



## Unveiling Speaking Challenges and Overcoming Strategies in Thesis Defense Examination: A Case Study of EFL Students at Universitas Jambi

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### Abstract:

*A thesis defense examination (TDE) involves the ability to defend the research and to orally explain the thesis. However, it is not easy to do them in front of the examiners. The purposes of this qualitative case-study are to identify the speaking challenges faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in their TDE and to describe the strategies they employed to deal with encountered challenges. Five EFL students of Universitas Jambi voluntarily participated. This research employed qualitative design with a case study approach as a methodology. Data were collected by using a semi-structured interview guided by an interview protocol and observation. Through thematic analysis, the researchers identified two main themes of EFL students' speaking challenges in TDE, including internal challenges (low self-confidence, limited vocabulary and lack of pronunciation) and external challenges (serious examiners and unpredictable questions). In order to deal with the speaking challenges, the participants employed self-management strategies (taking a deep breath, mixing languages and looking at notes), and confirmation strategies (asking for clarification and asking for repeating questions).*

**Keywords:** *EFL students, overcoming strategies, speaking challenges, thesis defense examination*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of speaking is always interesting to discuss. As academics who directly interacted with EFL students in higher education, we found many unique cases related to speaking phenomenon to be further explored. One of the captivating cases which caught our attention is the students'

speaking performance in their TDE. As it is generally known, TDE is a process which involves an individual's ability to orally defend his or her research in front of examiners (Samad & Adnan, 2017; Samad et al., 2022; Samad, et al., 2024). This process needs students' proficiency to speak English as they have to present their research and respond to the questions addressed by examiners. In reality, academics, including the researchers, witnessed many EFL undergraduate students find it difficult to defend their research and even barely communicate with the reviewers or examiners team during the defense. This rationale predominantly triggered us as researchers to conduct this present study.

Another rationale of this study came from the gap that the researchers found in the literature. To date, there has been growing interest in the topic of English speaking for EFL context, including public speaking (e.g., Grieve et al., 2021; Yulianti & Sulistyawati, 2021; Zhang et al., 2020), speaking anxiety (e.g., Abrar, et al., 2024; Nugroho et al., 2023; Saputra, et al., 2023), and teaching and learning speaking (e.g., Sevara & Akramovna, 2023; Tiu, et al., 2023; Wael, et al., 2023). However, the topic of speaking in defense examinations has not been much explored by researchers. Some of them investigated the topic from post-graduate students' experiences, not undergraduate (e.g., Davis & Engward, 2018; Mushoriwa & Nyakutse, 2014; Tan, 2022). The only documented related study of speaking in TDE in Indonesian undergraduate context was the study from Samad et al., (2022), but it solely focused on the aspect of speaking anxiety in TDE. This research scarcity also motivated us to deeply explore the issue.

Based on the above reasons, this present study focused on two aspects of speaking in TDE, including the speaking challenges faced by EFL students' in TDE and their strategies to overcome the challenges. Therefore, the formulations of the study are in the following:

- 1) What speaking challenges faced EFL students in thesis defense examination?
- 2) How do EFL students overcome their speaking challenges in thesis defense examination?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Thesis Defense Examination

In general, thesis defense examination (TDE) is a term which describes a process of presenting and defending research. According to Samad & Adnan (2017), TDE refers to an oral final examination in which university students present the findings of their research and defend their knowledge to the board of examiners. Furthermore, Kemoli and Ogara (2016) highlight that thesis examination provides an opportunity for students to present the research, interact, and get feedback for thesis improvements from a panel of examiners. Moreover, Samad et al., (2024) conclude that TDE is an oral examination conducted by final-year undergraduate students to present and defend the results of their research in front of the examiners. These definitions suggest that TDE is an oral thesis presentation and defense of final-year students with the board of examiners before graduating from the university.

The term TDE itself is referred to by different names across the globe (Hasan, 1994; Lantsoght, 2021; Samad et al., 2019). In the United State of America, for instance, TDE is called an institutionalized pedagogical activity. In most parts of European countries, the defense examination is commonly known as a public defense, disputation and/or disputas. Meanwhile, it is referred to as *Viva voce* in the United Kingdom. In the context of most Indonesian universities, the term of TDE depends on the degree level, such as *ujian skripsi* or script defense

examination for undergraduate degree, *ujian tesis* or thesis defense examination for master degree, and *ujian disertasi* or dissertation defense examination for doctoral level.

TDE is a systematic process which has some elements that are interrelated to each other. Bagdasayan et al (2019), Lantsoght (2021, 2022), Lin (2017) and Swales (2004) separately argue that the objective of the exam, the rhetorical steps, the members, the terms used, and the criteria of assessment are the elements of examination. Regarding its objective, the examination aims at assessing students' research understanding and knowledge, including research theoretical lens, research procedures and findings. Besides, all members involved in the examination have some roles, such as the examiners to ask questions and provide suggestions, a chairman as the leader in the forum, and an examinee to defend his/her research results and arguments. In terms of assessment criteria, the examiners have some criteria to assess the examinee (e.g., oral presentation, verbal argumentation, thesis manuscript) that are used as the standard to pass or fail the examinee. Some examinees may have understood the examination system, while some others may not; and this has been the concern of final-year students.

## **2.2 Speaking and Thesis Defense Examination**

As indicated in the previous section that TDE is an oral final examination for university students before their graduation, this definition shows a close relationship between speaking and TDE. Theoretically, speaking is an activity of expressing and conveying information, opinions, thoughts, and feelings in spoken language which requires students' proficiency of linguistic and sociolinguistic competences (Abrar, 2024; Hinkel, 2011; Nunan, 1999). The students' inability to master required speaking competencies may affect their speaking performance and evaluation in spoken activities, especially TDE (Bagdasayan et al, 2019; Tan, 2022).

During the process of EFL students' TDE, English speaking is an inseparable activity as it is needed in each phase of TDE. At first, TDE is usually started by the students' presentation of their research findings. To do it well, they are required to convincingly present their research with good, clear, and effective spoken English. After the presentation, students' works (e.g., thesis) are assessed by the board of examiners. They ask some questions to the examinees and demand detailed answers, clarifications and arguments. In order to promptly respond to the examiners' questions, EFL students' speaking ability is important in this phase. The last phase is usually the examiners' decision. They announce the result of TDE and EFL students are expected to have good speaking skill to be able to get the point of announcement. From this, we can conclude that speaking is a pivotal aspect in TDE. When EFL students have better speaking skills, they have greater opportunities to do TDE well. On the other hand, when their speaking skill is poorer, they may find it more difficult to accomplish their TDE.

## **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Research Design**

The main purpose of this inquiry is to explore EFL final-year students' speaking experiences in TDE. Specifically, this study focused on two main aspects, including the challenges and overcoming strategies. To achieve the study objective, the researchers utilized a qualitative method with a case study approach. This method is considered appropriate to be used in this inquiry because it can provide a detailed and comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon of interest (Abrar, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hennink et al., 2020; Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Moreover, a case study approach is a qualitative tradition which is intended to comprehensively

explore, describe, and analyze a case or a bounded system (Johnson & Christenson, 2008; Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2017). In other words, this approach generates a detailed and comprehensive investigation of a real-life context case and/or phenomenon. Moreover, this design facilitated the researchers to portray and explain the case or phenomenon of interest holistically. Therefore, qualitative inquiry with a case study approach is best suited.

### 3.2 Research Setting and Participants

This inquiry took place at English language program study, Universitas Jambi. The rationales for selecting this research setting were based on its availability and access to conduct this research. We, the researchers, found it relatively undemanding to access and contact our prospective participants. In the process of recruiting the participants, the researchers employed the most common sampling technique, a purposive, which is based on the study purposes (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Hennink et al., 2020). Before selecting the appropriate research participants, the researchers initially set some inclusive criteria, including (1) The participants majored in English education study program students; (2) The participants have their thesis defense in the year of 2023; (3) The participants agreed to voluntarily take part in the research. After determining the criteria, the researchers requested the list of students who completed their defense in the year of 2023 as well as their contact numbers from the study program administration. Then, each prospective participant was individually contacted to ask their eagerness to participate in this study. As every participant volunteered, the researchers eventually managed to recruit 5 participants. Among them, three were females and two were males; three of the participants were in their fifth year and two were in their fourth year. The information of each participant (pseudonym) can be seen in the following table,

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Data

No	Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Year
1	Ratih	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>
2	Gilang	Male	5 <sup>th</sup>
3	Siska	Female	5 <sup>th</sup>
4	Yoga	Male	4 <sup>th</sup>
5	Suzy	Female	4 <sup>th</sup>

### 3.3 Data Collection Techniques and Research Instruments

Data collection refers to the process of gathering the empirical data of the study. To do this, the researcher employed in-depth interviews. This interview helped the researchers to get rich data as it allowed them to elaborate the process of interviews by asking more related questions, clarification, and even confirmation (Abrar, 2024; Creswell & Poth, 2016). In general, interviews went well. Before interviews, the researchers made sure that the participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the study by signing an informed consent form. The researchers also gave the participants the authority to choose the place, time and mode of interview. During interviews, the researchers started by explaining purposes of the study and interview mechanisms including recording and language in the interviews. All interviews were audio-recorded and approximately 30-45 minutes were allotted for the interview of each participant. All participants responded to the questions in the interview by using Bahasa Indonesia. They argued that answering in Bahasa Indonesia could help them answer the questions clearer and in more detail. As for the research

instrument, the researchers used an interview protocol. This was used to guide us as researchers to conduct the interview appropriately and properly. Moreover, the interview protocol helped the researchers simulate the participants to respond to the questions (Abrar, 2024). The questions listed in the interview protocol related to the research questions. Some of the questions were: 1) Do you find it challenging to speak in your thesis defense? If yes, please explain the challenges you faced? 2) How did you deal with your speaking challenges in your thesis defense?

Besides, the researchers did observations to support the data of the participants' interviews. The observations were conducted in their TDE. Of five participants observed, only one observation was participatory observation. In this case, one of the researchers was involved as the board of examiners in TDE. On the other hand, the observations of the other four participants were non-participatory. In both participatory and non-participatory observations, aside from taking notes, the whole process of TDE was audio recorded. The length of the TDE recording was approximately 90 minutes. The utterances of TDE recordings were later used as supporting data for some sub-themes in the report.

### 3.4 Data Analysis Procedures

After the data were gathered, the next process was analyzing them by employing thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006). It is a method of qualitative data analysis which identifies, analyzes and reports patterns in the form of themes within the data. The researchers started the analysis by *familiarizing ourselves with the data*. Several activities were done to familiarize the data, including listening to the recording, writing up data transcription, and reading the transcriptions multiple times. Then, the researchers *generated the initial codes* by highlighting with colors and/or underlining important parts of the transcriptions. After that, the researchers began *searching for themes* by combining several codes into a single theme. The next step was *reviewing the themes* by making sure of the accuracy and useful representations of the data. Henceforth, the researchers *defined and named themes* by interpreting the data and coming up with a name for each theme. Finally, the researchers *produced the reports* by writing the findings, discussions and conclusion parts. The summary of the phases can be seen in the following figure.

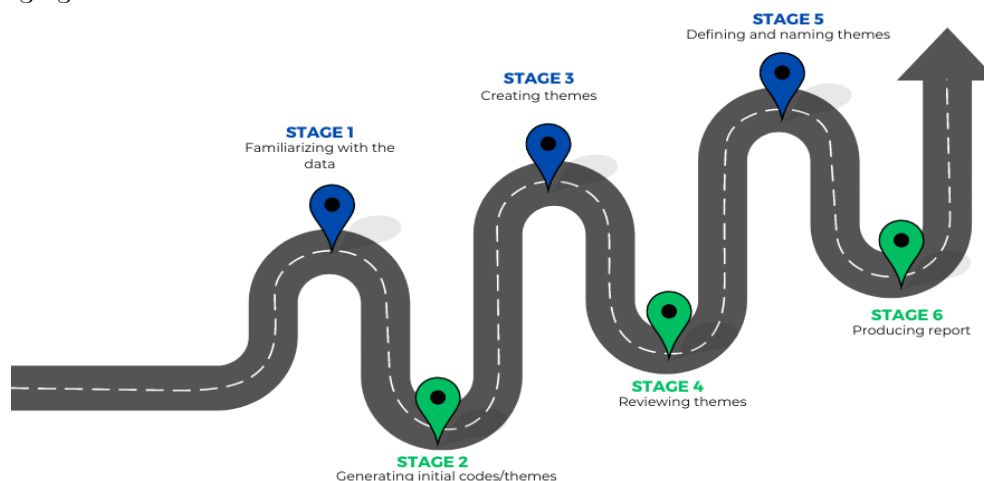


Figure 1. Stages of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006)

### 3.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

One of the common issues in qualitative is the issue of subjectivity (Abrar, 2024) which is closely related to accuracy data. In order to minimize subjectivity and to verify the accuracy of data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researchers used the technique of member checking. The process of trustworthiness was by returning the transcription of interview data to all participants to cross check. Besides, researchers also shared the data analysis and had intense discussion among us to ensure the accuracy of our interpretation.

Another aspect that the researchers paid attention to in this inquiry is the ethics of research. In complying with this issue, several measures were taken, such as removing the identity of participants and other identifiable information and changing them into pseudonyms. These ensured the appropriateness of the research and to protect the safety of the participants (Abrar et al, 2024; Silverman, 2013).

## 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Drawing from the results of thematic analysis, the researchers found some interrelated themes and subthemes of EFL speaking challenges in TDE, including internal challenges (low self-confidence, limited vocabulary, and lack of pronunciation) and external challenges (serious examiners and unpredictable questions). Besides, overcoming strategies were also revealed, such as self-management strategies (taking a deep breath, mixing languages, and looking at the notes) and confirmation strategies (asking for clarification and asking for repeating questions). The summary of themes and sub-themes can be seen in Figure 1 below.

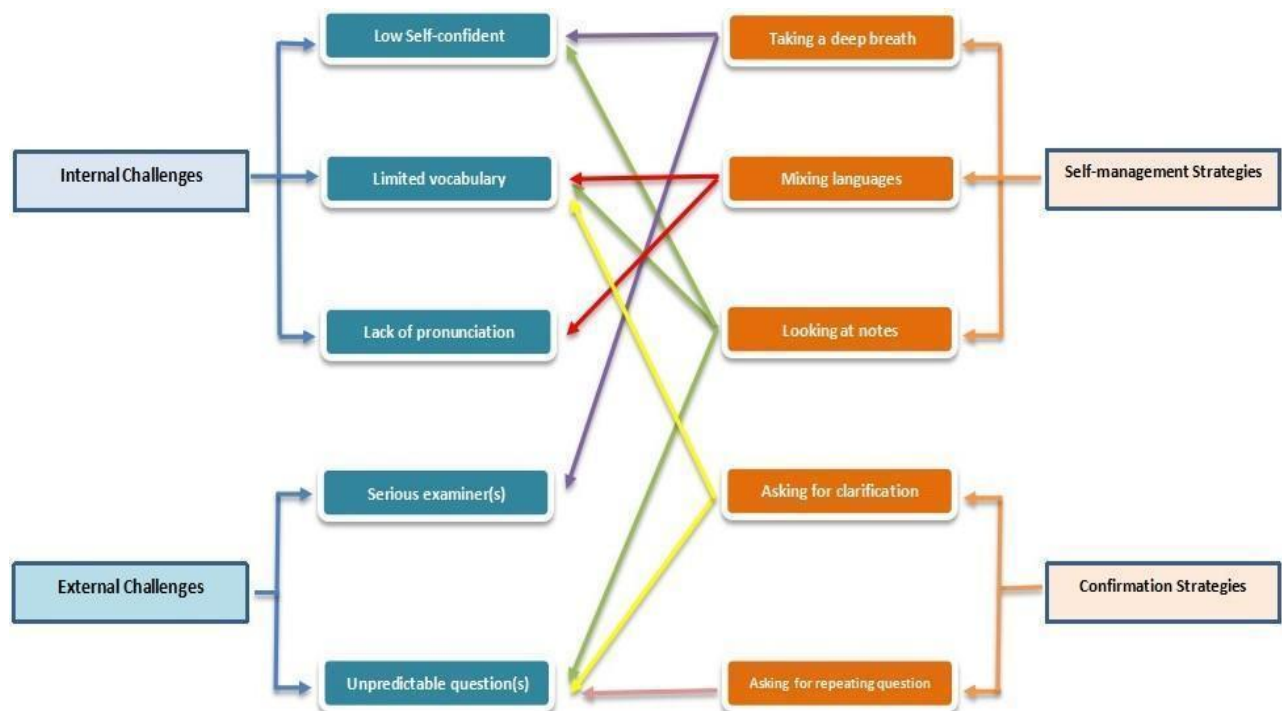


Figure 1. EFL Students' Speaking Challenges and Overcoming Strategies in Their Thesis Defense Examination

## **4.1 EFL Students' Speaking Challenges in Their Thesis Defense**

### **4.1.1 Internal Challenges**

As seen in Figure 1, the first theme of EFL students' speaking challenges while defending their thesis orally in front of the examiner is internal challenge. It refers to obstacles or constraints derived from the individuals themselves. Based on the study results, three sub-themes were identified, including low self-confidence, limited vocabulary and lack of pronunciation.

#### *1. Low Self-confidence*

The most prominent sub-theme of internal challenges is low self-confidence. Self-confidence is badly needed in pursuing students' speaking performance, including defending their theses. It is an individual's belief in their own abilities to achieve their dream in life. With self-confidence, an individual has the ability to act effectively and overcome obstacles he faces. Without having strong self-confidence, on the contrary, an individual may not be able to act accordingly and face difficult situations well (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020; Diyora & Umarova, 2023; Goel & Aggarwal, 2012; Hakim, 2004). Of five participants, four of them acknowledged that one of their biggest challenges when having thesis defense was lack of self-confidence. This challenge did influence them to present their thesis in front of examiners and respond to the questions. One of the participants, Gilang, stated:

*“My biggest difficulty in my defense was my confidence. I was not confident to speak in front of examiners. This led to me having difficulty and stuttering in presenting the study results and answering the questions from the board of examiners” (Gilang, interview).*

In line with Gilang, another participant who completed her thesis in her fourth year, Suzy, reported the same challenge while speaking in her thesis exam. She mentioned:

*“My problem is with my...self-confidence. During my exam, there was a moment I could not respond to the question while facing examiners and audiences. Therefore, I rarely saw people in the room of my exam. I just felt bad because I could not be more confident in the exam” (Suzy, interview).*

Besides the result of the interviews, students' low confidence was also observed in their TDE. Three of them obviously were not confident from their behaviors and movements when presenting and responding to the questions, such as looking down, having unclear and trembling voices, and looking at the notes. Based on the above transcriptions and observation results, it could be deduced that low self-confidence becomes one of the main reasons why participants could not perform well in their thesis defense. This finding generally strengthens other research findings which focused on the issue of EFL students' speaking problems (Abrar et al., 2024; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Arifin, 2017; Jaya et al., 2022; Rahayu et al., 2020; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Their research revealed that lack of confidence is an EFL students' speaking challenge that contributed to their poor speaking performance.

#### *2. Limited Vocabulary*

Besides confidence issues, another sub-theme that was most frequently stated by the participants in the interview is limited vocabulary. It is generally known that vocabulary is an important aspect of learning English as it underpins individuals' language proficiency, including speaking skill (Abrar, et al., 2024; Ratnasari, 2020; Saidakhmedovna, 2024). With a good range of vocabulary,

individuals may be able to communicate well, and on the other hand, limited vocabulary will have an impact on themselves when they want to have interaction with others (Dewi & Jimmi, 2018). Four participants who had problems with limited vocabulary admitted that it was not easy for them to talk fluently in their thesis defense. To illustrate, Siska and Ratih described that their limited range of vocabulary made them challenging to clearly do presentations and respond to the questions addressed by the examiners in the forum. They uttered:

*“When an examiner asked me to explain the process of data gathering from the participants, I could not answer it well. I know what to answer, but I just don’t know what to say, I don’t know the vocabulary”* (Siska, interview).

*“I really am unhappy with my English. During the exam, I could not explain my thesis and answer the questions fluently. I kept thinking of the appropriate words I wanted to say. It is because I mostly only know common English words”* (Ratih, interview).

The data from observations also showed that students’ limited vocabulary prevented them from clearly and fluently in conveying their ideas during TDE. This is evident from the participants’ long pauses, hesitations, and the use of Indonesian words when answering questions from the board of examiners.

*“Qualitative research is...hmmm...research - mendalam - ... about something. This research ... -bertujuan - to get data - mendalam - about the topic”* (Ratih, observation).

*“The gap of this research is... - belum adanya penelitian ini - in Jambi and I do not only [conduct] the research about the challenges, but also - meneliti strategi - to overcome the challenges”* (Yoga, observation).

The data transcriptions of the interview and observation above indicated that lack of vocabulary causes participants difficulty to speak in their thesis defense. Verily, this is a common speaking challenge for EFL students both in Indonesian and worldwide context (cf. Abrar *et al.*, 2024; Amoah & Yeboah, 2021; Chand, 2021; Mridha & Muniruzzaman, 2020; Sha'ar & Boonsu, 2021; Tram, 2020; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Therefore, it is suggested that when an individual has a good range of vocabulary, he/she may find speaking less challenging.

### *3. Lack of Pronunciation*

The last internal factor identified from the data was lack of correct pronunciation. This was raised by two participants. They argued that their inadequate knowledge of English correct pronunciation made them hesitant to speak during their thesis defense. This, further, resulted in their underrated performance in front of their examiners. One of the participants, Siska, voiced:

*“I think my pronunciation is not that good. I even sometimes do not know how to pronounce the words correctly. When it was my defense, I felt it was difficult to speak, I felt hesitant to talk in English and I even could not speak fluently and convincingly in front of the examiners”* (Siska, interview).

With a slightly different experience, Yoga told the interviewer that he has a very good understanding of English, but when it comes to speaking the language, he can really not pronounce the words correctly. In his defense, he was corrected several times by the examiners and it indirectly affected his confidence. He confessed:



*“I had an experience with my bad pronunciation during my thesis defense. I kept pronouncing the word student with student. The examiners and supervisors kept correcting my pronunciation and it made me a little bit down and less confident”* (Yoga, interview).

Additionally, the notes from observation showed that some students felt unsure to pronounce some words. This was evident from the low volume of their voice when uttering English words. In their TDE, some words were incorrectly pronounced by the students, such as the words student, focus, embarrassing, trustworthiness, challenge, and analysis. Based on the data, it is obvious that lack of appropriate pronunciation hindered the students from presenting their research results and responding to the examiners' questions effectively. In other words, EFL students' inability to pronounce the words appropriately is one of the reasons for their speaking reluctance. This confirms a study of Ramli *et al* (2021) which underscored that poor English pronunciation caused students' unwillingness to publicly speak. In addition, data also showed that pronunciation issues affected the participants' confidence to speak English. This result is in line with a study by Nisa & Sari (2023) which examined self-confidence and pronunciation in speaking English. Their study results revealed that one of the factors contributing to EFL students' lack of confidence in speaking is inability to correctly pronounce English words.

#### ***4.1.2 External Challenges***

Besides internal challenges, the study revealed that participants also found it difficult with external challenges they faced during their thesis defense. As can be seen in Figure 1, there were two sub-theme we identified, including serious examiner(s) and unpredictable questions(s).

##### ***1. Serious Examiner(s)***

This sub-theme was found as one interesting finding in this inquiry. Regarding this, all participants agreed that serious examiners in their defense triggered their poor speaking performance. Some of them mentioned that they could not effectively present their theses and answer the questions when seeing serious examiners in front of them. One of the participants, Ratih, enthusiastically explained:

*“Besides vocabulary issues, one thing that made me challenging in my thesis defense is the examiners... They looked serious even before my defense started. Standing in front of them made me nervous. During the defense, I went blank and could not perform my best”* (Ratih, interview).

Similarly, Gilang explained that serious examiners made him stutter to speak during his defense. He commented:

*“Some of my examiners were very serious and critical. I was unable to fluently answer their questions. No...I even stuttered and lost for words during my defense for most of the time”* (Gilang, interview).

Theoretically, a thesis examiner is an academic who reads the finished thesis, examines the students, and recommends the result (Golding *et al.*, 2014). The presence of examiners in thesis defense is pivotal to ensure students research quality and originality. However, as elaborated from the participants' data, their presence becomes a source of struggles in the process of defending their thesis. This study result corroborates other studies which revealed that lecturers

and/or teachers contribute to EFL/ESL students' speaking reluctance and anxiety (Abrar *et al.*, 2024; Ahmad, 2021; Al-Yaseen, 2019).

## 2. Unpredictable Questions(s)

The last sub-theme of external challenges is unpredictable question(s). This is closely related to students' readiness to respond to questions from examiners. Three participants admitted that questions from the examiners made them speechless and lost for words. One participant from four semester reported:

*"Before the thesis exam, I learned a lot about the findings and discussions parts of my thesis, but the questions from examiners made me stiff in front of them. I could not effectively answer their questions about sampling technique. I missed studying it"* (Suzy, interview).

With a different story, Siska mentioned in her interview that examiners asked her some questions that are not related to her thesis. She particularly uttered:

*"During the defense, most examiners did not really ask about my thesis. They addressed questions related to my one-year completing my thesis. Their questions were unpredictable and made me anxious"* (Siska, interview).

Based on the elaboration above, it is suggested that unpredictable questions asked by examiners in the defense made participants unable to fluently respond to them. This challenge is quite common in oral presentation, including thesis examination. Similar result was previously reported by Zurnaningsih (2023). She revealed one of the causes of students' poor performance and anxiety in thesis examination was impromptu questions from examiners. Similarly, Asnur (2013) concluded that inability to answer unpredictable questions led to students' anxiety and ineffective performance in the presentation.

## 4.2 EFL Students' Strategies to Overcome Speaking Challenges in Their Thesis Defense

### 4.2.1 Self-management strategy

The first theme of overcoming strategies, as seen in Figure 1, is self-management. This strategy refers to an individual's self-control of thoughts, words, emotion and also actions (Abrar, *at al.*, 2024). In this study, self-management means the strategy initiated and taken by the participants themselves to alleviate their speaking challenges in thesis defense. Regarding this, three sub-themes were identified, including taking a deep breath, mixing languages, and looking at the notes.

#### 1. Taking a Deep Breath

The first sub-theme of self-management strategy is taking a deep breath. This is one common way for the participants to alleviate their speaking challenges in thesis defense, especially with the issue of low self-confidence and serious examiners. Although this was not very effective in overcoming their speaking challenges, all participants confessed that they found this helpful for them. To illustrate, Gilang explained in his interview that taking a deep breath helped him to be more calm in his defense. He said:

*"As I said earlier, one of my challenges to speak in the exam is my low confidence. Although I could not overcome it 100% in the exam, the act of taking*

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*a deep breath before doing a presentation and answering the examiners' questions helped me a lot*" (Gilang, interview).

Similarly, Yoga mentioned that taking a deep breath helped him feel calmer in his defense when facing serious examiners. He expressed:

*"I took a deep breath many times in the exam. Actually, I felt anxious to see the facial expressions of my examiners and this action made me calmer"* (Yoga, interview).

Based on the notes of observation, all participants also did take a deep breath before starting the presentation and responding to the examiners' questions. From the data transcription above, it can be suggested that taking a deep breath seems to be effective for alleviating the students' speaking difficulty, especially in the aspect of low confidence and serious examiners. This result is consistent with some other previous studies which focused on the strategies to alleviate speaking problems (Martiningsih *et al.*, 2024; Milanriato *et al.*, 2023; Taly & Paramasivam, 2020). They revealed that taking a deep breath is fruitful to reduce the challenges in speaking, such as anxiety and lack of confidence.

## *2. Mixing Languages*

The second sub-theme of self-management strategy is mixing the language. This was used by some participants when they found it challenging to recall appropriate vocabulary and say correct pronunciation. In the context of general communication, mixing the languages may refer to the term of *code mixing*. Theoretically, code mixing is the consequent phenomenon of language contact in bilingual and/or multilingual communities in which the speakers embed various linguistic units in the utterances, including affixes, words, phrases or even clauses to infer what is intended (Bakomba, 1989; McKay & Hornberger, 1996; Muysken, 2020; Wardhaugh, 2002). Regarding this, three out of five participants mentioned that this is an effective way for them to use in their thesis defense. By doing this, they could maintain the pace of interaction with their examiners. As Siska said in her interview, mixing Bahasa Indonesia in her defense really helped her with pronunciation issues and concurrently this kept her communication well with the board of examiners. She uttered:

*"You know, I said my pronunciation isn't good. When I did not know the correct pronunciation, I just used Bahasa Indonesia for some words. This way, I did not have long pauses when presenting or answering questions in front of the examiners"* (Siska, interview).

With a similar vein, Yoga also felt that mixing English with Bahasa Indonesia made him easier to explain his thesis when he faced problems with English vocabulary. He specifically voiced:

*"Whenever I did not know the English words or I forgot them, I always mixed my English speaking with Bahasa Indonesia. I just did it because it's fruitful and helped me manage good and interactive communication with supervisors and examiners in the forum"* (Yoga, interview).

Besides interview data, observation recording transcription also indicated that code mixing was commonly used by the students in their TDE to help them manage the pace of their speaking. Below are the excerpts of their utterances.

*“About trustworthiness, I [did] member checking. I ... - kembalikan transkripsi - to the participants [to be checked]. When [there was no] - perubahan -, I [analyzed] the data”* (Siska, observation).

*“Steps of collecting my data... First, I - hubungi - the participants. Then, I [interviewed] them. I interviewed them with Bahasa Indonesia to get data - yang komprehensif - and rich.* (Ratih, observation).

The elaboration of data suggested that mixing language is an effective way to have effective communication and to anticipate misunderstanding between the participants with their examiners. This is in line with one of the purposes of code mixing, that is a strategy of neutrality which highlights the usage of code mixing is to avoid misunderstanding between speakers and hearers (McKay & Nancy, 1996). Besides, this finding also supports some previous studies (Helmie et al., 2020; Sari, 2022). They revealed that the use of code mixing in the presentation is to make the explanation clearer and more effective.

### *3. Looking at the Notes*

The last sub-theme of self-management strategy identified from the participants is looking at the notes. This was raised by three participants in their interviews. Based on the data, participants employed this effort to overcome their challenges in the aspects of confidence, vocabulary and impromptu or unpredictable questions. For instance, Ratih mentioned that she tended to look at her notes whenever she had problems with vocabulary. She stated:

*“I realized that I have problems with vocabulary, especially formal words. When I found it difficult with certain vocabularies during presentation, such as thesis defense, I just looked at my notes and read them”* (Ratih, interview).

Besides Ratih, Suzy underscored that notes are very helpful to deal with unpredictable questions from examiners. She described:

*“In dealing with the unpredictable questions from examiners, I think seeing the notes was helpful. Like I told earlier, I got a question which I did not really learn about before the defense. I just looked at my notes quickly and I eventually could respond to the questions promptly”* (Suzy, interview).

Besides, the notes from observation suggested one participant, Suzy, often looked at her notes before answering the examiners' questions and this really helped her get the idea for her answers. The data from the interviews and observations showed that looking at notes is useful to overcome the issue with vocabulary and unpredictable questions. This result indicated that preparing a note consisting of important related details, facts, or thoughts before presentation, including thesis defense, is paramount. Similar to this study result, a study by Sahril et al (2022) concluded making a note could be a good and useful strategy in overcoming issues in thesis examination's oral presentation.

#### **4.2.2 Confirmation Strategy**

Another theme of overcoming strategy is confirmation. This strategy refers to an act of verification. As can be seen in Figure 1, there are two sub-themes identified from the participants' interview results, including asking for clarification and asking for repeated questions.

### *1. Asking for Clarification*

Based on the data, three participants mentioned that asking for clarification accommodated them to overcome the issue of vocabulary and unpredictable questions. For instance, Siska shared her story in the interview that she often asked for clarification to the examiners in her defense. By doing this, she could understand the questions clearly and respond to them comprehensively. She mentioned:

*“To be honest, I often asked for clarification from the examiners. For example, I once asked about something and I just heard a new word for the first time. Then, I clarified the word by asking is this what you mean?. By doing that, I knew it and I could answer the question”* (Siska, interview).

With a similar vein, Gilang asked for clarification to deal with unpredictable questions from the examiners. He noted:

*“When I got a question which I did not expect, I always asked for clarification. It was quite fruitful because the examiners explained what they meant”* (Gilang, interview).

The act of asking for clarification, to help students with vocabulary and impromptu questions, was also found in the observation. They used clarification phrases both in English and Indonesian . Some of excerpts are in the following

*“About your question. I am sorry Sir, do you mean my reasons [for conducting] this study:?”* (Siska, observation)

*“Mam, I am sorry, - apakah maksud Mam mengapa menggunakan - case study - untuk penelitian saya -?”* (Ratih, observation)

From the above extracts of transcription, it can be concluded that clarification is indeed needed in the interaction, including in thesis defense. In his book entitled *language learning strategies*, Oxford (2010) contended that asking for clarification is one of learning strategies that helps learners clarify words, phrases and information that they still consider unclear. Moreover, some studies highlighted that asking for clarification is the indicator of interactive speaking situation which helps the speaker to deal with some issues in speaking, including vocabularies, anxiety, and pronunciation (Basalama et al., 2020; Bsharat & Barahmeh, 2020; Pawlak, 2018)

### *2. Asking for Repeated Questions*

The last sub-theme of confirmation strategy asking for repeated question(s). In this sense, the participants requested the examiner(s) to repeat the questions with the hope of grasping the question's idea. Based on the data, two out of three participants who raised an issue of unpredictable question challenge employed this in their thesis defense. For example, Suzy argued that she successfully managed an unexpected question by asking the examiner(s) to repeat it. She uttered:

*“One of my ways to overcome the problem with unexpected question(s) is by asking the examiners to repeat questions. I quite often said pardon me? or could you please repeat the question? Sometimes, the examiner(s) did not only repeat the same questions, but also explain them. That way, I could spend more time preparing the answer”* (Suzy, interview).

Similarly, Gilang told the interviewer that repeated questions from examiners helped him get a clearer understanding of the unpredictable questions. He said:

*“To deal with unexpected questions from the examiner(s), I asked them to repeat the questions. They usually rephrase the questions to be easier to understand. This way helped me a lot to respond to the questions well”* (Gilang, interview).

The result of observations also indicated that the students asked for repeated questions in their TDE. They seemed to use this to get a better understanding of the questions. From the above data elaboration, two main benefits of requesting repeated questions in the thesis defense were identified, and one of them is including ensuring individual’s comprehension of the questions. This finding is in line with what Toglia and White (2024) said about repeated questions. They noted that the purpose of requesting people to repeat questions is to ensure understanding. Besides, from the data, giving more time to think of the appropriate answer is another advantage of asking someone to repeat his/her questions. This makes sense because whenever someone is given an impromptu question, (s)he may not know the answer right away and (s)he gets extra time to think and formulate the appropriate answer by asking the question to be repeated.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to identify EFL speaking challenges in their thesis defense and to describe the way they overcome the challenges they faced. The findings of the study revealed that there are some EFL speaking challenges in thesis defense, including internal challenges (low self-confidence, limited vocabulary and lack of pronunciation); external challenges (serious examiner(s) and unpredictable question(s)). The finding also showed that students employed some strategies to alleviate their speaking challenges in their thesis defense, such as self-management strategies (taking a deep breath, mixing languages and looking at notes); confirmation strategies (asking for clarification and asking for repeating questions).

Although this study has thoroughly discussed EFL students’ speaking challenges and overcoming strategies in their thesis defense, it does not mean that it has no limitations. Firstly, this study solely explored the phenomenon from the students point of view. Further studies may investigate the phenomenon from examiners and supervisors perspectives. Secondly, the sample of the study was limited to five EFL students. Future researchers could recruit more participants in order to get more comprehensive and in-depth exploration on the topic. Lastly, as this study employed a qualitative research design, the results of the study cannot be generalized. Next research may use quantitative methods which allow the researchers to generate knowledge from the results of the study.

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