

Exploring Candidates' Response Strategies to Oral Questioning in the EFL Thesis Defenses: A Celce-Murcia's Framework Approach

Immanuel Kamlasi^{1□1}, Hendi Pratama², Sri Wahyuni³, Seful Bahri⁴

Author Affiliations

Faculty of Languages and Arts Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia^{1,2,3,4}

Abstract. The thesis defense examination (TDE) is a high-stakes academic interaction in which candidates must communicate effectively and persuasively to demonstrate their understanding of the subject matter. Understanding response strategies is vital to establishing effective communication within a thesis defense. This study analyzed candidates' response strategies in the EFL thesis defenses using Celce-Murcia's framework. The data collection involved observing eight thesis defenses and recording oral interactions, which were then transcribed for analysis. To ensure the credibility of the data analysis, an inter-coder agreement was calculated, resulting in a Cohen's kappa value of $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating a high level of agreement between coders. The findings showed that candidates frequently employed expansion strategies when answering examiners' questions. Confirmation strategies also appeared with relatively high frequency. Repetition and reduction and repair strategies were used with moderate frequency, whereas rephrasing and rejection were rarely employed. This study reveals that EFL candidates often add more information to their responses and confirm their answers during interaction in the thesis defenses.

Keywords: communication, EFL, response strategies, thesis defenses

INTRODUCTION

The oral thesis defense represents a high-stakes academic interaction in which candidates must demonstrate their ability to engage in academic discourse under pressure. Samad & Adnan, (2017), Dimitsas et al. (2022), Abrar et al., (2024); Samad et al., (2024) emphasize that a thesis defense is a formal procedure where a graduate candidate presents their research findings to a board of examiners. In the context of EFL, a thesis defense is challenging because candidates are required to have a high level of proficiency in English to respond effectively to the examiners' oral questions. Candidates often struggle to understand the questions due to limitations in their English proficiency, particularly with complex and abstract questions. Thus, English proficiency is fundamental for effective communication and transactional skills (Pratama et al., 2017). Candidates employ various communication strategies to manage interaction demands, articulate their arguments, and respond to criticism or questions. Thus, candidates also employ a variety of response strategies to address the examiners' oral questions. Response strategies play a crucial role in helping candidates navigate the interactive style of thesis defenses. These strategies include confirming understanding, seeking clarification, correcting communication breakdowns, or expanding answers. These strategies are often underexplored in the EFL academic context, where linguistic and pragmatic competence can significantly affect performance.

The Celce-Murcia strategic competence framework offers a comprehensive perspective that candidates can use to develop strategic language for analysis. Response strategy is an approach for addressing questions and comments to navigate communication or interaction. In terms of response strategy; Cele-Murcia et al. (1995) categorized response strategies into repetition; rephrasing; expansion; reduction; confirmation; rejection; and repair strategy. These response strategies enable candidates to communicate effectively, address misunderstandings, and demonstrate linguistic competence during EFL thesis defenses. Through employing response strategies such as repetition, word repetition, word expansion, and improvement, candidates can clarify their ideas, elaborate on key points, and respond effectively to the examiner's oral questions. Thus, these strategies help manage both language challenges and academic demands during the oral thesis defense. In addition, Dörnyei and Scott (1997) provided a comprehensive overview of communication strategies used by second language learners to overcome

difficulties during communication process. They developed taxonomies to classify the communication strategies such as paraphrasing, guessing, and using gestures. Their work function to better understand how learners manage language gaps and to inform teaching practices that support effective communication.

Based on the researchers' observations of EFL undergraduate thesis defenses over a period of several years, it was revealed that examiners were quite active in asking numerous questions to the candidates, while the candidates also employed a variety of responses to address these oral questions. The problems that may appear during the thesis examination process include the types of oral questioning used by the examiners, the questioning strategies used to ask them, the response strategies in responding to questions (rephrasing, restructuring, repetition, code switching, omission, translating, and no response strategy), and speaking and listening problems. The difficulty of the questions and the absence of responses during the examination process could have an impact on an EFL undergraduate thesis exam. During the thesis defenses, EFL learners' pragmatic competence potentially cause communication problems. The challenges in pragmatic competence in the EFL thesis examination stem from misleading questions posed by the examiners and the candidate's ability to interpret them; thus, advanced speaking and listening abilities are required. The pragmatic competence requires the candidate's ability to interpret and respond to the questions during the examination; so, the questions and responses contribute to a successful and effective communication in a thesis examination in an EFL context. Aleksius (2021) noted that limited proficiency in English as language learners become problems for EFL learners in classroom, as they have lack of linguistic knowledge. Examiners could potentially pose unexpected questions to probe deeper into the candidates' comprehension. In the case of vice versa, candidates with limited pragmatic competence may find it challenging to respond to questions effectively or provide less relevant responses.

Recognizing the importance of response strategies to overcome communication challenges, previous studies such as Aleksius (2021) and Safitri and Jufrizal (2021) have highlighted the role of response strategies in facilitating effective communication in oral academic settings. However, there is limited research that systematically examines these strategies within the framework of proven pedagogical models, such as the Celce-Murcia framework, which emphasizes contextualized and learner-centered language use. Therefore, exploring candidates' response strategies through this framework offers a deeper insight into how EFL students navigate the complex dynamics of thesis defenses. Such insights enable educators to design more targeted interventions that support candidates in developing their communicative competence and resilience during oral assessments.

The study was conducted to explore and analyze the candidates' response strategies to the examiner's oral questioning in oral thesis defenses in the EFL context. Through the uses of response strategies in EFL thesis defenses, that candidates clarify, expand, confirm, reject, or repair their answers, thus; the findings highlight the role of strategic competence as a crucial component of oral communication. This study aims to explore the types and functions of response strategies employed by EFL undergraduate candidates during thesis defenses, drawing on Celce-Murcia's framework, and to understand how these strategies enable them to communicate effectively and respond to examiners' questions. The findings are expected to contribute to the understanding of academic oral communication in EFL contexts and provide practical implications for pedagogical practices in thesis supervision and defense preparation.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach to explore the response strategies employed by candidates during oral interactions in EFL thesis defense sessions (Creswell & Creswel, 2018). The study applied Celce-Murcia et al.'s (1995) framework of communicative response strategies as the analytical lens to identify and categorize the types of responses used by the candidates. The Interaction Analysis Method (IAM) was employed as the core analytical method to examine the spoken exchanges between candidates and examiners. Keyton (2018) noted that IAM enabled the researchers to systematically code and

interpret the patterns of verbal interaction during the EFL thesis defenses. The analysis focused on the structure, function, and strategic choices within response strategies such as use of repetition, rephrasing, expansion, reduction, confirmation, rejection, and repair strategies. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of how EFL learners construct meaning, maintain interaction, and manage communicative pressure in a high-stakes academic context. The research participants involved eight students as the candidates and eleven lecturers as the examiners from the English Education of Timor University, Indonesia. The students comprised two males and six females, aged between 21 and 24 years. The lecturers included five males and six females, aged 35 to 50, with diverse teaching experience in English education. Specifically, four lecturers had 6 years of teaching experience, one had 10 years, two had 15 years, one had 17 years, one had 20 years, and two had 25 years of experience. This research employed structured observation guides and audio/video recording devices as its primary instruments. The observation guide was used to observe the thesis defense process, capturing interactions between candidates and examiners and their overall dynamics. The audio/video recording device was used to record oral interaction among examiners and candidate during the thesis defenses. The research established ethical protocols, commencing with formal approval from the rector and the institutional review board. The participants' privacy was safeguarded throughout the research by employing pseudonyms and modifying any potentially sensitive information, thus ensuring anonymity in the final report. During the data collection phase, the EFL thesis defense sessions were directly observed, and the participants' oral communication was recorded. The observation focused on identifying the responses strategies to oral questionings used by the candidates during the EFL thesis defenses sessions.

FINDINGS

After collecting the audio-recorded data, the researchers used Turboscribe.ai to transcribe the oral interactions between examiners and candidates, preparing them for analysis. Then, the transcription data were coded into seven types of response strategies (Repetition, Rephrasing, Expansion, Reduction, Confirmation, Rejection and Repair). To ensure the credibility of the data analysis, an inter-coder agreement was calculated, resulting in a Cohen's kappa value of $\kappa = 0.82$, indicating a high level of agreement between coders.

Table 1. Realization of Responses Strategies

	Repeti tion	Rep hras ing	Expa nsion	Redu ction	Confi rmati on	Rejec tion	Repai r	Σ
Σ	95	10	247	95	202	6	72	727
%	13%	1%	34%	13%	28%	1%	10%	100%

Table 1 presents the distribution of seven types of response strategies employed by candidates during EFL thesis defense sessions. There were 727 utterances identified during observation sessions. The data showed that expansion strategies were the most frequently used, accounting for 34% of the total, with 247 instances. The data indicate that candidates often extended their responses by providing additional explanations, examples, or justifications. Confirmation strategies followed closely, appearing 202 instances (28%), suggesting that candidates frequently sought to affirm or verify their understanding or responses during the examination. Both repetition and reduction strategies were used equally, each recorded 95 instances (13%). Repetition was used to restate key points, while reduction showed a tendency toward concise or minimal responses. Repair strategies, which involve self-correction or clarification, were identified in 72 instances (10%), showing that candidates occasionally revised or refined their answers when needed. In contrast, rephrasing was used only 10 instances (1%), and rejection

strategies appeared just 6 instances (1%), making them the least employed. The low frequency of these two strategies suggests that candidates rarely reformulated their responses or disagreed with examiners, possibly reflecting cultural norms or the formal nature of academic defenses. Overall, the candidates relied most on expanding and confirming responses, while more direct or confrontational strategies, such as rejection or rephrasing, were used minimally.

Table 2 Distribution of Response Strategies

No	Repetition	Rephrasing	Expansion	Reduction	Confirmation	Rejection	Repair	Σ
S1	5	0	18	21	3	1	6	54
S2	23	4	69	4	81	1	24	206
S3	5	0	22	5	16	0	1	49
S4	3	1	14	1	5	0	4	28
S5	5	1	33	19	17	0	9	84
S6	6	0	31	22	16	0	3	78
S7	33	4	31	5	35	4	16	128
S8	15	0	29	18	29	0	9	100

Remark: S1-S8: Session 1-Session 8

Table 2 presents the distribution of response strategies among the candidates. The data revealed that Session 2 (S2) had the highest number of total responses (206), with particularly high use of Confirmation (81) and Expansion (69), suggesting a more interactive or demanding defense that required frequent elaboration and clarification. Session 4 (S4), with only 28 strategies, may have involved a shorter or less challenging interaction. Notably, Session 7 (S7) showed the highest use of Repetition (33) and Repair (16), indicating frequent Repetition or self-correction that may point to difficulties in articulation. In contrast, Session 5 (S5) demonstrated a balanced use of Expansion (33), Reduction (19), and Confirmation (17), reflecting a dynamic and adaptive communication approach.

DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings concerning the theoretical framework proposed by Celce-Murcia (1995). Regarding the data collection from EFL thesis defenses, the analysis shows different response strategies employed by candidates when facing examiners' oral questions. The research findings highlight how EFL candidates navigate high-stakes academic discourse by employing response strategies such as repetition, rephrasing, expansion, confirmation, and repair. The results offer insight into how communicative competence is operationalized in real-time academic defense settings and suggest implications for EFL pedagogy and oral academic communication training. The following sections provide more detailed explanations and examples for each response strategy.

1) Repetition Strategy

Repetition strategy entails restating the speaker's original parts of words parts, utterance or statement without changes. Repetition is a strategy used to repeat some parts of the trouble source turn, often with a rising intonation, to convey uncertainty and invite the speaker to complete the repair (Wong & Waring, 2010). Repetition strategy is commonly used to confirm understanding.

Examiner : *Why is it dominant in the movie? (S2_1:05:47)*

Candidate : *Yeah, because, I mean, based on the conversation in the movie, there's eight phrases that show that, yeah, it's the characteristic of hyperbole in the movie. So, I mean, based on the conversations (S2_1:05:50)*

The examiner's question requires explanation regarding the dominance of a specific element: "Why is it dominant in the movie? The candidate responds by repeating the phrase "based on the conversation(s)" more than once: "based on the conversation in the movie..." and later, "based on the conversations." This repetition helps the candidate maintain fluency, organize their thoughts, and reinforce the justification for their answer, which is that the dominance of hyperbole is evident in the repeated phrases found in the movie's dialogue. The repetition strategy in this context reflects both a processing device and a means of reinforcing the source of evidence. Celce-Murcia's model enhances discourse and strategic competence, as it helps maintain fluency, organizes responses, and ensures that contributions remain relevant and cohesive within the ongoing academic exchange. Ardini, S. N. (2018) found that repetition was mostly used by teacher's talk. Similarly, Aleksius (2021) found that repetition is most dominant used by the students. He emphasized that repetition is used to address comprehension issues, address specific language-related issues, request repetition, and request confirmation. Repetition strategy is used to conform understanding and repair communication problem.

2) Rephrasing Strategy

Rephrasing strategy conveys the original message using different words or structures ensuring the intended meaning remains unchanged. This strategy is useful for clarification or to ensure understanding.

Examiner : *Can you tell me what does it mean? The skiff was hauled out (S7_44:41)*
Candidate : *Okay, thank you. I mean like the struggle of Santiago. Maybe catching the fish. I mean like she sacrificed to get the fish. And after he got up the fish. The fish ate the fish. I think I need to finish it. (S7_44:52)*

Celce-Murcia's rephrasing strategy involves restating the original message using different words or sentence structures while keeping the intended meaning intact. This strategy is often used to clarify ideas or ensure the listener's understanding. In the given example, when the examiner asks, "Can you tell me what does it mean? The skiff was hauled out," the candidate attempts to interpret and rephrase the meaning by connecting it to the struggle of Santiago in the story. The candidate says, "I mean like the struggle of Santiago. Maybe catching the fish. I mean like she sacrificed to get the fish..." and continues to rephrase their interpretation, trying different formulations to express the symbolic meaning of the phrase. Although the delivery is somewhat disorganized and marked by hesitation, the candidate clearly uses multiple rewordings in an effort to convey their interpretation, demonstrating the use of the rephrasing strategy to clarify meaning and maintain communication despite uncertainty. In conversational analyses, rephrasing often appears as part of self-repair sequences. Emrani and Hooshmand (2019) identified inserting and replacing as common self-repair subtypes in rephrasing.

3) Expansion Strategy

Expansion strategy involves adding information to the original utterance to clarify or elaborate on the message. This strategy involves adding more information to the original utterance to provide additional context, details, or explanations.

Examiner : *My next question is, what is the contribution of your research for English language teaching? (S2_40:12)*
Candidate : *So, yeah, the contribution for English language teaching, I think, as I suggested, like, I suggested for English teachers that they can put, like, they can make lessons that use figurative language, and then later on, they can, like, use, like, this research to provide, like, the material (S2_40:19)*

The examiner poses an open-ended question that invites the candidate to elaborate on the practical impact of their research. The candidate provides detailed explanation of research contribution to English teaching. The candidate does not just state a simple answer (e.g., *“It helps teachers teach figurative language”*). Instead, the candidate expands on the idea by referring to prior suggestions, giving a practical application (*“make lessons that use figurative language”*), explaining how the research can be used as teaching material, and attempting to connect theory with classroom practice. Aleksius (2021) discovered that students not only repeated the problematic item but also provided additional information like an acknowledgement or explanation. Some students prefer to add more explanation that clarifies or gives more context about the topic during classroom discussion.

4) Reduction Strategy

The reduction strategy involves simplifying, shortening or condensing the original message while retaining its essential meaning. This strategy is useful when communicating with someone who may have difficulty understanding complex language. The reduction strategy is presented in the following data.

Examiner : *How many aspects of speaking? (S1_24:24)*
Candidate : *There are four (S1_24:26)*

The candidate's response is brief, direct, and minimal, providing only the essential numerical information required by the question. This type of response typically avoids additional explanation, elaboration, or contextual detail, focusing solely on delivering the exact data requested. Such responses are often employed in situations where precision is prioritized over elaboration. The strategy helps ensure communication is efficient and immediately understandable, which is particularly useful in contexts where precision is prioritized over detailed explanation. Hu and Li (2017) found that student responses in English as Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms are predominantly lower-order responses. The students' responses mostly fall into silence or no response strategy when answering to teacher questions which indicates limited cognitive engagement. Many responses are at the lowest level, such as silence or no response, meaning students often do not reply when teachers ask questions. The findings reflect a tendency for students to stay at basic levels of cognitive processing during classroom interactions, possibly due to limited language proficiency.

5) Confirmation Strategy

The confirmation strategy is used to verify or affirm the original statement, typically by expressing agreement or providing a brief validating response.

Examiner : *Using Excel, what do you think about this formula? Is it difficult or simple, easy? (S3_44:38)*
Candidate : *Yes, Ms. The use of formula is difficult (S3_44:45)*

The confirmation strategy is categorized as Celce-Murcia's framework, is used to verify, affirm, or respond positively to a question or statement, often to show agreement or validate the interlocutor's point. In the data, the examiner asks, *“Using Excel, what do you think about this formula? Is it difficult or simple, easy?”* The candidate responds with, *“Yes, Ms. The use of formula is difficult,”* which clearly shows confirmation of the examiner's suggestion that the formula might be difficult. The candidate provides a brief validating response that both agrees with and reaffirms the perception of difficulty, thereby facilitating interaction and confirming shared understanding. This strategy helps maintain conversational coherence and shows the candidate's ability to engage cooperatively in academic discourse. Abrar et al. (2024) noted that confirmation strategy includes asking for clarification and repeating questions during thesis defenses. Confirmation strategy helps the candidates ensure understanding and clarity in communication. In the context of thesis defenses, employing confirmation strategies allows participants to clarify points, reduce misunderstandings, and facilitate effective communication between candidate and examiner.

6) Rejection Strategy

The rejection strategy is employed to express disagreement or negate the original utterance, either directly or politely, depending on the context.

- Examiner* : *Sorry, I misunderstand for the sign, the partial deixis, partial, that you write it down (S7_27:32)*
Candidate : *No, it's related to this, this, and? I mean like, spartial deixis (S7_27:43)*

The rejection strategy, which falls under strategic competence in Celce-Murcia's framework, is used to disagree with or negate a previous statement, either directly or politely, to correct a misunderstanding or clarify meaning. In the example, the examiner says, "*Sorry, I misunderstand for the sign, the partial deixis, partial, that you write it down,*" indicating confusion about the candidate's reference to deixis. The candidate begins the response with "No," which marks a rejection of the examiner's interpretation. This direct negation indicates that the candidate does not agree with the examiner's statement. Then, the candidate attempts to clarify the intended term, correcting "partial" to "spatial deixis." Despite a slight pronunciation error ("*spartial*" instead of "*spatial*"), the candidate's intention is clear: to reject the examiner's misinterpretation and provide the correct explanation. Maíz-Arévalo (2014) found students whose linguistic proficiency was lower also showed a tendency to avoid strong disagreement. Strong disagreement requires self-confidence in language proficiency and content knowledge. In EFL context, candidates avoid of using rejection strategy.

7) Repair Strategy

The repair strategy is used to address errors or misunderstandings (Ellis & Barkhuizen (2005) in the original message. Emrani and Hooshmand (2019) noted that a repair can be made by the speaker of the repairable item (self-repair) or it may be made by the recipient of the item (other-repair). This strategy involves correcting errors or misunderstandings in the original message such as self-repair (correcting one's own mistake) or other-repair (correcting someone else's mistake).

- Examiner* : *Yeah, you only identify the word. But did you identify the part of the song into the narrative text? (S5_47:18)*
Candidate : *I'm sorry only identify the word and sentence for the form of narrative text I didn't identify (S5_47:27)*

Rabab'ah (2013) emphasized that repair strategy is a method for modifying, organizing, and maintaining conversations, particularly among non-native speakers. Celce-Murcia's framework addresses and corrects errors during communication, including self-repair (correcting one's own mistakes) or other-repair (responding to and correcting someone else's misunderstanding). The data show that the examiner asks, "*But did you identify the part of the song into the narrative text?*" implying a misunderstanding or expecting a more detailed analysis. The candidate responds, "*I'm sorry only identify the word and sentence for the form of narrative text I didn't identify,*" which reflects a self-repair strategy. The candidate acknowledged the misunderstanding and clarified their actual work, stating that they only identified words and sentences, not the broader narrative structure. This candidate's response corrects the examiner's assumptions and helps maintain clear communication, demonstrating the candidate's ability to rectify potential damage and manage interactions effectively in an academic setting. In the EFL context, self-repair is often preferred over other-initiated repair. Emrani and Hooshmand (2019) found that the Iranian EFL learners employed four self-initiated self-repair structures: replacing, inserting, deleting and aborting.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of EFL thesis defense interaction thru Celce-Murcia's theoretical framework showed that candidates employ a variety of response strategies to overcome challenges in academic oral communication. The findings reported that the candidates primarily used expansion and confirmation

strategies, with less frequently used strategies, such as rejection and rephrasing, appearing only occasionally. Each strategy serves a different function, such as clarifying meaning, expanding explanations, simplifying responses, expressing disagreement, correcting/addressing errors, and managing the flow of interaction. The study highlights the importance of strategic competence as a key component of practical academic discourse for EFL learners. The use of response strategies enables candidates to respond to examiner questions and demonstrate their ability to manage linguistic challenges and engage in meaningful academic communication. The findings offer valuable insight to EFL pedagogy, particularly in designing speaking-oriented instruction that equips EFL learners with practical discourse management tools. Developing such responses strategies can enhance students' readiness for academic communication, thus it supports learners' development as confident and competent language users in formal contexts such as in EFL thesis defense.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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