» and «would you,» which may result in pragmatic errors. Linguistic politeness promotes safe, comfortable interactions and enhances effective communication among academic participants (Susandi et al., 2024).

Power relationships and politeness constraints affect TDE exchanges with EFL candidates. The dominating role of the examiner and the pressure of politeness often leave little space for socially sanctioned critical exchange. Limited English proficiency and language differences further reduce clarity. As a result, candidates often hesitate to engage in debate and provide only brief explanations to avoid offending others. Indirect speech, a cultural norm, makes argumenta-

tion even more difficult. Inexperience with English academic discourse affects negotiation and face-saving. At the same time, politeness in classroom interaction supports respect and encourages participation. Both positive and negative politeness strategies contribute to English language teaching. For example, observed Manobo students using positive, negative, and bald-on-record strategies, which improved engagement and interaction. These studies highlight the importance of politeness strategies in classroom discussions. These findings also point to the role of politeness strategies in classroom discourse.

Previous research has examined politeness strategies in EFL classrooms and academic interactions. However, most studies have focused on simulated classroom discourse, teacher-student communication, or general politeness practices outside high-stakes assessment settings. As a result, there is still limited attention to natural interaction between examiners and candidates during thesis defenses, especially regarding the sequential emergence of politeness strategies under institutional asymmetry. Existing studies have not sufficiently examined how evaluative authority, epistemic stance, turn management, and face negotiation interact during oral academic assessments. Therefore, the management of politeness by EFL candidates and the practice of interpersonal control over examiners through discourse remain underexplored. In response, this study aims to investigate the role of politeness and power in EFL thesis defenses. Specifically, the research examines how examiner and candidate politeness strategies are shaped by institutional contexts, how these strategies are negotiated during different stages of the thesis defense, and how evaluative academic discourse functions throughout the process. The study addresses the following questions:

- RQ 1:** What politeness strategies are most frequently used by examiners and candidates in EFL thesis defenses?
- RQ 2:** How do politeness strategies differ according to institutional roles?
- RQ 3:** How are politeness and power sequentially negotiated during thesis defense interaction?

This study contributes to research on institutional discourse and EFL pragmatics by combining quantitative distributional analysis with qualitative sequential interaction analysis in naturally occurring thesis defense interaction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Politeness Theory

This review argues that politeness in thesis defenses is negotiated and context-specific, shaped by the roles and relationships between examiners and candidates. As these high-stakes interactions often involve face-threatening acts, politeness becomes essential to maintaining profes-

sionalism and rapport. Lakoff (1973) views politeness as an interpersonal tool that reduces conflict, while Goffman (1967) introduces the concept of «face,» which is central in responding to academic feedback. Brown and Levinson, (1987) concentrate on universal face-preserving strategies, positing that positive relationships, particularly in thesis defenses, maintain harmony. Yule (1996) defines politeness as language that signifies face awareness, which is crucial for sustaining professional exchanges. In contrast, Locher & Watts, (2005) argue that politeness is constructed through interaction and shaped by the particular context, and roles of the participants, as seen in the differing behaviors of examiners and candidates. Despite the criticism, power and social structures give rise to different strategies of politeness worldwide. Thus, providing ways how politeness strategies are reflected on academic assessments. When compared, Brown & Levinson's (1987) on focus on the universal dimension, and Locher & Watts (2005) focus on the dimension of the context. Thus, Brown and Levinson focus on horizontal strategies, while Watts (2003) focuses on different cultures in terms of vertical strategies of politeness during thesis defense.

These approaches provide the theoretical basis for examining politeness in EFL thesis defenses as both a face-management strategy and an interactional response to institutional roles. Goffman's concept of face helps explain why defense interaction is potentially sensitive for candidates, whose academic competence is being publicly evaluated. Brown and Levinson's framework is used in this study to identify the main politeness strategies realized in individual utterances, including bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. At the same time, Locher and Watts' relational view of politeness is important because it prevents the analysis from treating these strategies as fixed linguistic forms detached from context. In thesis defenses, the same strategy may carry different meanings depending on who uses it, at what stage of the defense, and in response to what kind of examiner move. For this reason, the present study uses politeness theory not simply to classify utterances, but to examine how examiners and candidates manage face, authority, and professional alignment throughout the defense interaction.

Institutional Talk and Power

While most people think of language characteristically as a collection of symbols, we think of language as a consequence of power. One peculiar class of language behavior in most of the world's academic environments is what is referred to as "politeness." This behavior, a design of courtesy and respect, appears to reinforce most of the world's academic environmental hierarchies, and it does so deceptively. In a typical framework of academic thesis defense, politeness and courtesy are highly likely to remain in a "passive" state until power and control, courtesy, and formalities are employed. As per the research of Culpeper et al. (2018), po-

liteness appears to be "social asymmetry," particularly in a framework of a teacher-student relationship, is better understood and described as a "relational property," as per the research of Suparno et al. (2023). Without the typical "no face," there appears to be a high likelihood of "direct," "not mitigated," and highly "unconscious" speech, as noted by Chaqmaqchee and Jasim (2022) in frameworks that are both "face threatening" and "attention demanding." Fan (2025) proposes that impoliteness can be ethical when it serves to protect identity or equality, challenging the assumption that it is always negative. In EFL thesis defenses, these power relations are important to understand how politeness shapes assessment outcomes. Explicitly, power and politeness must be considered together to understand language use in evaluations fully.

This body of work is important for the present study because thesis defenses are not ordinary academic conversations. They are institutional encounters in which participants do not have equal rights to question, evaluate, interrupt, redirect, or close the interaction. Examiners speak from a position of epistemic and evaluative authority: they set the agenda, formulate questions, challenge claims, initiate repair, and decide whether the candidate's performance meets academic expectations. Candidates, by contrast, must defend their work while displaying deference to the examiner's institutional role. For this reason, politeness strategies in thesis defenses cannot be interpreted simply as individual preferences or general markers of courtesy. They need to be read in relation to institutional roles, turn control, question design, epistemic stance, and repair sequences. This perspective directly informs the present study's analysis of how politeness and power are jointly produced in examiner-candidate interaction.

EFL Thesis Defense Discourse

The complexity of EFL thesis defense discourses demonstrates intricate layers of institutional academic interaction influenced by elements such as politeness, power, assessment and pragmatic negotiation. With regards to examiner-candidate interaction, institutional asymmetry becomes evident. Exam boards are generally more direct, while candidates tend to rely on mitigation and deference. With a focus on sequential interaction, the studies place more importance on institutional authority and pragmatic competence. According to the findings of Utari et al. (2025), during defense events, the examiner-examinee discourse is reflective of the hierarchies inherent to the institution. In terms of evaluative discourse, examiners are more likely to utilize what are called negative evaluative judgments of an implicit nature, that may later become explicit. In their defense of their work, candidates generally demonstrate a preference for neutral evaluative discourse and low evaluative confidence. Lin and Lau (2021) discovered evaluative discourse in defense events related to master's theses, and believed that each of the three attitudinal sources within their study

held roughly equal importance. Therefore, the participants believed that both the thesis and the defense had inherent worth. They understood both evaluative discourse and the emotional attachment of the examiners, implicitly suggesting an examination of research aptitude of the participants. This illustrates the technique of evaluators in academia, which is the ability to synthesize subjectivity and objectivity. The emotional discourse of the evaluators in this regard serves to intensify their critique, while at the same time enables the participants to become more relaxed and able to excel in this evaluative setting. Participants are found to be active in the defense discourse that takes place, while examiners continue their use of greater rhetorical justification for answers based on their evaluative discourse. According to Chen et al. (2024), examining defense discourse frameworks reveals multiple verbal interactions from examiners in the defense corpus based on the framework that concerns discourse. These frameworks provide a greater balance of participants during the defense.

The communication seen in thesis defenses is determined by several factors including sequential interaction, institutional authority, and pragmatic competence. Recognizing these components is important for communicating through the defense process. Each of these factors shapes the interaction and evaluative criteria what institutional authorities employ. Recurring phases in thesis defense in a sequential nature include the opening, questioning, presentation, challenge, and closing phases, where thesis examiners challenge any thesis-related claims made by a candidate. While candidates hold a lot of knowledge in the field they are defending, thesis examiners establish what they see and perceive as the standard academic knowledge. They control the thesis defense by dominating the time, turning threads of discussions, interruptions, and hinder the candidates by limiting their responses to a certain extent. In the field of EFL, candidates have a difficult time with participation as they have limited knowledge in 'pragmatic' nature. For the purposes of thesis defense, politeness strategies, and other issues that have the potential to affect examiners' adverse evaluations in relation to the candidate's thesis. The thesis defense in EFL serves to outline the use of instructional language and academic evaluation in terms of high stakes academic situations.

Previous studies show that EFL thesis defenses cannot be treated simply as oral presentations followed by questions. They are institutional assessment events in which candidates must defend their research while responding to examiner authority, evaluative pressure, and the pragmatic demands of academic interaction. Prior work has shown that examiners use questions, comments, and evaluative judgments to test candidates' knowledge and methodological reasoning, while candidates often rely on mitigation, deference, and careful self-positioning when responding to critique. However, less attention has been paid to how these polite-

ness strategies unfold turn by turn during the defense and how they are shaped by particular phases of the interaction, such as opening, questioning, challenge, and closing. The present study addresses this gap by combining Brown and Levinson's framework for identifying politeness strategies with Drew and Heritage's account of institutional talk and Locher and Watts' view of politeness as relational work. This combination allows the analysis to examine not only which strategies are used, but also how they become meaningful within the power relations of EFL thesis defense discourse.

METHOD

Design

A combination of qualitatively and quantitatively based research methods were employed in this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Examining coding was done by categorizing utterances based on bald-on-record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record frameworks. Once categorization was performed, a quantitative analysis was done in order to compare measurements of frequency and proportionality of each role. Then, a qualitative assessment was done to determine the contextual effectiveness of each strategy. Discourse analysis provided the tools to assess the sequential patterns that take place in the interactivity between questions and answers of the examiner and the candidate, respectively. Strategies employed were examined in terms of their frequency and their relative position as to what interpersonal resources the participants subjugated (Power). This was done using the Interactional Analysis Method (IAM) as the primary analysis tool (Keyton, 2018).

The Research Site and Participants

This research was conducted at the English Language Study Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Timor, Indonesia. The participants consisted of eight EFL graduates, two male and six female, aged 21-24, and eleven lecturers, five male and six female, aged 35-50. All participants are Indonesian citizens. These graduates, coming from various regions across Indonesia, have completed their four-year undergraduate programs with outstanding academic achievements. Lecturers with experience as thesis advisors or members of examination committees play an important role in maintaining high educational standards in thesis examinations. Participants were included in the study based on the scheduled dates of their thesis examinations, not by predefined sampling criteria. Data collection took place for two months. During this time, only eight students had scheduled examinations at the institution, so all eligible students were included. The study is therefore population-based during this specific period. The data reflect real examination practices, influenced by institutional scheduling rather than researcher selection.

Ethics Statement

This study was approved by the Vice Rector for Academic Affairs on December 12, 2024. Written consent was obtained by the participants after explaining the goals and methods of the research, as well as the risks. Consent for the audio record and the analysis of the participants' defense interactions was also obtained. Participants' identities and personal information were kept by using pseudonyms.

Instrument

The research resources included audio & video recorders and observation guides. Three linguistic specialists evaluated the observation guide to assess the clarity and validity through the lens of the research purpose. The observation guide was formulated to document the interactions and hierarchies throughout the thesis defense. In order to improve and assist the study, each observation question was mapped to respective research questions that included a rationale and data justification. To record the oral interactions of the thesis defense, audio and video recorders were utilized to aid in providing Roberts.

Procedure

The data were collected during the undergraduate defense examinations that occurred from December 2024 to February 2025. Sessions lasted from 45 to 70 minutes and were broken into opening remarks, the defense presentation, examiner questions, discussion, and closing remarks. During each session, students would defend their research in front of a panel of three examiners. All participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form, which were reviewed before each session. Interactions were either audio or video recorded; a research assistant monitored the equipment and provided context notes to help the research without interference. A transcription of the recorded sessions was kept for analysis on a secure and encrypted drive.

Codification

This study considered an utterance as a definable communicative unit which embodied one pragmatic, not collaborative, function within a turn. Long turns which contained multiple pragmatic acts were decomposed into units. Before the coding started, the two coders were engaged in an exercise of utilizing preliminary coding of sample texts which were excluded from the final sample. The two coders then independently analyzed the transcripts with the aid of Brown and Levinson's frame in terms of their assessment of the politeness of the conversational turn and function of the utterance in terms of the framework of bald-on-record, positive, and negative politeness, and off-record. In situations wherein the utterance underwent multiple pragmatic acts, the coders were guided by contextual reanalysis and subsequent deliberation. Coders engaged in discussions to

address the cited disturbances and were guided by the established coding framework of the particular research. Additional coding parameters were created to address the cited disturbances and are discussed herein. The cited utterances were considered off-recorded in the sense the utterance encompassed a communicative function of polite indirectness which was inferred by the listener. The coders were specifically instructed not to perceive utterance as off-recorded if the politeness was a function of disfluency, repair of the utterance, or general linguistic deficiency. The cited and instructive disturbances were resolved by coders who performed supplementary analyses with the aid of the coding framework.

Data Analyses

The dataset includes eight thesis defense sessions that were recorded and transcribed, resulting in 772 utterances: 469 from examiners and 303 from candidates. Each utterance was analyzed using 'Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework. Two trained coders independently coded the data, showing high inter-coder reliability ($\kappa = 0.81$); any discrepancies were resolved through discussion. In addition to politeness strategies, power-related interaction features were identified, including turn management, question design, epistemic and deontic stances, interruptions, and repair sequences. Quantitative analysis was used to describe the distribution of politeness strategies across roles through frequency counts, proportions, and χ^2 tests with Cramér's V as the effect size. Since utterances are nested within speakers and sessions, the results are seen as indicative of distribution trends rather than as evidence of independent observations. For this reason, inferential claims are made cautiously, and the quantitative results are supported by sequential qualitative analysis to provide interactional evidence. Qualitative excerpts were selected purposively to represent recurrent interactional patterns across different phases of the thesis defense, including opening, questioning, challenge, and closing sequences.

RESULTS

This section presents the empirical findings in relation to the research questions. The analysis focuses on three dimensions of interaction: (1) the distribution of politeness strategies across participant roles, (2) the relationship between politeness strategies and institutional power markers, and (3) the sequential realization of politeness and power during different phases of thesis defense interaction.

Distribution of Politeness Strategies

This section presents data on the distribution of politeness strategies according to participant roles during the EFL undergraduate thesis defenses. The findings emphasize the importance of understanding role-related behaviors and

their implications for effective communication in academic settings.

This analysis involved conducting a chi-square test of independence in relation to the variables of role within the institution (examiner or candidate) and the use of particular politeness strategies. It was established that there is a statistically significant relationship of role and strategy choice within the analysis ($\chi^2(3) = 23.94, p < .001$). Looking at the effect size (Cramér's $V = .346$), it is obvious that the participants' roles had a noticeable impact on the choice of politeness strategies attributed to the networking of thesis defense. Furthermore, there was a noticeable discrepancy in the strategies employed by candidates (73% negative politeness) and examiners (44%). Negative politeness strategies reflect the candidates' need for a higher level of mitigation and level of deference. In comparison, examiners displayed a noticeable preferred use for positive politeness strategies along with bald-on-record, which is a reflection on their institutional authority and their evaluative roles.

A description of the examiners' politeness strategies and examples of the utterances are explained in this section. The phrase «*Good morning, everyone... I want you to get ready*» opens the session and demonstrates the BOR strategy. Rather than using a softer option like «*Could you please prepare*

yourselves?» the examiner chooses the direct first-person imperative, «*I want you to...*» This approach asserts the examiner's institutional authority immediately, leaving no ambiguity about expectations. Another example of interaction is: «*I was very surprised after reading your thesis.*» Here, the examiner shows positive politeness by expressing interest. The examiner's personal reaction by showing the thesis made a genuine impact, beyond casual evaluation. In this context, «*surprised*» is very positive, suggesting the thesis exceeded expectations. This implies implicit praise and acknowledges the candidate's need for recognition. A further example illustrates a different strategy: «*Sorry, you have limited time, so please move directly to chapter 4.*» This utterance reflects negative politeness by balancing time pressure and respect for the candidate's negative face. Opening with «*Sorry*» acknowledges the face-threatening act, signals regret, and presents the examiner as understanding, while also marking the importance of the intervention. In terms of indirectness, the example, «*I would like you to be more prepared to have your thesis defense*» illustrates an off-record strategy in Brown and Levinson's framework. The examiner takes an indirect approach rather than directly critiquing preparedness, thereby avoiding a face-threatening bald-on-record comment. This indirectness is key as the conversation moves from evaluation to the examiner's overall assessment of readiness. These observations suggest that

Table 1
Distribution of Politeness Strategies

Strategy	Examiners		Candidates		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
BOR	94	20%	39	13%	133	16.5%
PP	157	34%	37	12%	194	23%
NP	207	44%	221	73%	428	58.5%
OR	11	2%	6	2%	17	2%

Table 2
Description of Examiners' Politeness Strategies

Strategy	Description	Transcription
BOR	The examiner establishes authority at the beginning of the examination by using direct language without any mitigation devices. This scenario demonstrates the power differential in the academic context, where the examiner has institutional authority to set rules and procedures.	[Good morning, everyone... I want you to get ready...] (00:00_S1)
PP	The examiner expresses a personal reaction, showing appreciation for the candidate's work.	[I was very surprised by reading your thesis] (43:17_S2)
NP	The examiner begins with an apology, «sorry,» acknowledging the imposition; uses «please» as a softening device while maintaining control; and balances time-management needs with respect for the candidate's autonomy.	[Sorry, you have limited time, so please move directly to chapter 4] (06:18_S4)
OR	The examiner's statement serves as an implicit evaluative remark regarding the candidate's readiness. Instead of directly indicating that the candidate is unprepared, the examiner couches the critique in terms of personal desire, using the phrase «I would like.»	[I would like you to be more prepared to have your thesis defense] (34:26_S ₄)

examiners select among various politeness strategies in relation to interactional goals and contextual demands. In this way, examiners can maintain authority while fostering an environment conducive to open dialogue and effective evaluation, ultimately enhancing the fairness and efficacy of the assessment process.

The findings derived from the dataset compiled during the study's observed thesis examinations offer a detailed description of the candidates' politeness strategies. The candidate's response, «*I have two statements of the problems,*» exemplifies the bald-on-record strategy, which is marked by directness, clarity, and the absence of hedging or elaboration. By responding directly, the candidate satisfies the examiner's informational requirement through a bald-on-record strategy. Conversely, positive politeness is evident in the utterance, «*Thank you, Sir. So, first, I use observation.*» The candidate conveys appreciation, showing sensitivity to the examiner and building a relationship through the use of the phrase «*Thank you, Sir*». A more nuanced examination of bald-on-record and positive politeness reveals that while both strategies satisfy the examiner's request for information, the former places a higher value on the efficiency and the objective content of the information, while the latter focuses on the social relationship. The same cannot be said for the utterance, «*So, I think it is not really difficult because it was easy for me,*» which is a clear instance of negative politeness. Unlike the other two forms of politeness, negative politeness makes use of hedges/mitigators to avoid imposing. The candidate's use of dual hedges in «*I think*» and «*not really*» softens the positive comment, thus minimizing the examiner's negative face, and avoids the positive face denoted through the utterance's informal modality. Finally, the reply of the candidate, «*I already contacted all of them, but some students do not respond,*» illustrates the use of an off-record strategy

by means of hinting. Off-record strategies are based on the use of a hedge to avoid a request in a more clear-cut way.

Institutional Power Markers

Politeness and institutional power markers are explored through the lens of institutional asymmetry and examiner authority. This study highlights the influence of hierarchical relationships on communication dynamics during the thesis defense interaction.

The data depicts how power markers were used during thesis defense sessions. It specifically focusses on management of turns and phases describing how the examiner governs the floor and manages phases of the discussion. It shows that examiners can change the topic of conversation after abruptly concluding a discussion, which reinforces their executive control. It is argued that examiners have control over the temporal, topical, evaluative and interactional aspects in a thesis defense, thus candidates should maneuver scholarly discourse in the space that they have outlined. The boundaries can be crossed either intentionally or unintentionally.

The analysis also showed that discourse markers exhibited parallel patterns of politeness at the different levels of power markers. The bald-on-record and negative politeness strategies during management of turns and phases of the discussion were noted at the different levels of power regulation and evaluation. Contrarily, candidates tended to respond to the evaluative turns of the examiner's challenges by negatively politeness of the different levels of power. The patterns showed that turns at the different levels of thesis defense were eloquently integrated with the management of institutional power.

Table 3

Description of Candidates' Politeness Strategies

Strategy	Description	Transcription
BOR	The candidate answered the examiner's questions directly, without using hedging, and focused on providing the requested information.	EX: [How many statements of problems do you have here?] (10:11_S8) CA: [I have two statements of the problems] (10:15_S ₂)
PP	The candidate begins with gratitude before providing a structured answer, «the first,» demonstrating both respect and a methodical approach.	EX: [How did you get the data from the students as the subject of the research?] (17:08_S1) CA: [Thank you, Sir. So, the first, I use observation] (17:31_S1)
NP	The candidate uses hedging phrases such as «I think» and «not really,» even when describing a lack of difficulties. This context shows respect for the examiner's autonomy.	EX: [Did you encounter difficulties during your data analysis?] (24:45_S2) CA: [So, I think, it is not really difficult, because it was easy for me] (24:53_S2)
OR	The candidate's response indirectly addresses the examiner's question about participant selection, hinting at the rationale behind the sampling decision without explicitly stating the method used.	EX: [What is the reason they do not want to help you?] (33:22_S ₄) CA: [I already contacted all of them, but some students do not respond] (33:27_S ₄)

Table 4
Power Markers in the Thesis Defense Interaction

Marker Power	Criteria	Example
Turn/phase management	The examiner terminated the candidate’s response and proceeded to a new topic without negotiation.	EX: [Now, let us move to the next page, on page 20] (25:40_ S ₂)
Open question	The candidate provided multiple responses	EX: [Why are you interested in this type of study?] (19.00_ S ₃) CA: [The reason why I am interested with this type of study is] (19.15_ S ₃)
Constrained question	The candidate provided a limited response	EX: [What method did you use?] (1:00:52_ S ₂) CA: [So, I used the descriptive qualitative method] (1:00_ S ₂)
Deontic/epistemic stance	The examiner reviews, corrects, evaluates, or directs the candidate’s responses.	CA: [So, after conducting this study, have you answered those two research questions based on the instruments that you used?] (25:45_ S ₃)
Interruption/overlap	The examiner overlapped mid-turn, especially during redirection or correction.	CA: [That is all about my presentation] (6:23_ S ₈) EX: [So, can you go back? Okay, where is the Chapter 4 part?] (6:33_ S ₈)
Other-initiated repair	The examiner clarified or corrected an inaccurate response during the discussion.	CA: [Do you understand my question?] (27:56_ S ₃)

Power Asymmetry, Epistemic Stance, and Face-Management

This section presents the data concerning power asymmetry, epistemic stance, and face-management within the context of interactions during thesis defenses.

Excerpt 1

Opening Phase

01 EX: Okay, mm. Good morning, everyone, today there will be a thesis exam (.) for D

[POWER: institutional framing]

02 I want to express my sincere thanks to my colleagues, as the board of examiners

[STRATEGY: positive politeness]

03 D, let me inform you that your main examiner is Pak B, followed by myself and Pak M

[POWER: role assignment]

04 I want you to get ready [POWER: directive]

05 your presentation will be about 10 minutes, so please manage your time

[STRATEGY: instruction]

06 the main examiner will have about 20 minutes, others 15 minutes each

[POWER: agenda setting]

07 so, time is yours, D [POWER: floor allocation]

08 CA: okay, thanks for the opportunity given to me [STRATEGY: deference]

09 first of all I thank God for His blessing so we can be here today

[STRATEGY: cultural facework]

10 and thanks for your coming today [STRATEGY: positive politeness]

11 so the first one is introduction (PRESENTATION SESSION)

12 okay, I think that’s all for today:: if you have suggestion or criticism, time is yours

[STRATEGY: open to evaluation]

The passages depict the initial stage where the examiner claims authority by assuming a role and dissemination of directions through a process. The candidate then makes a formal statement expressing the intention to be examined through courtesy and appreciation. Finally, the examiner’s closing statement reinforces control over turns and maintains harmony.

Excerpt 2

Questioning Phase

01 EX: okay, great (.) well, mmm why do you think it’s important to conduct this research?

[POWER: epistemic question]

02 CA: all right. so this is, aaa I think this research is very important [STRATEGY: hedging + justification]

03 because it’s related to the aaa: semantic studies, and aaa: especially about figurative language.

04 so that’s why in my significance of the study, I conclude here that this study can

aa .hhh like later on contribute to English teachers, [STRATEGY: appeal to relevance]

05 to students, and also to another researchers that they can use this research

in the lesson plan and yeah.

06 EX: how many times you watched the movie? [POWER: procedural question]

07 CA: so, actually, the first one, I watched the movie first, I watched the movie first,

08 and then after that, I accessed the transcript, and then, for the comparison, I only do once, like,

I watched carefully the movie, and then I tried to listen to their conversation

09 in the movie, and then I pay attention also to the transcript,

so I can see, like, it is a correct transcription or not.

[STRATEGY: procedural transparency]

10 EX: okay. did you encounter difficulties during your data analysis? [POWER: challenge prompt]

11CA: so, I think, it's not really difficult,

because it was easy for me to find the movie, and also to access the transcript,

12 because I found them in the Internet. [STRATEGY: minimizing difficulty]

The passages begin from the examiner prompting the candidate to give an explanation. The candidate specifies each transcription process, justifies methodological choices, elucidates crucial steps, amend previous claims, and attends to gaps and uncertainties. This confirms their advanced methodological appropriation. When faced with the third methodological question, the candidate identified the core issue, proposed a solution, and demonstrated procedural competence.

Excerpt 3

Challenge Phase

01 EX: okay. so do you think that your result is valid? do you think so::?

[POWER: epistemic challenge]

02 CA: yes, I think it is valid [STRATEGY: claim + assertion]

03 EX: it's valid [] why? (.) well, you only use one instrument

and you come to the conclusion that the students are not confident,

the students are having lack of interest [POWER: critique of method]

04 so, you think that your finding is fine (1.0) do you think so::?

[POWER: press for justification]

05 CA: yes. [STRATEGY: minimal defense]

06 EX: okay, I suggest you, aaa:: in terms of using instruments,

you should use more than one to increase the validity [STRATEGY: constructive directive + academic norm]

07 let's say you just give the students' test and then calculate their scores [POWER: limitation elaboration]

08 I don't think the results aa:: really reflect the students' ability [POWER: explicit disagreement]

09 are you sure the students are not cheating each other?

this is junior high school students [STRATEGY: contextual challenge]

10 are you sure they didn't cheat during the process of doing the test?

11 you don't make sure that, right? so it is less valid [POWER: conclusion + evaluation]

12 that's why I suggest you to use other instruments as well

you can interview the students what problems they face [STRATEGY: solution-oriented suggestion]

The passages show the examiners' opinions who claim concerns of the instrument's epistemological and methodological issues and reliability through justifications and elaboration. Other concerns about cheating further undermine the data's credibility before the phase concludes with corrective advice that affirms the examiner's authority while allowing candidates to maintain their self-esteem.

Excerpt 4

Closing phase

01 EX: that's why later I would like to end up my questions, okay, as your main advisor

[POWER: role assertion]

02 okay, and my suggestion is, D, right after this, please see your supervisors

[STRATEGY: directive + guidance]

03 and also your main examiner today for the revisions of your writing, okay?

04 so please don't go back to your village or anywhere else,

05 but stay over here and please see M, myself, and Pak B

06 to revise your skripsi as soon as possible.

[POWER: institutional control]

07 and one suggestion is that please pay attention to your suggestion number two

[POWER: critique + directive]

08 because it doesn't tell us anything about the problems the students face, okay?

[STRATEGY: specific feedback]

09 actually, in another page, you elaborate like in pre-test the problems

10 and perhaps you can take those problems to the conclusion

11 because in conclusion number two, it doesn't touch [STRATEGY: constructive guidance]

12 it doesn't touch at all about the problems

13 you have to mention: based on the analysis, the observation, questionnaire,

14 interviews then the problems are something like this. and that's good.

15 so I would like to end up my question-and-answer session today. D, thanks.

[POWER: closing + gratitude]

This closing sequence demonstrates supportive authority and control. The examiner (lines 1) mentioned their role in the institution and supplemented lines (2-6) to explain what the subsequent steps should be. This response reinforces fostering and adhering to academic standards. The response to this feedback on "*suggestion number two*" (lines 7-12) is framed in a conciliatory and encouraging manner, linking the line of evaluation to the end of the evaluative criterion. Lines (5) show appreciation with phrases such as "*that's good*" which provide a balance in power with saving face, and provide a context for authority and relational alignment.

The analyzed data show certain interaction behaviors between the examiners and the candidates in the thesis defense, which includes the examiners' control over the proceedings. Initially, the examiners demonstrated control over the defense as part of managing the procedural framework, which included the allocation of speaking turns. The examiners further enforced control through questions that involved epistemic and evaluative shifts and had a limited scope. However, this type of examiner control can be considered "soft" control. This phase occurs during the feedback component, where the examiner provides comments and critiques on the defense and is therefore expected to use supportive politeness strategies. From the candidate's perspective, the examiner's control is addressed through strategies that focus on maintaining the examiner's dignity and reaffirming the candidate's respect for the institution. These strategies involve changing answers, expressing gratitude after responding, and providing justifications after answering to maintain self-esteem. This study provides a descriptive analysis of politeness and power negotiations in relation to the phases of defense. The analysis provides evidence of recurrent differences in the use of politeness strategies by both examiners and candidates during the EFL thesis defenses. Control of the defense was coupled with examiner tactics of evaluative questioning and interactional directives, while the candidates relied on face for politeness and mitigation strategies. The sequential analysis also provides evidence for the negotiation of power and politeness in relation to the different phases of the interaction. These patterns form the basis of the interpretative analysis in the subsequent section.

DISCUSSION

The discussion section discusses empirical findings related to the research questions, focusing on three key dimensions of interaction. First, the distribution of politeness strategies among different participant roles is analyzed. Second, the relationship between these politeness strategies and institutional power markers is explored. Third, the sequential realization of politeness and power dynamics during various phases of thesis defense interactions is examined. Furthermore, the findings are contextualized by comparing them with theoretical frameworks and previous studies in the field.

Distribution of Politeness Strategies

The findings revealed significant differences in the use of politeness strategies between examiners and candidates during EFL thesis defense, $\chi^2(3) = 23.94$, $p < .001$, with a moderate association (Cramér's $V = .346$). Candidates primarily employed negative politeness strategies (73%), while examiners used a more varied mix, including positive politeness (34%) and bald-on-record strategies (20%). These patterns highlight the institutional asymmetry present in thesis defense interactions, where candidates tend to show deference and mitigation, while examiners exert evaluative authority. The results support Brown and Levinson's (1987) argument that power relations and social distance significantly influence politeness choices. In this academic context, negative politeness serves mainly as a means of minimizing imposition and upholding the academic hierarchy. Negative politeness (NP) typically reflects the relationship between the participants in the thesis defense context. These findings suggest that candidates were more likely to express preferences for negative politeness (NP) in their strategies. It is congruent with the research of Amer et al. (2020), Latrech and Alazzawie (2023), participants prefer negative politeness. In contrast, Valdellon and Cuarte (2024) demonstrated that most students employed positive politeness strategies such as greetings, or expressions of thanks or gratitude, as a means of relationship management.

Examiners' Politeness Strategies

The examination process is shaped by a clear power dynamic in which the examiner asserts authority through direct language with minimal mitigating strategies. This reinforces the examiner's role in the institution by determining the control of the evaluation. The findings pattern that examiners dictate the course of policy making in EFL thesis defenses.

es by their institutional power to set the rules and communicate in the most direct and regulated way. These actions coexist with the context-based theory of indirectness and Locher and Watts's (2005) politeness in the defense. The imposition of the rules, along with the limitations of the time and defense, inhibits indirectness, and demands directness in the defense. The examiners' role within the institution and by the defense is to provide criticism for the purpose of the thesis and thereby shape the thesis. In the context of thesis defense, institutional power is structured through speech acts. This is true of most high-stake defense thesis acts (Kamlasi et al., 2026). Examining procedures allow a privileged perspective for thesis evaluators to co-participate as "experts" in one-dimensional discourse. This is a quintessential cultural context that examiners construct around thesis evaluation. Drew and Heritage (1992) point to three essential distinctions of institutional discourse: discourse that is purposefully directed to a goal related to an institutional role, constraints on permissible discourse and a discourse that is shaped by an inferential system that is particular to that institution. Drew and Heritage point out that asymmetry prevails in institutional discourse, whereby a spokesperson determines the topic of the discourse, the order of who is entitled to speak, and the discretion of who is fortunate to speak.

Examiners begin thesis defenses by saying thank you and presenting their personal reactions to students' works. Although said reactions may seem positive and help candidates gain self-confidence, they actually reinforce assessment standards. Besides, appreciation tokens rank as the most frequent micro-level strategies, with the most frequent examples including, "Thank you, or "I appreciate your kind words" (Deveci, 2023). Brown and Levinson (1987) also underline the importance of direct contacts in an academic setting in the context of thesis defenses. Besides, institutional authority, face management, and strategic politeness, as described by Locher and Watts (2005), also relate to assessment practices. Sapitri et al. (2020) mention that positive politeness statements enhance the "positive face" of the assessed parties by expressing gratitude or creating an in-group identity and are most frequently identified in the friendly or familiar environments. Positive politeness, examined by Drew and Heritage (1992) as well as the concept of institutional talk, also occurs in the sociology of highly asymmetric and well-regulated environments, in this case, academic defenses. Therefore, we can assume that the examiners' major goal of consistently applying positive politeness is not drafting social courteousness in the context of defense, but ensuring that candidates receive each examiners' support in the most psychological manner. This practice can enhance the candidates' defense ability to the extent they not only satisfy the examiners' requirements, but also meet the rigor in academic assessments.

The examiner's use of 'sorry' and 'please' mitigates face-threatening acts (FTAs) by softening directives and

signaling awareness of the imposition created during evaluative interaction. Murphy (2019) finds even vague apologies can be perceived as threats, while Aijmer (2019) cites "sorry" as the primary example. Fitriyani and Andriyanti (2020) and Banat et al. (2024) reported negative politeness is a frequent, positive strategy for assessments in particular, but as an instance in both Indonesia and also in Jordan. In summary, a negative politeness strategy will maintain a balance of positive and polite (power) interaction in a likely institutional (context) interaction. Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework helps explain why examiners simultaneously employ authority and politeness during thesis defenses. Although examiners possess institutional power, they still mitigate directives through expressions such as "sorry" and "please" in order to maintain professional rapport and reduce interpersonal tension during evaluative interaction. Drew and Heritage (1992) suggest that negative politeness in institutional discourse is his/her social role in an institution where participants adopt socially relevant identities and a balance between his/her social role and his/her interpersonal relationship. The expressions of politeness "I'm sorry" and "please" are examples of the examiner doing a balance of these social roles.

While using this strategy, the examiner is likely to use the OR strategy to provide comments on the readiness of the task at hand while avoiding face-threatening comments. Moreover, Sapitri et al. (2020) identify such strategies as attempts at using indirect speech to reduce the burden of the listener and to construct relationships while promoting interactions in cases where the subject is of a sensitive nature. Brown and Levinson's (1987) on the theories of politeness, along with Drew and Heritage's (1992) theory of institutional talk, help to provide an explanation on why the examiners use indirect communication strategies, as well as the nature of the institution's rules and purposes when conducting thesis examinations. Drew and Heritage (1992) Institutional talk explains that institutional interactions require participants to attend to the dominant salient Identities and purposes while managing the inevitable asymmetries of the intersocial transaction. Examiners' indirect comments about how ready candidates are reflect this dynamic, as they try to fulfill their institutional duties, which may involve ensuring candidates are properly prepared for their fields and upholding the fairness of the exam process.

Candidates' Politeness Strategies

In thesis defenses, candidates mainly used negative politeness strategies to reduce imposition and show respect to examiners. This feature is especially visible in responses with hedging expressions, such as "I think", and "not really", which make statements softer and avoid directly contradicting evaluative authority. For example, in Excerpt 2 (lines 10-12), the candidate hedges certainty when responding to methodological questions, thereby maintaining both the authority of the examiner and the self-esteem of the candi-

date. These findings support Brown and Levinson's (1987) claim that individuals in lower institutional roles tend to use mitigation strategies in asymmetrical interactions.

The candidate demonstrates a clear and direct approach as BOR strategy in responding to the examiner's question and providing factual explanations. Candidates, however, see that direct, factual replies work best in examination settings. Observing these strategies provides a basis for discussing power in academic meetings. Those with power, whether they are examiners are the ones who shape the norms and standard expectations. They literally build on the institution's hierarchy structures. Drew and Heritage (1992) claim that the focus is almost always on identities and/or goals of the institution when defining institutional talk. Studying the relationships between examiners and candidates suggests that the status of each is defined by the norms that are discursive, and the same are negotiated through power. As such, the dynamics of power illustrate the extent to which discursive norms, which are the communication styles associated with institutional power, are interrelated, according to the theory of Locher and Watts.

To employ PP strategies, the candidate incorporates gratitude and appreciation at the beginning of the response. This sets a respectful tone that guides the candidate's process of addressing the examiner's questions. According to Maros and Rosli (2017), the presence of PP enhances the quality of communication. This was further developed by Kusmanto and Widodo (2022), who elaborated on PP strategies that a number of undergraduate students employ; these strategies include looking out for potential conflict, using identifiers, creating agreement, avoiding conflicts, and expressing optimistic/inclusive humor. The strategies identified by Kusmanto and Widodo (2022) are similar to those developed by Muliadi et al. (2023), who reported that students (in an EFL) employ a variety of PP strategies with appreciation, greetings, address, everyday language, fillers, and apology strategies. Kamlasi and Sahan (2022) documented the role of greetings as a form of expressed appreciation, with teachers using greeting strategies for appreciation. Formally structured greetings and expressed appreciation provide building blocks for contextual strategies against the imbalance of relational power demonstrated within the context of formal thesis defenses. Drew and Heritage's (1992) termed the participants' structured thesis defense framework as the candidate's output alterations to fit the structured thesis defense framework. This is consistent with Locher and Watts (2005), who indicated that participants' structured thesis defense frameworks actively guided the output of participants' thesis defenses to meet the objectives of structured thesis defense frameworks.

The candidate uses hedging phrases like "I think" and "not really" in their NP analysis to confer their conceptualization

in the given task. This approach hedges presumptions and shows the candidate's respectful concern for the examiners' assessments on the adequacy of the work shown. The candidate relativizes the examiners' assessments and shows their respectful evaluation of the examiners' assessments. This strategy is designed to minimize the hearer's negative face. Mulyono et al. (2019) explain that negative politeness describes the speaker's negative face, which tries to show care and retain a distance. The candidate also uses some uncertainty hedges to show their concern to the examiners. These descriptions show that negative politeness is a universal strategy that aids the speaker's relational work in any context. The candidate also uses the "I think" hedging to show that it is an opinion, and, therefore, the examiner's epistemic autonomy is still intact. This is confirmed by Wei (2024). "I think" is a phrase that shows the speaker's opinion and personal concern to the examiners. Pan (2025) asserts that the hedging phrase of «I think» is used to show a subjective opinion. Markers like «I think,» «I guess,» and «I suppose» show a subjective perspective of the speaker in relation to the message.

The candidate's use of an off-record politeness strategy demonstrates the candidate's willingness to talk about key elements of their sampling methodology, albeit indirectly, and permits the examiner to infer the candidate's intended meaning behind the sampling methodology used. The candidate's response hints at the rationale for participant selection but does not explicitly state the sampling method used. Zhou and Zhang (2022) examined various discourse genres related to interpersonal relationships, highlighting the extensive use of off-record indirectness in interactions. Their findings indicate that indirect communication fosters politeness and helps maintain social harmony among family members, friends, and colleagues.

Institutional Power Markers

Institutional roles and evaluative purposes shape asymmetrical encounters in thesis defense interactions by positioning examiners as authority figures and candidates as subordinate participants. The findings indicate that examiners exercise control through turn management, question design, the adoption of epistemic and deontic stances, interruptions, and the initiation of repair or improvement sequences. For example, during one observed defense, an examiner interrupted a candidate's response to a methodological question and redirected the discussion through probing follow-up questions. This move reinforces the examiner's epistemic authority and compels the candidate to adjust strategies in order to maintain credibility. These discursive practices formalize the defense as an institutional ritual, requiring candidates to show research competence while managing power dynamics and self-presentation. At the same time, these practices are not only a framework

for skill demonstration but also reproduce and legitimize existing academic power structures. The repeated enactment of these rituals sustains hierarchies, often reinforcing the authority of examiners and the subordinate positions of candidates. This raises questions about whether these rituals effectively prepare candidates for academic discourse or primarily perpetuate institutional power structures (Fairclough, 2001).

Undergraduate thesis defenses are a unique type of institutional assessment interaction. Drawing on Fairclough's critical discourse framework, they are characterized by a distinct power dynamic: examiners possess epistemic authority, grounded in their knowledge and expertise, and evaluative authority, which enables them to assess candidates' work critically. Candidates, by contrast, must defend their research while also showing deference to both the examiners' epistemic and evaluative authority. Institutional discourse shapes this dual requirement, creating a complex interactional atmosphere that enacts and reproduces power relations. In this context, politeness strategies are crucial for addressing concerns related to face, authority, and the expectations of academic accountability. These strategies are particularly relevant as they navigate their relationship with the examiners and the evaluation process during thesis defenses, highlight how established communication practices highlighting how established communication practices shape perceived competence and influence examination outcomes.

Power Asymmetry, Epistemic Stance, and Face-Management

The analysis shows how patterns of power asymmetry, epistemic positioning, and face management strategies sustain or contest authority. For instance, the examiner dominated the opening by setting the agenda and allocating time. By using institutional authority to regulate the interaction, the examiner announced the exam structure, defined their role, and set deadlines. Furthermore, while the phrase «time is yours» appears to empower the candidate, it also reflects gatekeeping, since the examiner still controls the timing and duration of the candidate's speech. The questioning phase demonstrates how epistemic questions position the candidate to defend their research decisions. Here, the examiner already has valid justification criteria and is assessing whether the candidate can explain acceptable reasons in line with the rhetorical question (Mehan, 1979). In contrast, during the challenges phase, a shift occurs: a power disparity emerges through an epistemic challenge to the validity of the candidate's research. The examiner uses strong language to note deficiencies, suggesting the methods may be insufficient. In Excerpt 3 (lines 1–11), the examiner repeatedly challenges the validity of the candidate's methodology through epistemic questioning (“do you think your result is valid?”) and evaluative criticism (“it is less valid”). These

interactional moves position the examiner as the primary epistemic authority while compelling the candidate to defend methodological legitimacy under institutional pressure. Additionally, rhetorical questions further undermine the candidate. This situation reflects epistemic decline, as the candidate's expertise is challenged by institutional authority, highlighting how examiners reinforce methodological standards (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). The candidate's minimal response indicates the subject's interactional bond: strong self-defense risks appearing arrogant, while compliance confirms the examiner's criticism. The candidate implicitly acknowledges epistemic authority while avoiding direct recognition of their shortcomings. This can be read as strategic ambiguity used to preserve face (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Despite the power asymmetry, both parties used positive politeness. The examiner expressed gratitude to colleagues, while the candidate showed appreciation and offered a prayer, demonstrating academic norms. In the closing phase, the examiner strikes a balance between criticism and supportive authority. The directive is framed as a guide for improvement, not as a punitive judgment. The phrase «that's good» serves as a face-saving acknowledgment, softening a critical assessment. The examiner concludes with gratitude, «Thank you.» This reflects a surface-level relational symmetry while maintaining institutional hierarchy.

This scenario illustrates what Locher and Watts (2005) term political behaviour and the manifestation of expected, unmarked conduct within a community of practice. Locher and Watts argue that such behavior maintains group cohesion by aligning individual actions with institutional norms, particularly in settings characterized by hierarchical structures. In the context of a thesis defense, this is a balance between being friendly and adhering to the institution's rules: the examiner makes the final decision, and the candidate must answer questions and accept corrections. These observations extend Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which posits that specific interactional strategies manage power relations and face-threatening acts. Additionally, Drew and Heritage (1992), the framework of institutional talk provides a lens for understanding how examiners' use of formal questioning and evaluative language constructs epistemic authority and enacts gatekeeping. By empirically tracing these communicative practices, this study demonstrates how participants negotiate institutional power, maintain self-esteem, and construct professional identities throughout the EFL thesis defense process.

Synthesis

Undergraduate thesis defenses are a unique form of institutional evaluation. In these settings, examiners hold epistemic and evaluative authority. Candidates must defend their research while also conforming to standards of

politeness. This dynamic creates an environment where politeness strategies are vital for managing face, authority, and academic responsibility. This study explores politeness in institutional discourse, showing that its pragmatic role is shaped by academic roles and evaluative pressures, not just as a linguistic choice. The results suggest important educational implications for EFL programs. Preparing for a thesis defense should include not only the research material but also the practical skills needed to answer evaluative questions well.

The findings show that differences in politeness strategies closely follow participants' institutional roles. Examiners use directive and evaluative language to manage the interaction and assess performance. Candidates show a preference for negative politeness, working to reduce imposition and display deference. These choices are responses to unequal roles in the examination. While some tendencies might align with broader cultural ideas about hierarchy and indirectness, the data do not directly support cultural explanations. References to customary norms should be considered context-specific, not definitive causes. The observed patterns are better explained by the roles set by the structure of thesis defenses. Sequential analysis reveals that politeness strategies gain meaning through interaction. For example, examiner directives often prompt candidate alignment or repair, illustrating how authority is negotiated turn by turn. These findings suggest politeness is not a fixed trait but develops through interaction.

Limitations

The present study has several limitations. First, the data collection was limited to eight undergraduate thesis defense sessions in one university in Indonesia. This constrains the generalizability of the findings to wider institutional and cultural contexts; second, despite the statistical analysis revealing a significant correlation between institutional roles and the use of politeness strategies, the effect size was moderate (Cramér's $V = .346$), indicating that other social, linguistic, and contextual factors may also influence the choice of strategies. Third, because utterances were nested within speakers and sessions, the inferential statistics should be interpreted descriptively rather than as fully independent observations. Fourth, the relatively small number of off-record cases reduced the robustness of comparisons involving indirect politeness strategies. Finally, this study did not examine variables such as English proficiency, disciplinary background, or cross-cultural variation, all of which may shape pragmatic behavior during academic assessment interaction.

Further Research

Future research should increase the size of the data set by examining thesis defenses at several universities, across disciplines, and different educational levels, including Mas-

ter's and doctoral defenses. Comparative studies may show whether power and politeness strategies differ across institutional types and academic levels and between disciplinary cultures. Further research could also investigate the relationship between English proficiency and the use of politeness strategies in academic EFL interactions. Cross-cultural and cross-linguistic comparisons could illuminate how the norms of local academic communities shape the negotiation of authority, face, and institutional expectations in oral assessment.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the use of politeness strategies as interactional resources in EFL thesis defenses to negotiate institutional authority, face and evaluative relationships. The results showed that examiners and candidates used strategies in significantly different distributions, $\chi^2(3) = 23.94$, $p < .001$, with a moderate association (Cramér's $V = .346$). Candidates mainly used negative politeness strategies (73%) to minimize imposition and express deference. Examiners, on the other hand, used a more mixed selection of negative politeness, positive politeness and bald-on-record strategies to exert procedural control and academic evaluation. The low frequency of off-record strategies (2%) indicates that clarity and institutional efficiency are prioritized in thesis defense interaction. The sequential analysis also indicated that the use of politeness strategies was affected by the institutional phases of interaction. Examiner authority became especially visible during questioning and challenge sequences through turn management, interruptions, epistemic positioning, and repair initiation. These findings extend Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness framework by showing that politeness strategy choice is not static but sequentially shaped by institutional roles and interactional phases. This study integrates Brown and Levinson's politeness framework with Drew and Heritage's (1992) institutional talk approach and illustrates the dual role of politeness in face management and institutional authority reproduction in oral academic assessment. The findings also shed light on the pedagogical implications for EFL thesis defense training. Training programs should attend to not only research content but also pragmatic and interactional competence, especially in responding to evaluative questioning, managing repair sequences, and balancing deference and academic confidence in challenging phases. The findings further imply that politeness is not a static attribute but a dynamic process of interaction in institutional contexts.

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DECLARATION ON THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI

The authors utilized ChatGPT-5 (OpenAI) and Grammarly AI for assistance in language editing, paraphrasing, and enhancing academic clarity. They emphasize that they reviewed and edited all AI-assisted content, accepting full responsibility for the accuracy and integrity of the finalized document. Furthermore, the authors independently verified all references and citations against their original sources.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

None declared.

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