

Speech acts in undergraduate thesis defenses: A pragmatic analysis of oral interaction in an EFL context

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Abstract

The study argues that institutional power dynamics influence speech acts in the EFL thesis defenses. The study identifies types of speech acts used by examiners and candidates and analyzes how these acts shape the dynamics of the defenses. The research utilized qualitative methods based on the Interaction Analysis Method. Eight EFL candidates and eleven examiners were involved in the research. The study used an observation guide and audio/video recorders to document oral interactions during thesis defense sessions. The oral interactions were transcribed for analyses. The utterances were coded and analyzed using Austin's and Searle's framework of speech acts. The findings indicate a clear power asymmetry between the examiner and the candidate. The examiners confirmed that directive speech acts are dominant with 53%, followed by assertive speech acts at 35%. Expressive speech acts account for 10%, while commissive and declarative speech acts are low, only 1%. The candidates showed that assertive speech acts are the most prevalent of 86%, expressive acts represent 10% while directive acts are significantly lower at 3%. Commissive acts make up 1%, and declaration acts are the least common. The study suggests targeted training to minimize misunderstanding in an academic discussion.

Keywords: Communication, power, speech acts, thesis defense

INTRODUCTION

Thesis defenses represent one of the most critical institutional encounters in higher education. During this event, candidates are required to demonstrate their expertise and defend their research orally before a panel of academic examiners. The Thesis Defense Examination (TDE) is an oral examination where final-year undergraduate students present and defend their research to a board of examiners (Samad et al., 2024; Samad & Adnan, 2017). Established roles, norms, and hierarchical power relations govern this oral exchange, exemplifying institutionalized academic discourse. Examiners possess the authority to evaluate, question, and challenge the candidate's work, whereas candidates are expected to respond effectively, defend their arguments logically, and exhibit both academic proficiency and communicative competence. For instance,

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during a thesis defense, a candidate faced a rigorous question regarding methodological choices. An examiner, speaking with authority, asked, "Can you explain why you chose this model over others in the field?" The candidate is then required to compose thoughts and respond confidently, outlining the critical advantages and supporting evidence that validated the choice. This exchange highlighted the dynamic nature of the defense, requiring the candidate to display not only in-depth knowledge but also the ability to communicate under pressure. This context underscores the dynamic and high-stakes nature of the defense, which demands both advanced reasoning and clear, confident articulation. Thus, pragmatic competence is required of both participants in high-stakes communication, such as thesis defenses.

In this context, language is central to negotiating meaning, constructing knowledge, and demonstrating power. Communication during the thesis defense relies on speech acts such as asking questions, seeking clarification, giving directions, offering evaluations, or expressing agreement which in line with (Susilawati, 2019; Betti & Hasan, 2020; Kamlasi et al., 2026). As Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) note, utterances do not merely convey information; they also perform actions. For example, when an examiner asks a question, it is not only a request for information but also an exercise of institutional power that reinforces the examiner's authority. A candidate's commitment to revise or clarify a section of their thesis demonstrates adherence to the evaluation committee's expectations.

The power asymmetry between examiner and candidate makes the thesis defense a fertile ground for pragmatic investigation. Examiners often use directive and assertive speech acts to maintain control, while candidates use commissive, expressive, or mitigated responses to manage face-threatening acts and preserve politeness. These interactions show how institutional power is enforced, negotiated, and sometimes challenged through language. Speech acts can be challenging for students with lower competence levels or limited exposure to language outside of a language classroom (Darong, 2024). Understanding speech acts requires examining functions and patterns used by speakers to communicate and engage with one another, beyond linguistic proficiency.

In EFL setting, those defending a thesis must demonstrate not only language proficiency but also pragmatic competence, such as politeness and respect toward examiners. EFL learners often encounter difficulties in using speech acts due to the lack of pragmatic competence. Thus, Pratama et al. (2017) and Yang and Maarof (2024) emphasize that extensive exposure to the target language is fundamental for effective communication and transactional skills. Conversely, limited exposure to pragmatic input constraints to comprehend and appropriately use the target language results in ineffective language use. In high-stakes academic context such as EFL thesis defense examinations (TDE), language proficiency is essential for examiners and candidates to mitigate miscommunication.

This study highlights the lack of analysis of the pragmatic features of oral interaction, particularly in thesis defense examinations. Limited knowledge about speech acts can breakdowns communication. For example, a candidate

might unintentionally challenge an examiner's authority by being overly assertive, thus harming the examiner's negative face, which desires autonomy and respect. By studying these acts in EFL thesis defenses, one can observe how language, power, and academic practice connect. Therefore, analyzing this topic deepens our understanding of academic discourse and helps EFL students succeed in exams. Thesis defenses are often framed as evaluations or teaching exercises. However, in practice, the oral interaction between examiner and candidate involves speech acts, displays of authority, finding shared meaning, and forming academic identity. In EFL contexts, these issues grow as candidates face demanding exams in a second language.

Several past studies have explored the use of speech acts, particularly in EFL classrooms. Budianti et al. (2020) reported that illocutionary directive utterances were dominantly used in classroom. Hidayat et al. (2022) identified three primary types of speech acts (locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary) used by teachers and students in EFL classrooms. Similarly, Li and Mao (2025) found that Chinese EFL learners predominantly employed meaningful speech acts rather than ritual. In classroom discourse, Sulastris and Saptiany (2023) reported that teachers predominantly used directive speech acts. Likewise, Sari et al. (2025) confirmed that directive speech acts were the most frequent in classroom communication.

Previous studies on speech acts have primarily focused on classroom interactions and everyday communicative settings. While this study significantly contributed to the understanding of speech acts realization and focused on high-stakes academic interactions such as undergraduate thesis defense. Although some studies have examined on pragmatics in academic discourse, research on how speech acts function to construct and negotiate institutional power in EFL thesis defenses remains limited. Likewise, empirical evidence on how EFL students employ speech acts to manage interactions with examiners, maintain academic decorum, and negotiate disciplinary knowledge during thesis defenses is still scarce. This lack of research leaves an important gap in understanding the pragmatic demands of thesis defense discourse and the communicative challenges encountered by EFL learners in this high-stakes academic setting.

To address this gap, the present study investigates speech acts in undergraduate thesis defenses within an EFL context. Specifically, it identifies the types of speech acts employed by examiners and candidates and examines how this speech acts shape the interactional dynamics of the defense. Furthermore, the study explores how speech acts reflect institutional authority, academic politeness, and the communicative roles adopted by participants throughout the examination. By examining speech acts in this underexplored context, the study extends the application of pragmatic theory to institutional academic discourse. The findings are expected to aid EFL students in developing pragmatic competence for thesis defenses while also contributing to a more profound understanding of how speech acts mediate power relations, interpersonal interaction, and knowledge negotiation in high-stakes academic communication.

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METHOD**Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative pragmatic approach to investigate how speech acts reveal the dynamics of institutional power during EFL thesis defense examinations. The analysis was guided by the Interaction Analysis Method (IAM) proposed by Keyton (2018), which examines naturally occurring interactions to explain how participants negotiate meaning and institutional authority through language. IAM enables researchers to systematically observe, segment, code, and analyze interactional data while emphasizing small-scale discursive practices in authentic communicative settings.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted in the English Study Program at Universitas Timor, Indonesia, from December 2024 to February 2025. The participants comprised eight undergraduate EFL candidates undertaking thesis defenses and eleven examiners who participated in the examination sessions.

Research Instrument

Two instruments were employed to collect the data: an observation guide and audio-video recordings. The observation guide was developed to document participant interactions during thesis defense sessions systematically. Three linguistics experts reviewed it to ensure its relevance and alignment with the research objectives. Audio and video recordings were used to capture naturally occurring oral interactions, preserving the contextual features necessary for accurate pragmatic analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection commenced after obtaining institutional approval from the Rector of Universitas Timor. All participants were informed about the objectives and procedures of the study and provided their consent before data collection. Each thesis defense session was audio- and video-recorded, while field notes were taken to document contextual information that might not be fully represented in the recordings. Subsequently, all recordings were transcribed verbatim to produce the corpus for analysis.

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the speech act manifested in oral utterances produced by examiners and candidates during thesis defense examinations. Each utterance was treated as a pragmatic unit and analyzed according to its primary illocutionary force. Speech act categorization followed Searle's (1979) taxonomy, which classifies speech acts into five categories: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. This framework was selected because it provides a systematic means of identifying the communicative intentions underlying participants' utterances.

Coding Procedures and Reliability

To enhance the analysis's credibility, two independent coders categorized all utterances according to Searle's speech act taxonomy. When an utterance could

reasonably be interpreted as performing more than one speech act, the coders revisited the surrounding interactional context and resolved disagreements through discussion until consensus was reached.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed thematically to examine both the functions of speech acts and their role in constructing institutional power during thesis defense interactions. The analysis focused on identifying recurring interactional patterns and interpreting how particular speech acts reflected authority, politeness, participant roles, and knowledge negotiation. The findings were subsequently interpreted in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework to provide a comprehensive understanding of the interactional and institutional dynamics characterizing EFL thesis defense discourse.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explores undergraduate thesis defenses in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context using Searle's speech act categories.

Examiners' Speech Acts

This section presents the examiners' speech acts (assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative), descriptions, and examples in the thesis defenses. Each act reflects how examiners construct meaning and exercise authority within the institution. Assertive actions assert authority, directive actions direct responses, commissive actions show commitment, expressive actions convey emotional responses, and declarative actions determine outcomes. These categories illustrate how linguistic choices shape the flow of interaction and power dynamics in advocacy events. Table 1 displays the distribution and types of speech acts used by examiners.

Table 1. Examiners' Speech Acts in Thesis Examinations

Types of Speech Acts	n	%
Assertive	595	35
Directive	918	53
Commissive	23	1
Expressive	174	10
Declarative	22	1

Table 1 illustrates the prevalence of various speech acts, indicating that directive speech acts are the most dominant category, making up 53% of the total occurrences with 918 instances. Assertive speech acts follow as the second most common, comprising 35% with 595 occurrences. Expressive speech acts represent 10% of the total, amounting to 174 instances. In contrast, commissive and declarative speech acts are considerably less frequent, each accounting for only 1% with 23 and 22 occurrences, respectively.

Table 2 presents the identified types of speech acts, their functional descriptions, and representative utterances derived from the thesis defense

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interactions, demonstrating how examiners adeptly employed language to fulfill their evaluative and interactional roles.

Table 2. Examiners' Speech Acts, Description and Utterances

Speech Acts	Description	Utterances
Assertive	Examiners' observations of the thesis structure, particularly the number of research questions, reflect their institutional role in assessing whether the thesis adheres to academic standards.	[Alright. Related to the instruments that you applied, I notice here that you have two research questions] (25:34_ S ₃)
	The examiner identifies weaknesses in the candidate's thesis introduction, lack of justification or research gaps, which the candidate must recognize and defend.	[I think you didn't write about the reason or the gap of the purpose of this research or study] (7:54_ S ₈)
	The examiner grants the candidate permission to present, regulating the defense session's flow and exercising institutional power, requiring candidates to follow their cues.	[Okay? Now, I give you the time to present your result of your thesis] (54:53_ S ₂)
Directive	The examiner has asked the candidate to provide concrete evidence, although he was politely asked to show it, as it was an authoritative directive.	[So, can you show me one, only one of the students speaking text that talking about education that made the most errors in speaking?] (52:51_ S ₈)
	The examiner informs about the next phase and commits to providing feedback later.	[And then after that we are going to give you suggestions or questions to clarify related to your writing] (0:46_ S ₂)
Commissive	The examiner commits to focusing on a specific aspect of the research which shows direction in the academic interaction	[Okay, and related to your research method, I would like to focus on the instruments that you applied] (21:56_ S ₃)
	The examiner gave a positive overall evaluation of the thesis, showing appreciation toward the candidate's work.	[Overall, your writing is very good. It's outstanding] (42:51 S ₂)
Expressive	The examiner expressed his deepest gratitude to his fellow colleagues reflecting positive social relations.	[that's why first of all I have to express my sincere thanks to my colleagues, my friends as the board of examiners for this examination] (0:05_ S ₁)
	The examiner instructed the candidate to present and simultaneously grants them the authority to speak for the allotted time.	[For the firstly, I would like to give you the time 10 minutes to present yourself of your thesis. Time is yours] (01:47 S ₅)
Declarative	The examiner formally concluded his questioning by announcing conclusion	[So, I would like to end up my question-and-answer session today] (54.35_ S ₁)
	The examiner concluded their questioning phase and formally transferred control declaration.	[Yeah. Well, thank you. The time is given back to the moderator, as well as the second advisor, and the second examiner for today] (36:59 S ₇)

Note: S₁: session one; S₂: session two; S₃: session three; S₄: session four; S₅: session five; S₆: session six; S₇: session seven

Table 2 outlines the examiners' speech acts (assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative). Assertive speech acts were predominantly

employed by examiners to establish institutional authority through observation, evaluation and critical assessment of the candidate's work. For instance, (25:34 S3) includes, *"I notice here that you have two research questions."* This reflects an assertion regarding the academic evaluation of the thesis structure. Similarly, (7:54_S8) observes, *"I think you didn't write about the reason or the gap of the purpose of this research."* This context shows an evaluative stance that identifies a conceptual gap. These utterances assert institutional authority by positioning examiners as epistemic evaluators. Through assertive acts, they assess, critique, and reinforce academic conventions. These acts guide candidates' understanding of acceptable scientific standards. Moreover, such assertive acts perform a regulatory function, such as shaping candidates' understanding of what constitutes legitimate academic reasoning and methodological rigor. The examiners posse primary epistemic rights to assess knowledge, whereas candidates possess secondary rights in line with (Heritage, 2012).

The two examples above demonstrate this asymmetrical relationship as examiners used assertive acts to highlight weaknesses and guide improvement while maintaining evaluative control. Overall, the findings indicate that assertive actions function as linguistic mechanisms of institutional power. These actions allow examiners to demonstrate expertise, legitimize judgments, and reinforce the hierarchical structure of support events.

Directive speech acts were among the most prominent in the data set. This phenomenon reflects the asymmetrical power relationship between examiners and candidates. Utterances such as *"Now I'll give you time to present your results"* and *"Could you show me one of the students' oral texts?"* are common directives that regulate the flow of defense interactions. Although some directives were delivered politely, such as with *"could you..."*, their illocutionary force, that is, the intended authoritative command underlying the surface politeness, remains unchanged, as candidates are institutionally obligated to comply. Hl et al. (2023) identified four types of directive speech acts commonly involves demanding, commanding, begging, and challenging. Overall, directive speech acts function for managing interaction and exerting procedural control. Directive speech acts ensure that the thesis defense complies with institutional expectations.

Commissive utterances are speech acts when the examiner commits to actions in later parts of the examination. For example, phrases like *"We will provide suggestions or questions"* or *"I would like to focus on the instrument you are using"* demonstrate the examiner's commitment to the next steps. These speech acts signal predictability and continuity, reassuring the candidate about the session's direction. Commissive speech acts are crucial in institutional settings as they indicate speakers' explicit commitment to a specific task (Roberts, 2018). Commissive speech acts help organize events over time and make transitions between stages smooth and seamless. However, if an examiner fails to follow through on these commitments, it can create uncertainty and highlight power imbalances in the examination process. For instance, if an examiner states they will provide suggestions but then withholds them, it could leave the candidate feeling unsupported and questioning the credibility of the

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examination process. Such a scenario not only affects the candidate's perception but also brings into focus the authoritative position of the examiner. Bach & Harnish (1979) view this context as strong commissives, showing institutional commissives where commitment stems from role obligations. These findings demonstrate that academic discourse is both evaluative and procedural, striking a balance between content discussion and interaction management.

Expressive acts were used to express feelings, attitude, or appreciation toward the candidate's performance or colleagues. Complimenting speech acts can foster solidarity among speakers, fostering a positive perception of appreciation and respect for the addressees (Liao & Zhang, 2023). As demonstrated in data, "*Overall, your writing is very good. It's outstanding*" shows an appreciation, while managing the interpersonal dynamics of the academic encounter. Research indicates that positive interpersonal communication behaviors enhance teacher-student communication, classroom vitality, and meet learners' emotional and interpersonal needs (Xie & Derakhshan, 2021). In data "*I have to express my sincere thanks to my colleagues*" showing how the examiner constructs and maintains collegial bonds within the academic community. These acts highlight the affective dimension of thesis defenses, serving to reduce tension and foster a more supportive atmosphere. According to Holmes (2013), expressive speech acts are integral to maintaining rapport and interpersonal harmony in academic and professional settings. While, Paltridge and Starfield (2007) suggest that examiner feedback, which includes positive expressive speech acts, can encourage and motivate candidates while maintaining evaluative authority. Thus, while assertive speech acts and directives speech acts reflect power and evaluation, shows the interaction and enhances its relational quality.

Declarative speech acts perform official actions that alter the state of defense interactions and signal institutional power. For example, an examiner stated, "*I would like to provide you the time, ten minutes to present*," showing the procedural transition of granting a candidate the opportunity to speak. In contrast, "*I would like to end my question-and-answer session*" signals the examiner's closure, while "*Now I'd like to turn the session over to my colleague*" demonstrates a transfer of control. Through these marking shifts in who holds the floor and directs the flow of the defense, these transitions illustrate the enactment of institutional functions. Declarative thus represent the highest level of institutional power, directly shaping the event's structure and reinforcing the examiner's authority as gatekeeper of academic legitimacy. Austin (1962) referred to these declarative speech acts as 'performative utterances,' actions that achieve their significance simply through their utterance. Based on this foundation, Searle (1969) further explained that performatives are powerful precisely because they bring about institutional or social changes authorized by convention. Furthermore, Stevanovic and Peräkylä (2012) assert that Declarative represent the pinnacle of deontic authority, enabling individuals to govern the actions of others and shape the situation itself. In addition, Holmes and Stubbe (2015) argue that authority comes from one's institutional position within an organization. These findings underscore how thesis defense language reflects and reproduces academic hierarchies.

Candidates' Speech Acts

This section presents and discusses how candidates strategically use speech acts, provide descriptions, and share examples in thesis defenses to build credibility, demonstrate competence, and navigate asymmetrical power relations. The distribution and types of speech acts used by candidates are presented in table 3.

Table 3. Candidates' Speech Acts in Thesis Examinations

Types of Speech Acts	n	%
Assertive	773	86
Directive	223	3
Commissive	9	1
Expressive	88	10
Declarative	1	0

Table 3 indicates that assertive speech acts are the most prevalent, comprising 86% of occurrences (773 instances). Expressive acts follow, representing 10% (88 occurrences), while directive acts are significantly lower at 3% (23 occurrences). Commissive acts make up 1% (9 occurrences) and declarative acts are the least common, with only 0% (1 occurrence).

Table 4 presents the speech act types identified in the candidates' responses, together with their descriptions and representative utterances from the thesis defense interactions.

Table 4 Candidates' Speech Acts, Description and Utterances

Speech Acts	Description	Utterances
Assertive	The candidate reported research findings that state a factual claim based on data.	[The findings of this research reveal that teachers who implement PBL have succeeded in providing significant changes to students' speaking abilities] (4:24_ S1)
	The candidate concluded presentation with expression of gratitude reporting a factual conclusion.	[Okay, I think that's enough. This is my presentation, thank you for your attention] (17.13_ S7)
Directive	The candidate provided recommendation for educational institutions.	[Based on this study, it is recommended that education institutions incorporate Duolingo] (12.33_ S4)
	The candidate directed attention to visual evidence, guiding audience focus to supporting data.	[So, you can see in the table here the data that I calculated] (9.51_ S5)
Commissive	The candidate committed to presenting the thesis, signaling the beginning of their formal presentation.	[Now, I want to present my thesis entitled] (S4_ 1:50)
	The candidate committed to providing an explanation about the omissions.	[And I will explain about that] (02.02_ S7)
Expressive	The candidate expressed honour at the opportunity to present, reflecting power awareness and institutional politeness	[It is an honour for me to stand here and present my thesis today] (1.10_ S4)

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Declarative	The candidate expressed her inner emotional state which reflects her feelings rather than an academic performance.	[I feel like nervous, a little bit afraid] (18.05_ S7)
	The candidate formally concluded presentation declaration and invites questions and feedback directive.	[That's all for my presentation. Now, time and change, I'll give to all of you to give some suggestions or questions of my performance and my research] (11.45_ S5)

Note: S₁: session one; S₂: session two; S₃: session three; S₄: session four; S₅: session five; S₆: session six; S₇: session seven

Table 4 outlines the candidates' use of speech acts (assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative). In the high-stakes setting of an oral thesis defense, candidates employ assertive speech acts to present and defend their research content effectively. For instance, assertive act such as, "*The findings of this research reveal that teachers who implement PBL have succeeded...*" demonstrates assertive communication by showing both authority and subject mastery, key qualities for thesis defenses. In this context, (Searle, 1976) noted that even the factual content ('findings') provides the empirical basis, the phrase 'reveal that' serves as the illocutionary force, with the speaker not merely reporting but committing to the truth of the claim. Such statements transform factual data into knowledge claims, which are crucial for academic discourse.

Furthermore, the candidate demonstrates a solid understanding of the relevant procedural knowledge in their field when making such claims. Another example is, "*Okay, I think that's enough. This is my presentation; thank you for your attention,*" which serves a different communicative function by marking transitions and closure within the presentation. This approach requires candidates to both report their findings and structure their presentation for examiners. Assertives speech acts are statements that commit speakers to the truth of a proposition, such as stating, claiming, or reporting (Ilić & Radulović, 2015). The statements transform factual data into knowledge claims, which are important for academic discourse. Overall, these examples show that assertive speech acts highlight the tension in thesis defenses: candidates have demonstrated expertise while ensuring clarity for a diverse audience. Epistemic authority in thesis defenses involves balancing emerging research expertise with effective communication with established field authority examiners, creating a delicate negotiation of knowledge, power, and pedagogical responsibility, requiring learners to navigate meaning-making processes grounded in human judgment and ethical inference (Brandmo & Gamlem, 2025).

In high-stakes communication, candidates use directive speech acts to navigate power dynamics. The directive speech acts offer suggestions or recommendations or such as "*it is recommended that education institutions incorporate Duolingo.*" This directive expression shows their transition from description to prescription, highlighting the practical implications. However, the passive construction ("*it is recommended*") instead of direct imperatives ("*institutions should incorporate*") reflects their limited authority within the institutional hierarchy. Other directive expression, such as "*So you can see in the table here...,*" represents a pedagogical and organizational function, helping

to manage the audience's cognitive flow of information. The inclusive language ("*you can see*") rather than commands ("*look at*") maintains politeness and aids comprehension. Based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, it suggests that candidates use passive constructions and indirect directives as negative politeness strategies due to their subordinate institutional position. Similarly, Holmes (1990) underscores that speakers in low-power positions employ extensive mitigation strategies in directives to manage threats and acknowledge power differentials. Furthermore, Holtgraves' (2021) study on understanding miscommunication emphasizes that senders showed higher confidence in communicative success than receivers, but their judgments of success were not linked to the actual success of the communication. Thus, candidates' directive speech acts reflect a dynamic of negotiation of power, identity, and face within the institutional setting.

Commissive speech acts commit the speaker to a future action (Searle, 1976). For instance, the speaker might promise or commit to either doing or not doing something. Commissives are crucial in communication as they express future plans, create expectations, and play a vital role in social interactions, fostering trust and commitments (Mardiana et al., 2025). In EFL thesis defenses, these acts appear when candidates state intentions: "*Now, I want to present my thesis entitled...*" This directs the audience. Commitment to action brings predictability to complex events. For example, "*And I will explain about that*" shows metacognitive awareness. The candidate spots possible confusion and commits to resolving it. This gesture shows audience awareness and makes the candidate seem thorough and prepared. Public commitments made during a thesis defense can affect the candidate's emotional state, such as anxiety or confidence, which impacts their language performance. These commitments can reduce anxiety or boost confidence. By stating intentions openly, candidates can handle emotional hurdles and communicate more effectively. Bach and Harnish (1979) differentiate between strong commissive (promises) and weak commissive (offers, intentions), highlighting candidates' statements like "*I will explain*" as weak commissive. Promising as a commissive speech act requires understanding the language and commitment, not joking, and the hearer wanting the promised future action, under the preparatory condition (Li & Liu, 2023). Overall, the use of commissive acts show that effective thesis defenses require not only content mastery but also strong communication management.

Expressive acts emerged in moments when the speaker states personal feelings or affective responses such as apologizing, congratulating, thanking, greeting, and complaining. In a high-stake communication, such as a thesis defense, the candidate expresses their feelings through the use of expressive acts. For example, "*It is an honor for me to stand here...*" serves as an important social function, acknowledging the significance of the occasion and showing respect to the committee and institution. These expressions align with an academic norm of politeness as suggested by Brown and Levinson's (1987). In academic settings, face-threatening actions like disagreements, criticisms, and requests for clarification can cause discomfort, leading to individuals adopting various politeness moves to address these issues (Dawson et al., 2018). Phrases like "It is an honor" serve as positive politeness strategies, asserting common

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ground and respect, and also demonstrating deference. Such expressions like *"I feel nervous, a little bit afraid"* are more surprising in academic context, typically characterized by emotional restraint. This candidate expression may serve multiple functions: building rapport with the audience, excusing potential performance limitations, or demonstrating reflexivity about the defense process itself. The inclusion of such statements raises questions about disciplinary or cultural variations in acceptable emotional expression during formal academic events.

In high-stakes communication, such as a thesis defense, candidates are challenged to declare their research before the examiners' board. Declarative speech acts were found when candidates officially concluded their presentations or transferred control to examiners. Declarative speech acts, which can be classified into verdictives and effectives, are utterances that directly alter a situation after being uttered (Prescilla & Amalia, 2018). For example, the candidate said, *"That's all for my presentation. Now, time and change I'll give to all of you to give some suggestions or questions."* Simultaneously, the candidate closes the presentation (declarative) and opens the floor for feedback (directive). Such declarative acts perform institutional and procedural transitions, showing that the candidate recognizes their limited authority and the shift of control to the examiners. Participants make deontic judgments about their peers, using these judgments to design their turns of speech and interpret each other's turns as actions (Topping et al., 2025). Deontic authority, similar to epistemic authority, is often implicitly claimed and negotiated, resembling epistemic authority in many ways (Williams, 2024). Overall, declarative speech acts are crucial markers of academic ritual, showing that the candidate understands the conventions of oral defense discourse and respects its hierarchical structure.

The findings reveal a predominance of diverse speech acts, indicating that directive speech acts are the most prevalent category, comprising 53% of the total occurrences with 918 instances. Assertive speech acts follow as the second most common, accounting for 35% with 595 instances. Expressive speech acts make up 10% of the total, totaling 174 occurrences. In contrast, commissive and declarative speech acts are significantly less prevalent, each representing only 1%, with 23 and 22 instances, respectively. Candidates confirmed that assertive speech acts are the most frequent, constituting 86% of occurrences (773 instances). Expressive acts account for 10% (88 occurrences), while directive acts are notably lower at 3% (23 occurrences). Commissive acts represent 1% (9 occurrences), and declarative acts are the least frequent, with only 1 occurrence. This distribution highlights the dominant role of assertive speech acts in communication, reflecting a tendency to convey information and assert beliefs. The low frequency of commissive and declarative acts suggests that these forms may be less relevant in the contexts examined, indicating a potential area for further exploration in speech act theory.

CONCLUSION

The study explores the use of five speech act types in EFL oral thesis defenses, revealing how language negotiates institutional authority in high-stakes academic settings. The analysis of speech acts reveals that directive speech acts

are the most dominant, constituting 53% of the total. Assertive speech acts follow closely at 35%, while expressive speech acts account for 10%. Commissive and declarative speech acts are notably lower, each representing only 1%. In the candidates' performance, assertive speech acts are the most frequent, at 86%, while expressive acts represent 10%. Directive acts are significantly less common at 3%, and both commissive and declarative acts are minimal, each at 1%. The analysis shows fundamental power asymmetry between examiners and candidates manifested through the use of various speech acts. Examiners assertively evaluate candidates' work, positioning themselves as experts and validating academic knowledge. Their orders stay in effect and control the flow of interactions, while their promises of future actions create predictability and deontic authority. Examiners balance evaluation with rapport-building through praise and collegial acknowledgments. Declarative speech acts represent the highest level of institutional power, controlling timing, transitions, and participant roles. Candidates navigated institutional constraints by making strategic linguistic choices, striking a balance between expertise and respect when presenting research findings. To convey their subordinate status and fulfill their pedagogical function, they employed passive constructions, inclusive language, and indirectness. Furthermore, their commissive forms demonstrated metacognitive awareness and helped manage anxiety. Furthermore, their expressivity ranged from ritualistic respect to surprising vulnerability, serving to build rapport and save face. However, when offering the turn to the examiner, their utterances served to acknowledge rather than initiate an institutional shift, thereby reflecting the constraints of their authority. The study found that thesis defenses have multiple dimensions, including epistemic evaluation, deontic direction, procedural control, and temporal transition management. These speech acts function to manage both institutional objectives and social harmony, demonstrating expertise, deference, politeness, and emotion expression.

AUTHOR STATEMENTS

All authors contributed in this study: **Immanuel Kamlasi** conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, conducted data collection and wrote findings and discussion. **Edmundus Bouk** conducted data collection, analyzed the data, validated data transcription. **Hendi Pratama** contributed to data transcription, and initial coding and proofread article draft. **Sri Wahyuni** developed the theoretical framework and critical analysis. **Seful Bahri** assisted with data interpretation, language refinement, and manuscript preparation.

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