



## Navigating Authority and Dialogue: An Engagement Analysis of Academic Setting Discourse

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### Abstract

In undergraduate thesis defenses, academic discussion involves finding a balance between showing expertise and encouraging open conversation. Participants need to present their ideas confidently while remaining open to feedback and new perspectives. This study looks at how monoglossic and heteroglossic language is used during thesis defenses. Using Martin and White's Appraisal Theory, it explores how examiners and students manage power dynamics through their language choices. The research focuses on one English Education thesis defense with three examiners and one student, analyzing how each person uses language to show authority and keep the discussion academic. The findings show that examiners often use questions and suggestions to open up discussion, while students use more certain statements when presenting but become more flexible in their language when answering questions. The study finds that power relationships shape these language choices, and that institutional hierarchy affects how people interact. These results highlight challenges in academic socialization and suggest ways to improve thesis supervision and preparation in universities.

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## INTRODUCTION

Academic discourse represents a complex interplay of knowledge construction, power negotiation, and social positioning within institutional contexts (Martin et al., 2020). The undergraduate thesis defense, as a culminating academic event, provides a unique lens through which to examine how participants navigate authoritative knowledge claims and dialogic engagement strategies. Despite growing scholarly attention to academic discourse analysis, the specific context of thesis defense interactions remains significantly underexplored, particularly regarding how monoglossic and heteroglossic engagement resources shape knowledge construction and power dynamics between examiners and student candidates.

The significance of understanding academic discourse patterns extends beyond mere linguistic analysis, particularly as higher education institutions increasingly emphasize critical thinking and dialogic learning approaches. Recent research has highlighted the critical role of power dynamics in shaping learning experiences and academic success (Symonds, 2021; Whaley & McNaughtan, 2024). In educational assessment contexts, power relationships profoundly influence how students and faculty negotiate knowledge claims, with examiners holding dual roles as both supportive mentors and authoritative judges of academic competency (Nixon et al., 2016, as cited in Symonds, 2021). Furthermore, in multilingual academic contexts such as Indonesia, where English serves as the language of international scholarship while Indonesian remains the primary medium of instruction (Zein et al., 2020; Bolton et al., 2023), the dynamics of academic discourse become particularly complex. The implementation of English-medium instruction in Indonesian higher education must consider the multilingual and multicultural nature of the context (Zein et al., 2020), yet limited research has examined how these linguistic complexities manifest in high-stakes assessment events like thesis defenses.

Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Theory, specifically the Engagement system, provides a robust framework for analyzing how speakers position themselves and their audiences in relation to the propositions they advance. Recent applications of Appraisal Theory have demonstrated its effectiveness in analyzing evaluative language across diverse discourse types, including academic writing, feedback practices, and public discourse (Luo et al., 2022; Van Poucke, 2025). The distinction between monogloss (single-voiced) and heterogloss (multi-voiced) positioning offers valuable insights into how academic participants construct authority while remaining open to alternative viewpoints. Studies have shown that heteroglossic resources dominate academic discourse, as they allow writers to engage with multiple perspectives and construct more sophisticated arguments (Zhang & Li, 2024; Mesa & Chang, 2010). This theoretical framework is particularly relevant for examining thesis defense discourse, where participants must balance assertive knowledge claims with acknowledgment of limitations and alternative perspectives.

White (2003) distinguishes between monoglossic and heteroglossic utterances based on their acknowledgment of dialogic alternatives. Monoglossic utterances present propositions as uncontested facts, employing what Bakhtin (1981) termed "authoritative discourse." These statements appear to brook no alternative viewpoints and position the speaker as confident in their claims. In contrast, heteroglossic utterances acknowledge the existence of alternative voices and positions, either by entertaining other possibilities or by responding to anticipated counter-arguments. The heteroglossic category is further subdivided into dialogically contractive and expansive resources. Contractive resources, including disclaim (deny and counter) and proclaim (concur, pronounce, and endorse), work to challenge or restrict dialogic alternatives. Expansive resources, encompassing entertain and attribute, create space for alternative voices and positions (Martin & White, 2005). Recent corpus-based analyses have revealed that high-performing academic writers demonstrate more sophisticated deployment of engagement resources, particularly in how they combine contractive and expansive strategies to construct persuasive arguments (Zhang & Li, 2024; Chang & Schleppegrell, 2011).

Recent research has examined various aspects of academic discourse, particularly focusing on power relations in educational settings and the construction of academic identity through language use. Studies applying Appraisal Theory to academic discourse have revealed significant insights into how scholars construct authority while maintaining dialogic openness across different genres, including research articles, news journalism, and political discourse (White, 2024; Andrew & David, 2020). However, three critical gaps persist in the current literature. First, there is a practical gap in understanding how engagement strategies function in the specific context of thesis defenses, which represent high-stakes assessment events where students must demonstrate mastery while remaining

responsive to examiner feedback. Existing research on thesis defenses has primarily focused on questioning patterns and feedback provision (Mežek & Swales, 2016) rather than on the systematic deployment of engagement resources. Second, a theoretical gap exists in understanding how power asymmetries influence the selection and distribution of monoglossic versus heteroglossic positioning in dialogic academic encounters, particularly in assessment contexts where institutional power differentials are most pronounced (Symonds, 2021). Third, there is an empirical gap in research examining academic discourse in Indonesian higher education contexts, despite Indonesia's unique position as a multilingual nation navigating complex linguistic policies in academic settings (Zein et al., 2020; Bolton et al., 2023).

The thesis defense represents a unique academic context where students must demonstrate mastery of their research while remaining open to examiner feedback and suggestions. Recent studies have shown that thesis vivas are often characterized by examiners' monologic and directive discourse, with limited power negotiation and minimal student contribution to dialogue (Riekkinen, 2010; Burke, 1994). This creates particular challenges for engagement positioning, as students must balance confidence in their findings with appropriate academic humility and acknowledgment of limitations. Examiners, meanwhile, must exercise evaluative authority while maintaining the collegial nature of scholarly dialogue, acting as both gatekeepers of disciplinary standards and facilitators of scholarly development.

This study addresses critical gaps in academic discourse research by investigating how participants in undergraduate thesis defenses employ monoglossic and heteroglossic engagement strategies, what patterns of dialogic positioning emerge among different participant roles (examiners versus student candidates), and how power dynamics influence engagement choices during thesis defense interactions in an Indonesian higher education setting. By examining these questions through the lens of Appraisal Theory's Engagement system, this study seeks to reveal how linguistic choices reflect and construct power relationships in high-stakes academic assessment contexts, contributing both to theoretical understanding of dialogic positioning in asymmetrical power contexts and to practical insights for enhancing the pedagogical effectiveness of thesis defense practices in multilingual academic environments.

## METHODS

This study employs a qualitative discourse analysis approach, drawing on Martin and White's (2005) Engagement system to examine patterns of monoglossic and heteroglossic positioning in thesis defense discourse. The research adopts an interpretive paradigm, recognizing that discourse patterns are socially constructed and contextually situated within specific institutional and cultural frameworks. This methodological approach acknowledges that academic discourse functions as a complex social practice that both reflects and constructs power relations, institutional hierarchies, and disciplinary knowledge systems within higher education contexts.

The primary data consists of one complete undergraduate thesis defense session conducted at the English Education Department in a private university. This institution represents a typical Indonesian state university where English Language Teaching programs follow national curriculum standards while adapting to local institutional practices. The defense involved three examiners (assigned pseudonyms Mr. Richard as chair, Mrs. Athena, Mrs. Ruth, and Mr. Frances) and one student candidate (Sophie). The session examined Sophie's thesis titled "Students Teachers Challenges in Classroom Management in Teaching English During Teaching Internship," representing a typical applied linguistics research project in the Indonesian higher education context.

The selection of this particular defense session was based on several criteria ensuring both representativeness and analytical richness. The defense followed standard institutional protocols established by the English Education Department, making it representative of typical thesis examinations in the Indonesian ELT context. The multilingual nature of the interaction, characterized by natural code-switching between English and Indonesian, provides valuable insights into the linguistic negotiations that characterize Indonesian academic discourse. The comprehensive duration and scope of the examination allowed for substantial data collection across different phases of the defense process, from opening formalities through detailed content examination to final deliberations.

The defense followed standard university procedures with examiner questions, suggestions for revision, and collaborative discussion of research implications. The session lasted approximately 60 minutes and included detailed examination of methodology, findings, and academic writing

conventions. The interaction progressed through several distinct phases including initial presentation by the candidate, systematic questioning by each examiner, discussion of research methodology and theoretical framework, examination of findings and their implications, and final recommendations for revision. This structured format provided opportunities to observe how engagement patterns vary across different interactional contexts and participant roles. Participant consent was obtained in accordance with ethical research standards, and all identifying information has been anonymized in the analysis. The defense was conducted primarily in English with occasional code-switching to Indonesian, reflecting the multilingual nature of Indonesian academic discourse.

The linguistic complexity of the interaction adds analytical significance, as code-switching patterns may correlate with different engagement strategies and power dynamics. The bilingual nature of the discourse reflects broader sociolinguistic realities in Indonesian higher education, where English serves simultaneously as the target language of study and a marker of academic prestige, while Indonesian remains the primary language of institutional communication and cultural identity. This multilingual context provides additional layers for examining how participants navigate between different linguistic and cultural frameworks while constructing their academic identities and managing interpersonal relationships during the examination process.

The thesis defense transcript was analyzed using Martin and White's (2005) Engagement framework, with particular attention to monoglossic utterances presenting propositions without acknowledgment of alternative viewpoints, and heteroglossic utterances that acknowledge dialogic alternatives through either contractive resources (disclaim and proclaim) or expansive resources (entertain and attribute). This framework provides a systematic approach for examining how speakers position themselves in relation to their propositions and manage the dialogic potential of their discourse within institutional academic contexts.

Each utterance in the transcript was coded according to these engagement categories, with careful attention to participant role distinctions between examiners and student, as well as the sequential context of each interaction. The coding process involved multiple analytical stages to ensure reliability and interpretive depth. The transcript was initially segmented into individual clauses, following Martin and White's (2005) framework which operates primarily at the clausal level. Each clause was subsequently analyzed for its engagement properties, with specific attention to grammatical and lexical features that signal different types of dialogic positioning.

The analysis distinguished between different examiner types to capture potential variations in engagement strategies based on institutional relationships and examination phases. Mr. Richard, serving as defense chair, was expected to demonstrate distinct engagement patterns compared to other examiners, given his responsibility for process management and procedural compliance. The sequential positioning of examiner questions and responses was systematically documented to identify how engagement patterns shift as the defense progressed from initial questioning through detailed examination to final evaluation phases.

Particular analytical attention was directed toward instances where engagement strategies appeared to correlate with moments of tension, disagreement, or negotiation in the discourse. These critical incidents received detailed examination to understand how participants employed different engagement resources to manage potentially face-threatening acts while maintaining the collaborative nature of the academic examination process. The analysis also considered how cultural and institutional factors specific to Indonesian higher education contexts might influence engagement patterns, particularly regarding hierarchy, respect, and collective face-saving strategies that characterize Indonesian social interaction patterns.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals systematic patterns of engagement resource deployment that reflect the complex institutional and interpersonal dynamics characteristic of thesis defense discourse. These patterns demonstrate how participants navigate the competing demands of academic authority, scholarly dialogue, and institutional hierarchy through strategic deployment of monoglossic and heteroglossic positioning. The findings are organized according to the SFL-based Engagement system framework (Martin & White, 2005) and interpreted through the lens of dialogic positioning in high-stakes academic assessment contexts.

Table 1. Engagement Resources Analysis

| Engagement Resource | Example Data                                                                   | from | Linguistic Realization                                                                                    | Interpersonal Function                                                                 | Theoretical Grounding                                             |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Entertain (Expand)  | "What is your consideration in choosing this topic?"                           |      | Interrogative mood<br><br>Mental process (consideration)<br>Possessive determiner (your)                  | Opens dialogic space while maintaining examiner authority                              | Creates alignment opportunity through question design             |
| Entertain (Expand)  | "What is the crucial thing in classroom management?"                           |      | Wh-interrogative<br><br>Evaluative adjective (crucial)<br>Definite article                                | Guides student thinking through evaluative framing                                     | Pedagogical questioning strategy balancing authority and dialogue |
| Attribute (Expand)  | "Please check your citations and your references... based on APA 7th edition." |      | Imperative mood + politeness marker<br><br>Prepositional phrase (based on)<br>External authority citation | Introduces requirements through disciplinary standards rather than personal preference | Maintains face through attributive strategy                       |
| Proclaim (Contract) | "I think you need to avoid in the secondary reference or source."              |      | Mental process + modality (think, need)<br><br>Negative directive (avoid)                                 | Provides clear guidance while softening through modalization                           | Contractive move maintaining dialogic positioning                 |
| Proclaim (Contract) | "I suggest you to add the elaboration of each data collection."                |      | Mental process (suggest)<br><br>Directive + expansion strategy<br>Specific procedural guidance            | Exercises authority through suggestion rather than command                             | Balances evaluative authority with collegial stance               |
| Disclaim (Contract) | "No, ma'am" [in response to validity testing question]                         |      | Negative polarity<br><br>Politeness marker<br>Minimal response                                            | Acknowledges knowledge limitation under examination pressure                           | Reveals tension in maintaining authoritative positioning          |

|                    |                                                                                                |                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                                        |                                                                                      |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Monogloss          | "Because classroom management is important things that we are going to be a teacher."          | Categorical declarative<br><br>Relational process (is)<br>No modality<br>Causal conjunction (because)                         | Constructs student authority through unhedged assertion; presents proposition as self-evident fact                     | Authoritative discourse; positions proposition as beyond dispute                     |
| Monogloss          | "For the questionnaire, there are seven questions from five component of question management." | Existential process (there are)<br><br>Definite article (the)<br>Specific quantification (seven, five)<br>No hedging          | Demonstrates procedural mastery through factual presentation; establishes epistemic authority over research procedures | Procedural authority in academic discourse; existential process for presenting facts |
| Monogloss          | "I use triangulation, Ma'am."                                                                  | First-person material process (I use)<br><br>Technical terminology (triangulation)<br>Politeness marker (Ma'am)<br>No hedging | Demonstrates methodological competence through technical vocabulary; positions student as knowledgeable                | Epistemic stance; technical lexis as authority marker in academic discourse          |
| Entertain (Expand) | "Student teachers means all the student teachers in your class?"                               | Rising intonation (question)<br><br>Reformulation strategy<br>Quantifier (all)<br>Possessive (your)                           | Seeks clarification without challenging; creates space for student to correct or confirm; assesses understanding       | Dialogic expansion; maintains face while checking comprehension                      |

### Student Monoglossic Authority in Research Presentation

The student candidate (Sophie) employed predominantly monoglossic resources when presenting research findings and responding to basic questions about methodology, aligning with findings from previous research on academic discourse where students demonstrate authority through categorical assertions (Hood, 2010; Hyland, 2005). This pattern established authoritative claims about the study's scope and procedures: "Because classroom management is important things that we are

going to be a teacher." "Class management is important because it can control activities in class." "For the questionnaire, there are seven questions from five component of question management."

From an SFL perspective, these monoglossic statements function at the discourse-semantic stratum to construct interpersonal meaning through what Martin and White (2005) term "bare assertions"—propositions presented without acknowledgment of alternative viewpoints or dialogic positioning. The categorical presentation of research procedures and findings positions the research as contributing factual knowledge rather than tentative suggestions, reflecting what Halliday (1994) identifies as the declarative mood's function in establishing speaker authority. This pattern reflects the student's attempt to demonstrate competence and ownership of the research project, consistent with findings from Lin's (2021) study of Master's thesis defenses where candidates strategically employ evaluative language to establish credibility.

The monoglossic positioning adopted by Sophie reveals her understanding of the institutional expectation to present herself as knowledgeable about her research topic, consistent with Mežek and Swales's (2016) observation that thesis defenses require participants to perform appropriate academic roles. This approach aligns with traditional academic discourse conventions where students are expected to defend their work confidently, as evidenced in studies of doctoral viva discourse (Starfield et al., 2012). The use of definitive statements without hedging or qualification demonstrates Sophie's attempt to establish credibility and show mastery of her subject matter, though as Hood (2010, p. 28) notes, "the management of alignment in academic discourse requires sophisticated balancing of authoritative positioning with acknowledgment of the provisional nature of knowledge claims."

However, the student's monoglossic positioning occasionally revealed limitations in academic discourse sophistication, particularly when providing unclear responses about research design and data collection procedures. For instance, when questioned about validity testing, Sophie responded with uncertainty that disrupted the authoritative positioning: "Just give this answer and I ask the student teacher to check." This response indicates a shift from confident assertion to uncertainty, revealing what Bednarek (2008) terms the "evaluative disjunction" that occurs when speakers' linguistic choices fail to align with their intended interpersonal positioning. This pattern demonstrates the challenges students face when their knowledge boundaries are tested during examination processes, consistent with findings from studies examining power asymmetries in academic assessment contexts (Symonds, 2021).

The tension between maintaining authoritative positioning and acknowledging knowledge limitations presents a significant challenge for students in thesis defense contexts, as noted in research on engagement strategies in academic writing (Zhang & Li, 2024). Sophie's discourse demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining monoglossic authority when faced with detailed methodological inquiries that probe beyond prepared responses. This observation aligns with Martin and White's (2005, p. 100) argument that "engagement resources are fundamentally concerned with the linguistic means for construing and negotiating the interpersonal space between the speaker/writer and those they address," highlighting how Sophie's engagement choices reflect the complex negotiation of expertise and vulnerability inherent in high-stakes academic evaluations.

Furthermore, the student's monoglossic positioning sometimes conflicted with the collaborative nature of academic inquiry emphasized in SFL approaches to educational discourse (Martin et al., 2020). While establishing authority is important, academic discourse typically values the acknowledgment of alternative perspectives and ongoing scholarly dialogue, as White (2024, p. 687) argues: "Academic argument is characteristically heteroglossic, drawing on multiple voices and positioning the writer as engaging with, rather than simply asserting against, alternative viewpoints." Sophie's categorical statements, while demonstrating confidence, occasionally missed opportunities to engage with the broader scholarly conversation surrounding her research topic, suggesting that effective academic discourse requires balancing authoritative positioning with recognition of the dialogic nature of knowledge construction (Halliday, 1994; Martin & White, 2005).

### **Examiner Heteroglossic Strategies for Academic Guidance**

Examiners predominantly utilized heteroglossic resources, creating dialogic space for academic discussion while maintaining their evaluative authority, a pattern consistent with Hood's (2010) analysis of how academic discourse manages stance and engagement. The analysis reveals several primary patterns that demonstrate sophisticated navigation of institutional power relationships,

aligning with research on evaluative language in academic feedback contexts (Van Poucke, 2025; Fuoli & Bednarek, 2022).

Examiners frequently employed entertainment resources to open alternative possibilities and guide students toward more comprehensive analysis, demonstrating what Martin and White (2005, p. 104) describe as "dialogically expansive" moves that "entertain the possibility of alternative voices and positions." Mrs. Athena's questioning exemplifies this pattern: "What is your consideration in choosing this topic?" This interrogative structure functions at the lexico-grammatical stratum to realize interpersonal meaning through what Halliday (1994) terms the "interrogative mood," positioning the examiner as offering possibilities rather than making demands while maintaining academic collegiality and guiding the student's thinking. As Thompson and Hunston (2000, p. 22) note, "evaluation is the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that they are talking about," and examiners' questioning strategies reflect sophisticated management of evaluative stance in power-asymmetrical contexts.

The use of entertainment resources by examiners serves multiple pedagogical functions within the thesis defense genre. These strategies allow examiners to assess student understanding while providing opportunities for learning and clarification, consistent with findings from studies of feedback practices in higher education (Van Poucke, 2025). By framing their interventions as possibilities rather than directives, examiners maintain the dialogic nature of academic discourse while fulfilling their evaluative responsibilities, demonstrating what Bednarek (2008, p. 17) identifies as "the multifunctionality of evaluative language in institutional contexts." This approach reflects sophisticated understanding of how to balance authority with collegiality in academic contexts, aligning with Martin et al.'s (2020) discussion of how academic discourse constructs and negotiates knowledge through interpersonal positioning.

Similarly, Mrs. Ruth's inquiries demonstrate expansive engagement: "What is the crucial thing in classroom management? What should students and students have?" These questions invite the student to explore different dimensions of the topic while allowing the examiner to assess understanding without directly challenging the student's competence. The open-ended nature of these questions creates opportunities for students to demonstrate their analytical abilities while providing examiners with insights into the depth of student understanding. This questioning strategy exemplifies what White (2003, p. 260) describes as "heteroglossic resources which acknowledge and make space for alternative positions and voices," functioning to create what Du Bois (2007) terms the "stance triangle"—the relationship between speaker, addressee, and evaluated object that constructs intersubjective alignment.

The strategic use of questioning as an engagement strategy reveals the examiners' expertise in academic discourse management, consistent with findings from Lin's (2021) study of evaluative language in thesis defenses. Rather than simply correcting errors or providing information directly, the examiners create opportunities for students to develop their own understanding through guided inquiry. This approach models appropriate academic behavior while serving the dual functions of assessment and instruction, reflecting what Hood (2010) identifies as the pedagogical dimension of academic evaluation. As Martin and White (2005, p. 97) argue, "engagement resources are centrally concerned with how speakers/writers acknowledge and connect to or alternatively distance themselves from potential responses to the current proposition or counter-propositions," and examiners' questioning strategies demonstrate sophisticated management of these interpersonal dynamics.

Examiners incorporated references to methodological standards and academic conventions through attributive strategies, demonstrating what Martin and White (2005) term "heteroglossic attribution" where propositions are sourced to external voices. Mrs. Athena's guidance regarding citation practices exemplifies this approach: "Please check your citations and your references... based on APA 7th edition." This attributive pattern demonstrates the examiners' role in connecting student research to disciplinary standards while introducing requirements through external authorities rather than direct prescription, maintaining face for both parties while ensuring academic compliance. As Bednarek (2008, p. 165) observes, "attribution allows speakers to invoke authoritative voices while distancing themselves from direct assertion, a strategy particularly valuable in contexts where power relations must be carefully managed."

The use of attributive strategies allows examiners to introduce disciplinary standards without appearing overly prescriptive or authoritarian, aligning with research on how academic discourse



constructs authority through dialogic positioning (Hood & Martin, 2007; White, 2024). By referencing external authorities such as APA guidelines, examiners position themselves as facilitators of disciplinary knowledge rather than arbitrary rule enforcers. This strategy maintains the collaborative nature of academic discourse while ensuring that students understand and comply with established academic conventions, demonstrating what Hyland (2005, p. 176) identifies as the "dialogic resources through which writers engage with and relate to readers, establishing their credibility and acknowledging alternative voices."

Examiners also employed contractive resources to redirect discussion and address methodological concerns while maintaining dialogic positioning, illustrating what Martin and White (2005, p. 117) term "dialogically contractive" moves that "challenge, fend off or restrict the scope of alternative positions and voices." Mrs. Athena's feedback regarding secondary sources illustrates this strategy: "I think you need to avoid in the secondary reference or source." Mr. Frances's suggestions for revision demonstrate similar contractive guidance: "I suggest you to add the elaboration of each data collection." These contractive moves serve to guide academic discussion while maintaining the dialogic nature of scholarly exchange, allowing examiners to exercise authority through suggestion rather than directive command. This pattern aligns with findings from studies of examiner discourse in doctoral defenses, where evaluative authority must be balanced with collegial academic relationships (Starfield et al., 2012; Holbrook et al., 2012).

The careful deployment of contractive resources demonstrates the examiners' skill in providing clear guidance while preserving the student's agency and maintaining face, consistent with research on politeness and power in academic discourse (Hood, 2010; Thompson & Hunston, 2000). By framing corrections as suggestions or recommendations through mental process verbs ("I think," "I suggest"), examiners avoid direct confrontation while ensuring that important methodological and academic writing issues are addressed. This approach reflects the collaborative nature of academic mentorship, where guidance is provided within a framework of mutual respect and shared commitment to scholarly excellence, as emphasized in SFL approaches to understanding educational discourse (Martin et al., 2020; Halliday, 1994).

The examiners' consistent use of heteroglossic positioning throughout the defense reveals their understanding of the complex social dynamics inherent in academic evaluation contexts, aligning with Symonds's (2021) analysis of power dynamics in higher education assessment. Their strategies demonstrate how experienced academics navigate the tension between maintaining authority and fostering learning, creating an environment that supports student development while ensuring institutional standards are met. As White (2003, p. 275) argues, "the choice between monoglossic and heteroglossic formulations is never ideologically or interpersonally innocent," and the examiners' predominantly heteroglossic positioning reflects sophisticated management of the power asymmetries inherent in thesis defense discourse.

### **Student Response Patterns and Adaptive Positioning**

When responding to examiner questions, the student demonstrated varied engagement patterns, sometimes employing appropriate academic positioning and sometimes struggling with discourse conventions, a finding consistent with research on L2 writers' use of engagement resources in academic contexts (Zhang & Li, 2024; Lam & Crosthwaite, 2018). This variation reveals the challenges students face in navigating competing institutional demands during high-stakes academic interactions, particularly in multilingual contexts where linguistic proficiency intersects with academic discourse competence (Bolton et al., 2023; Zein et al., 2020).

Sophie's responses showed attempts to demonstrate competence through direct, confident answers, employing monoglossic resources to construct authoritative positioning: "I made the question by myself, according to component effective classroom management." "I use triangulation, Ma'am." These monoglossic responses position the student as competent and knowledgeable about research procedures, demonstrating appropriate confidence in methodological choices. From an SFL perspective, these utterances function to realize interpersonal meaning through categorical declaratives, establishing what Halliday (1994) terms "commodity exchange" of information where the speaker positions themselves as the knower relative to their interlocutor. This positioning strategy aligns with Hood's (2010) observation that successful academic writers strategically deploy engagement resources to construct authoritative academic identities.

The student's attempts to maintain authoritative positioning through direct responses reflect her understanding of the need to demonstrate competence during the defense, consistent with

research on thesis defense discourse as a site for performing academic expertise (Mežek & Swales, 2016; Lin, 2021). These responses show Sophie's effort to establish credibility by providing clear, confident answers about her methodological decisions. The use of technical terminology such as "triangulation" indicates her familiarity with research methodology vocabulary and her attempt to position herself as knowledgeable about research procedures. However, as Bednarek (2008, p. 159) notes, "the effectiveness of evaluative positioning depends not only on lexical choice but on the broader discourse context and the interlocutor's uptake," suggesting that technical vocabulary alone cannot sustain authoritative positioning without deeper conceptual understanding.

However, the effectiveness of these positioning strategies varied depending on the depth of inquiry from examiners, revealing what Zhang and Li (2024, p. 10) identify as the "engagement gap" between high and low-performing academic writers. When questions moved beyond surface-level methodological terminology to require detailed explanations of procedures and reasoning, Sophie's responses sometimes revealed gaps in understanding that undermined her authoritative positioning. This pattern suggests that successful academic discourse requires not only familiarity with terminology but also deep understanding of underlying concepts and procedures, consistent with Martin et al.'s (2020) argument that accessing academic discourse requires both linguistic resources and disciplinary knowledge structures.

Some responses revealed difficulties in maintaining appropriate academic positioning, particularly when faced with detailed methodological questions. Sophie's explanation of validity testing demonstrated uncertainty: "No, ma'am" when asked about instrument validity testing, followed by unclear explanations of triangulation procedures. These moments reveal the challenges students face in balancing confidence with appropriate acknowledgment of methodological limitations. The disclaim move ("No") functions as a contractive heteroglossic resource that disrupts the student's prior monoglossic authority, illustrating what White (2003, p. 264) describes as the "dialogistic tension between assertion and acknowledgment of alternative positions" that characterizes academic discourse under examination pressure.

The instances where Sophie's positioning became uncertain highlight the vulnerability of students during thesis defense interactions, consistent with research on power dynamics in academic assessment contexts (Symonds, 2021; Whaley & McNaughtan, 2024). When pushed beyond their comfort zone or areas of solid understanding, students must navigate the challenging balance between maintaining credibility and acknowledging limitations. Sophie's responses in these moments reveal the difficulty of this navigation, as attempts to maintain authority sometimes conflicted with the need for honesty about knowledge gaps. This finding aligns with Hyland's (2005, p. 177) observation that "academic writers must carefully manage their epistemic stance, projecting appropriate degrees of certainty while acknowledging the provisional nature of knowledge claims."

The student's engagement patterns also showed code-switching effects, where language proficiency influenced the effectiveness of positioning strategies, a finding particularly relevant to multilingual academic contexts (Bolton et al., 2023; Zein et al., 2020). Some responses contained grammatical uncertainty that potentially undermined authoritative positioning: "I was interested about the topic because I can join the program" (later requiring clarification about wanting to know about rather than having participated in the program). The multilingual context of the defense created additional challenges for Sophie's positioning strategies, where linguistic competence intersects with academic discourse competence in complex ways. This observation highlights the additional complexity faced by students defending theses in languages other than their native tongue, as noted in research on English-medium instruction in Indonesian higher education (Zein et al., 2020).

### **Power Dynamics and Institutional Hierarchy Navigation**

The engagement patterns reflect complex power dynamics where examiners maintain authority through dialogic facilitation rather than direct assertion, consistent with research on power relations in educational settings (Symonds, 2021; Whaley & McNaughtan, 2024). This sophisticated approach allows examiners to exercise evaluative authority while maintaining the collegial nature of academic discourse, creating an environment that supports learning while ensuring institutional standards, aligning with findings from studies of academic discourse and power in higher education contexts (Martin et al., 2020; Hood, 2010).

Examiners used heteroglossic resources to maintain academic dialogue through questioning, exercise evaluative authority through constructive criticism, and facilitate academic socialization

through modeling appropriate discourse, demonstrating what Martin and White (2005) identify as the multifunctional nature of engagement resources in institutional contexts. Mrs. Ruth's clarifying questions exemplify this approach: "Student teachers means all the student teachers in your class?" This questioning strategy allows the examiner to assess understanding while providing opportunities for clarification without directly challenging the student's competence, illustrating what White (2003) terms "dialogic expansion" where alternative interpretations are entertained without rejecting the original proposition.

The power dynamics evident in the thesis defense reveal the sophisticated ways academic institutions manage authority relationships, consistent with Symonds's (2021) analysis of learner-teacher power dynamics in higher education. Rather than relying on direct assertions of power, examiners demonstrate authority through their ability to guide discourse, ask probing questions, and provide expert guidance. This approach maintains the dignity of all participants while ensuring that evaluative functions are fulfilled effectively, reflecting what Hood (2010, p. 91) describes as "the paradox of academic evaluation: the need to exercise judgment while maintaining collegiality and fostering learning."

### **Implications for Academic Discourse Development**

The analysis reveals that thesis defense discourse involves sophisticated negotiation of competing institutional demands through strategic engagement positioning, consistent with findings from SFL research on academic discourse (Martin et al., 2020; Hood, 2010; Bednarek, 2008). Students must learn to navigate the delicate balance between demonstrating authority over their research while remaining appropriately open to examiner guidance and feedback. This requires developing sophisticated understanding of when to employ monoglossic versus heteroglossic positioning strategies, as emphasized in recent research on engagement strategies in academic writing (Zhang & Li, 2024; Van Poucke, 2025).

The findings suggest several important implications for academic discourse development, particularly in multilingual contexts such as Indonesian higher education (Zein et al., 2020; Bolton et al., 2023). First, students need explicit instruction in engagement strategies that help them navigate the complex demands of academic evaluation contexts, consistent with Hood's (2010) argument for making the interpersonal resources of academic discourse explicit to learners. Understanding how to balance authoritative positioning with appropriate acknowledgment of limitations and openness to feedback is crucial for successful academic discourse participation, as recent studies of appraisal in academic writing have demonstrated (Lin, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2024).

Preparation for thesis defenses should include practice with different types of questioning and guidance in how to respond appropriately to various examiner strategies, reflecting Martin et al.'s (2020) emphasis on the pedagogical value of explicit instruction in academic discourse patterns. Students need to understand the difference between questions seeking information and those designed to probe understanding or guide thinking, as emphasized in research on dialogic teaching in higher education (Whaley & McNaughtan, 2024). Developing this understanding could improve students' ability to respond effectively during defense interactions, particularly in contexts where power asymmetries create additional challenges for student participation (Symonds, 2021).

Furthermore, the analysis reveals how examiners model appropriate academic discourse through their own engagement choices, suggesting that examination interactions serve important socialization functions beyond evaluation, consistent with findings from studies of academic genres and disciplinary discourse (Hood, 2010; Hyland, 2005). The way examiners maintain authority through dialogic strategies provides students with examples of how to balance confidence with scholarly humility in their future academic careers. As White (2024, p. 689) argues, "the modeling of dialogic engagement in academic discourse provides learners with implicit instruction in the interpersonal dynamics of scholarly communication," highlighting the pedagogical dimension of thesis defense interactions.

The multilingual aspects of the defense also suggest implications for supporting students who are defending theses in additional languages, particularly relevant to Indonesian higher education contexts (Bolton et al., 2023; Zein et al., 2020). Language support services could benefit from understanding the specific discourse challenges faced by these students and developing targeted assistance programs that address both linguistic and academic discourse competence, as emphasized in recent research on multilingual academic writing (Lam & Crosthwaite, 2018).

Finally, the analysis suggests that understanding engagement strategies could benefit not only students but also examiners seeking to improve their effectiveness in evaluation and mentoring roles, consistent with Van Poucke's (2025) research on feedback practices in higher education. Training programs for thesis defense examiners could incorporate insights from SFL discourse analysis to help them understand how their discourse choices influence student learning and evaluation outcomes, reflecting the broader application of SFL theory to educational practice (Martin et al., 2020; Halliday, 1994).

## CONCLUSION

This study examined how participants in undergraduate thesis defenses use different linguistic strategies to navigate academic authority and scholarly dialogue. The research found that examiners typically use dialogic language that acknowledges multiple perspectives while maintaining their evaluative role, creating environments that support both assessment and learning. Students showed varying abilities to adapt their discourse strategies - sometimes effectively presenting their research with confident, authoritative language, but other times struggling with appropriate academic conventions when facing detailed questioning about their methodology.

The findings reveal that thesis defenses serve as crucial learning experiences where students develop academic discourse skills while being evaluated. Students need explicit guidance on when to use different engagement strategies throughout various phases of academic interaction. The research suggests that understanding these discourse patterns has important implications for thesis supervision and academic writing pedagogy, as programs should help students learn to strategically deploy different linguistic resources. Future research should examine defenses across multiple disciplines and institutions, track students' discourse development over time, and compare patterns across different cultural contexts to better understand how academic discourse is constructed in higher education.

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