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THE USE OF QUESTIONS IN MASTER'S ORAL DEFENCES IN ENGLISH AS AN ACADEMIC LINGUA FRANCA IN UNIVERSITIES

Abstract

This study addresses a research gap concerning the role of questions in oral defences within the context of English as a lingua franca (ELF), using an analytical framework examining syntactic, prosodic, and pragmatic dimensions. Drawing from modified taxonomies by Athanasiadou (1991), Freed (1994), Schleef (2009), Chang (2012), and Chen (2018), the study explores questions in a Taiwanese corpus of successful master's thesis defences (TCTD) (Lin, 2020). The findings reveal questions as crucial rhetorical devices, distributed widely throughout the defence dataset, prompting interaction among participants. Despite disparities in frequency and functions, question use enables participants to fulfil distinct roles and duties, navigating interpersonal relationships and managing conflicts in oral defences. This study distils the interactional characteristics of question-response sessions, enhancing transparency for participants, especially in the context of English as an academic lingua franca. The research contributes to the field of EFL in spoken discourse, specifically addressing the use of questions in master's oral defences. Implications for English for academic purposes at the university level are discussed, emphasising the significance of understanding and participating in these interactions.

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Key words

English as a lingua franca (ELF), questions, communicative purposes, master's oral defences, English as a medium of instruction (EMI).

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1. INTRODUCTION

Questions are considered to be one of the most significant features in conversation and practical linguistic tools to stimulate human interaction (Goody, 1987). In higher education, the use of questions has been broadly explored in written academic events to understand how interaction takes place between writers and readers in journal-writing (Hyland, 2002), textbooks and online materials (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2008), and academic blogs (Zou & Hyland, 2020), as well as spoken interaction between professors and students in academic lectures (Björkman, 2012; Chang, 2012; Chen, 2018), distance online courses (Chen, 2009), conferences and seminars (Aguilar, 2016; Wulffet et al., 2009), and supervision sessions (Macfadyen et al., 2019). However, studies exploring how questions are used by participants in oral defences have been limited to native English-speaking contexts, such as in the UK; based on 25 doctoral vivas, Trafford and Leshem (2002, 2008) textually analysed examiners' questions, identifying clusters of themes which represent a template for questions as guidelines for prospective researchers to prepare for their doctoral vivas. Nevertheless, how the use of questions correlates to the participant roles of examiners, candidates, and advisors in oral defences has not been addressed. Additionally, there is a lack of exploration into how these various participant roles utilise questions in the context of English as a lingua franca (hereafter ELF). To help to fill this gap, the present study focuses on how participants availed the use of questions for their communicative purposes in English-medium master's thesis oral defences in Taiwanese universities where English is used as an academic lingua franca (Lau & Lin, 2014). To explore this overarching research question, the following sub-questions are discussed:

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1. What question forms are used by participants in question-response sessions in English-medium master's thesis oral defences? And what functions do they serve?
2. How are the distribution patterns of question use associated with the roles of examiners, candidates, and advisors?
3. In English as a lingua franca universities, how do examiners, candidates, and advisors contribute to shaping the discourse of question-response sessions in master's thesis oral defences through their use of questions?

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON ORAL DEFENCES

Oral defence is a compulsory final oral examination, a finishing rite of passage, prior to the award of a PhD or master's degree, and an important academic conversation between a candidate and examiners to attest the candidate's membership of their chosen specialisation in academia (Swales, 2004). However, the names, ceremonial procedures, degrees of formality, and length vary from country to country and in

different academic cultural contexts (Recski, 2005). In the UK, a viva is conducted in a closed room with an internal examiner, an external examiner, a chair, and a supervisor; while in some Scandinavian countries, disputas are held in a large room with around 50 people: examiners in full academic regalia, the candidate, and a chair seated in a court arrangement performing some ceremonial in Latin (Swales, 2004) (for PhD defences in different countries, see Mežek & Swales, 2016).

The style of oral defences exhibits a "mixed variety", where examiners, functioning as repositories of expertise, display carefulness, thoughtfulness, and a capacity for humour, maintaining their scholarly demeanor with enough levity to avoid alienating the candidate (Mežek & Swales, 2016, pp. 362-363). The style also integrates formal and informal elements, influenced by institutional constraints, the significance of the business at hand, and the nature of interpersonal relationships among participants (Grimshaw, 1989; Swales, 2004). Within this blended and mixed style of oral defences, politeness appears to play an essential role in maintaining interpersonal relationships when dealing with conflict-laden interactions in oral defences. For example, when examiners pose questions regarding a candidate's dissertation and the candidate responds by justifying and clarifying their research, it constitutes a "Face-Threatening Act". Such interactions hold the potential to damage the receiver's "positive face" (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as examiners may assume flaws and deficiencies in the candidate's dissertation.To maintain participants' face, the positive social value individuals claim for themselves in interactions is essentially vital in facilitating effective communication, particularly between potentially conflicting parties. Rather than solely focusing on individuals' face concerns, "rapport", as proposed by Spencer-Oatey (2022), is closely related to face and politeness in intercultural communication, fostering a positive and harmonious relationship between individuals. Constructing such positive and harmonious relationship involves employing various interactional strategies, such as joint storytelling, participatory floor-management, humour and shared transgressions, as observed in MBA team meeting data (Debray & Spencer-Oatey, 2022).

The apparent structures of oral defences were categorised as follows: "preliminaries" (consisting of greetings and personal introductions), "the defence proper" (involving candidates' presentations and rounds of questions), "in-camera sessions" (encompassing evaluations of a dissertation and oral defence), and the "closing segment" (Recski, 2005; Swales, 2004). Obvious interactional patterns between candidate and examiners: question-answer, comment-response, criticism-response, or suggestion-response were recognised in oral defences (Don & Izadi, 2011, p. 3790) or disputation (Dobson, 2011). Furthermore, researchers proposed methods to help students understand what examiners are looking for, expect and comment on (Hodgson, 2020), the subjectivity element (Cooksey & McDonald, 2019), and standard procedures (Erwee & Perry, 2018) in oral defences.

Linguistic mechanics have also been examined, uncovering features of interaction among participants in oral defences. For instance, candidates used modal verbs, e.g., *will* and *should*, and *exactly* and *indeed* to demonstrate their

confident certainty, conveying an image of reliability and knowledgeability, but also *might*, *could*, *probably*, and *possibly* to express tentativeness or weak commitment to points challenged by examiners (Recski, 2005). Examiners frequently used pragmatic force modifiers prefacing disagreement (e.g., *seem*), involvement (e.g., *you know*), and intrusion of a subjective stance (e.g., *I mean*, *I thought*, *I guess*), while candidates tended to secure their original contributions to disciplinary knowledge (Lin, 2017).

Apart from the above studies in the context of English as L1, various studies have explored the performance of participants during English-mediated oral defence scenarios, wherein English serves as an academic lingua franca. An examination of Iranian participants reveals distinctive patterns in face management: a strong connection among examiners, a high level of separation between examiners and candidates, and a medium level of separation between examiners and advisors (Don & Izadi, 2011). Furthermore, a social representation of self-denigration emerged as a prevalent strategy employed by Iranian participants to negotiate and manage conflicts, thereby safeguarding harmony and resilience within the academic discourse (Mayahi & Jalilifar, 2022). In Swedish PhD defences, most of the laughter was non-humorous to mitigate face threats to others, while humorous laughter was usually produced by more than one person to relieve the tension, creating a non-adversarial atmosphere and building a community (Mežek, 2018). In Taiwanese universities, similar types and frequencies of modifiers were found by committees and candidates in co-structuring institutional oral defence discourses, but also apparent differences as the result of their distinct duties, dynamic roles, and communicative purposes (Lin, 2020). Additionally, a study of comparing assessment references in ELF and L1 found that a clear distinction between native and non-native speakers of English is not always easy to make. Participants who use ELF might expect frequent and clear assessment references signalling important content and information (Johnson, 2024).

Although questions are one of the significant features inherent to oral defences, particularly in question-response sessions, very few researchers have focused on the use of questions. From 25 authentic doctoral vivas focusing on the content of examiners' questions, Trafford and Leshem (2002, pp. 37-41) identified 11 topics in the order of a PhD dissertation's structure, such as opening questions (e.g., 'Why did you choose this topic for your doctoral study?') and conceptualisation (e.g., 'How did you arrive at your conceptual framework?'). It also suggested that good quality theses and more experienced examiners were inclined to pose more questions related to defending "doctorateness" in the dissertation, while others tended to highlight the technology, literature, and practice of research (Trafford & Leshem, 2008, p. 20). In spite of attempting to propose a framework for candidates to defend their theses in oral defences, Trafford and Leshem (2002, 2008) merely focused on the content of examiners' questions and seemed to approach their data with an underlying assumption of fixed pre-assigned institutional roles and duties of examiners, while neglecting the natural dynamics of interaction among participants with distinct roles, not even in universities where English is used as an

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academic lingua franca. Furthermore, the majority of the above research focuses on PhD but only very few highlights master's oral defences (Lin, 2020). To help fill this gap, the present study explores how the use of questions by examiners, candidates and advisors is associated with their roles and dynamic communicative purposes in master's oral defences in ELF universities.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research context

English as the medium of instruction (EMI) has been gradually developed and applied in numerous universities in Asian countries to promote international competitiveness in higher education and attract more international students, and Taiwan is no exception. Arising from this, many studies have drawn attention to related aspects, such as institutional policies and practices of EMI (Lau & Lin, 2017; Lin, 2023; Vuong et al., 2021; Wu, 2023), curriculum development and course evaluation (Le & Tang, 2022; Liu et al., 2022), professional development (Graham & Eslami, 2023), intercultural interaction in academic settings (Lacaste et al., 2022; Nguyen, 2021), academic assessment (Lin, 2020), students' perspective on EMI (Hsu, 2023; Lan, 2022; Moncada-Comas, 2022), EMI lectures in online settings (Picciuolo, 2023), and language-content partnership at Chinese universities (Li et al., 2024). Nevertheless, how participants interact in EMI in the context of using English as an academic lingua franca lacks attention, not to mention oral forms of academic assessment in higher education and oral defences for theses and dissertations, which have rarely been explored because of their blocked nature and the difficulty of collecting oral defence data. Therefore, this study reuses a Taiwanese corpus of successful master's thesis defences (henceforth TCTD) (Lin, 2020), a valuable authentic oral defence dataset which so far has only been examined on limited aspects, such as pragmatic force modifiers (Lin, 2020) and evaluative language (Lin & Lau, 2021), by discussing participants' use of questions in order to investigate the nature of oral defences in the context of English as an academic lingua franca.

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3.2. EMI in Taiwan and the dataset

In recent years, Taiwan has actively pursued the internationalisation of its higher education system by implementing an expansion of EMI programmes and augmenting the enrolment of international students, particularly following the introduction of the Bilingual 2030 policy in 2018 (National Development Council, 2023). The number of EMI programmes has witnessed a modest increase, rising from 314 to 349 across nearly 50 universities in Taiwan during the period from

2018 to 2023 (Ministry of Education, 2023). Over the timeframe spanning 2015 to 2023, the enrolment of international students in degree programmes in Taiwan has exhibited a gradual growth of 55.45%, while the number of domestic students has declined by 16.50% due to a diminishing birth rate (see Appendix 1). Nonetheless, the proportion of international students remains relatively low, constituting approximately 3% of the total, in contrast to local students who constitute nearly 97% of the overall student population.

The dataset under scrutiny comprises six question-response sessions during master's oral thesis defences, encompassing a total of 33,272 words and spanning 273 minutes. The duration of these six question-response sessions ranged from 1,857 to 8,482 words and lasted for 18 to 66 minutes. This dataset was selected from the Taiwanese corpus of successful master's thesis defences (TCTD) which was built between 2015 and mid-2017 (Lin, 2020). The primary objective of this dataset was to capture a diverse representation of nationalities among participants engaged in master's thesis defences, with a specific focus on investigating the context of English as an academic lingua franca within Taiwanese universities. Participants in these defences included candidates, advisors, internal examiners, and external examiners hailing from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, the Philippines, Gambia, and Indonesia (for detailed data and participant demographics see Appendix 2).

It is crucial to note that all data pertaining to defences were exclusively sourced from departments of English and Applied Linguistics in four universities in Taiwan. The decision to concentrate on a specific field in this study serves as a foundational exploration for further investigations into various academic disciplines within the expanding landscape of EMI programmes in Taiwan. Throughout the data collection process, all participants were aware of the recording and signed consent forms, allowing us to use their data for research purposes with their names kept anonymous.

3.3. The analytical framework

In this study, to enhance the consistency between raters, two researchers coded the entire dataset investigated and, subsequently, compared and deliberated on the outcomes, reaching a consensus regarding the categorisation of questions. Questions are identified using a discourse analytic framework that considers their syntactic, prosodic, and pragmatic properties, as detailed at the following two levels. At the first level, our focus centers on the syntactic and prosodic aspects of questions, encompassing forms such as wh-questions, alternative questions, yes/no questions, and question tags (Biber et al., 1999), incomplete questions (Chang, 2012), and declarative questions (Swan, 2005) (see Appendix 3).

The second level delves into contextual speaker meanings (Leech, 1983) to identify question instances and classify their functions. Table 1 illustrates the subcategories of question functions used in this study, integrating taxonomies

proposed in studies on conversations, academic writing, and academic lectures (Athanasiadou, 1991; Chang, 2012; Chen, 2018; Crawford Camiciottoli, 2008; Freed, 1994; Hyland, 2002; Schleef, 2009; Thompson, 1998). These functions encompass two main categories: audience-oriented questions, aiming for responses from addressees, include seeking new information, seeking confirmation, seeking clarification, comprehension checks, examining questions, and seeking common ground tags. Content-oriented questions, delivering information to the audience, encompass rhetorical-structural questions, pointing forward questions, and rhetorical questions. To fully accommodate our data, we introduce a new subcategory, discourse management which functions to manage and enhance interaction flow in oral defences, under the audience-oriented questions. In Table 1, each subcategory of question function is exemplified with references and authentic examples extracted from our dataset, where participants are designated as candidates (C), advisors (A), internal examiners (IE), or external examiners (EE).

The process of question recognition and assigning each question to a specific function subcategory was not a straightforward task. It was accomplished manually using oral defence transcripts with reference to corresponding audio recordings, involving iterative navigation between the data and potential taxonomies of functions. Several challenges emerged during this process, and corresponding solutions were proposed. Firstly, certain question instances were multi-functional, making it challenging to assign them to a single function category. To address this, we highlighted the 'primary function' of each question instance based on the context in which it occurred (Freed, 1994, p. 625). Secondly, ambiguous cases were excluded during the categorisation process. Notably, false starts, repetitions, and self-corrections were occasionally observed but were not identified as question instances. For example, "*What's the, what's the focus of your study?*" was counted as one question. The following two types of questions were not included for discussion as not being related to the theme of this study. A directly quoted question from a thesis, for example, "like interview question 3. You say that - *after teacher shared positive story, did you feel more relaxed about writing course?*" (Oral Defence-5). Also, a question as an example to illustrate the speaker's point, for instance, "if you want to have like a qualitative interview in trying not to guide your interviewee by asking them *do you feel interested or are you bored with …*" (Oral Defence-5).

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	QUESTION FUNCTIONS	DEFINITIONS AND REFERENCES	EXAMPLES
Audience-oriented questions			
1	Discourse management	Question functions to manage and enhance interaction flow in oral defences.	(1) **IE**: and also, ***can I see slide four?*** **C:** four **(Oral Defence-2)**
2	Seeking new information	Question used to get more information and assumes that the hearer knows (Athanasiadou, 1991).	(2) **IE**: …so you need to revise it… ***what is their motivation? why do they choose Taiwan? Is it because their English is not good enough?***

				(laughs) maybe they have good English they go to Singapore? Yeah … I don't know yeah so I think this kind of information will help… **C:** Thank you prof. **(Oral Defence-1)**
3	Seeking confirmation	Question requests confirmation to check if the speaker has correctly understood what she/he has heard (Chang, 2012).	(3)	**IE:** So, another question is about discipline, you're comparing management discipline and, also applied linguistics disciplines, ***you're comparing two disciplines, right?*** **C:** Yes. **(Oral Defence-6)**
4	Seeking clarification	Question seeks additional information related to a previous utterance of the speaker either in situ or in the thesis (Freed, 1994).	(4)	**IE:** they come to Taiwan. maybe … Hong Kong … Dubai or … Singapore… ***Which country is the biggest destination? Which one? Do you know?*** **C:** About that one, prof. I don't know. I haven't checked it prof. **(Oral Defence-1)**
5	Comprehension check	Question checks the hearer's comprehension of the speaker's remarks or instructions (Crawford Camiciottoli, 2008; Thompson, 1998).	(5)	**A:** ***You just elaborate a bit more like Dr Lin and Dr Ke just suggest, okay? …*** **C:** Yes, Prof. **(Oral Defence-1)**
6	Examining question	Question invites candidate to talk about a specific issue in his/her research, such as research design, research methodology, sampling, conceptual conclusions (Trafford & Leshem, 2002).	(6)	**IE**: *I have one question,* **what's the, what's the focus of your study?** **C:** I was seeing what their beliefs [are] about foreign language learning so that… **(Oral Defence-2)**
7	Seeking common ground tag	This type of question tag is used to create common ground by signalling information uttered as shared knowledge (Schleef, 2009), and to appeal to the addressee to agree with the speaker's propositions (Chang, 2012; Thompson, 1998), but not yielding the turn to others.	(7)	**IE:** at the top [of] page 5, ***you talked about the older Chinese migrant students having the strongest instrumental motivation because learning… brra… right?*** And I don't remember that you uhm is there a similar finding in your study? because… **(Oral Defence-1)**
			(8)	**IE:** ***quite limited, right? So you cannot generalise your result anywhere, right?*** So then, if that's the case… **(Oral Defence-2)**
Content-oriented questions				
8	Rhetorical-structural question	Rhetorical-structural questions (Schleef, 2009), i.e., conversational focus questions (Freed, 1994), are pre-announcements to refer the hearer to	(9)	**IE:** ***and chapter ah this is chapter four it should be results and discussions, right?*** It should be in the plural.

		informational content contained in what the speaker is about to utter or about the direction the conversation is about to take.	**(Oral Defence-2)**
9	Pointing forward question	One or a series of real, hypothetical or open questions are used to raise one specific unresolved issue genuinely to seek information rather than anticipating a specific answer at critical points in an argument (Hyland, 2002).	(10) **IE:** think about ***how can you help them in terms of their English level? How much do you think they will improve in IOU in limited time? and then how realistic is it for them to achieve that kind of level?*** **(Oral Defence-1)** (11) **IE**: ***And do you think the results will be different if the teachers are different?*** **C:** Ah, Yes, maybe ah… **(Oral Defence-5)**
10	Rhetorical question	This type of question has the force of a strong assertion and generally indicates no answer is expected (Chen, 2018; Quirk et al., 1985).	(12) **IE:** *at the end of each section you summarise the results again, right? Then **where is where is discussion?** Discussion means you have to discuss why this is the case, right? why these seven students … responded in this way, then you have to provide a potential explanation. But I don't think I saw that.* **(Oral Defence-2)**

Table 1. Taxonomy of question functions

4. THE FINDINGS OF QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

A quantitative analysis of the frequency of questions, question forms and question functions reveals the distribution patterns of questions used by examiners, candidates and advisors in oral defences. To standardize the analysis and remove the variability in the word count across individual oral defences' question-response sessions in our dataset, Table 2 displays the frequency of questions per 1,000 words, across individual defences. They vary, ranging from 12.62 to 37.03 questions per 1,000 words, at the average of 20.82 questions per 1,000 words. Furthermore, it reveals that the longer oral defence question-response sessions do not necessarily produce higher frequency of question instances. For example, the longest oral defence in the dataset, Oral Defence-4, with 8,482 words, has only 15.09 per 1,000 words, which is lower than the average of 20.82 questions per 1,000 words. Conversely, Oral Defence-5, with 3,646 words, has 37.03 questions per 1,000 words, the highest question frequency in the dataset.

DATASET	NUMBER OF WORDS	FREQ. OF QUESTIONS	FREQ. OF QUESTIONS/ 1,000 WORDS
Oral Defence-1	8,368	183	21.87
Oral Defence-2	7,591	152	20.02
Oral Defence-3	3,328	42	12.62
Oral Defence-4	8,482	128	15.09
Oral Defence-5	3,646	135	37.03
Oral Defence-6	1,857	34	18.31
Total	**33,272**	**674**	**Average 20.82**

Table 2. The frequency of questions per 1,000 words across individual oral defences in the TCTD

Table 3 shows the proportions of questions and frequency of questions/1,000 words across participant roles in TCTD, with a total of 674 occurrences of questions across six oral defences. Over 80 per cent of all questions posed by IE and EE reflect their chief role of questioner in oral defence question-response sessions. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that candidates (12.31%) and advisors (6.23%) who are not typically expected to pose questions in oral defences, also asked questions. It appears there are no regulations to prohibit advisors from questioning and taking part in discussions of oral defences in those four universities in Taiwan where TCTD was collected. How and why candidates and advisors pose questions in oral defences are qualitatively discussed further in subsections 5.4. and 5.5. However, when observing the last column in Table 3, which indicates the frequency of questions per 1,000 words across participant roles, it is interesting to note that candidates appear to use questions (26.11) slightly less frequently than IE (28.32) and EE (27.06) do. In terms of word contribution percentage across distinct participant roles, the advisor's usage is surprisingly higher, at 31.03% compared to EE's 25.77%.

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PARTICIPANTS	FREQUENCY OF QUESTIONS	PERCENTAGE OF QUESTIONS	NUMBERS OF WORDS	WORD CONTRIBUTION %	FREQ. OF QUESTIONS/ 1,000 WORDS
Candidate	83	12.31%	3,179	9.55%	26.11
Advisor	42	6.23%	10,324	31.03%	4.07
Internal examiner (IE)	317	47.04%	11,195	33.65%	28.32
External examiner (EE)	232	34.42%	8,574	25.77%	27.06
Total	674	100.00%	33,272	100.00%	Average 21.39

Table 3. Proportions of questions and frequency of questions/1,000 words across participant roles in TCTD

Table 4 shows that distinct participant roles contribute very differently in terms of words across individual oral defences. For example, advisors' contributions range

from 0% to 23% of the total word count. Candidates have a range of 19-38%, while examiners have a more expanded range from 9% to 56%.

Dataset	Advisor	%	Candidate	%	Internal examiner (IE)	%	External examiner (EE)	%	Total	%
Oral Defence-1	544	6.50%	1,575	18.82%	4,655	55.63%	1,594	19.05%	8,368	100.00%
Oral Defence-2	88	1.16%	2,676	35.25%	2,067	27.23%	2,760	36.36%	7,591	100.00%
Oral Defence-3	369	11.09%	1,263	37.95%	1,385	41.62%	311	9.34%	3,328	100.00%
Oral Defence-4	1,944	22.92%	2,966	34.97%	1,675	19.75%	1,897	22.37%	8,482	100.00%
Oral Defence-5	232	6.36%	1,193	32.72%	1,075	29.48%	1,146	31.43%	3,646	100.00%
Oral Defence-6	2	0.11%	651	35.06%	338	18.20%	866	46.63%	1,857	100.00%
TOTAL	3,179		10,324		11,195		8,574		33,272	

Table 4. The percentage of words contributed by distinct roles across individual oral defences in TCTD

Regarding the overall distribution of question forms, Table 5 shows that yes/no questions (32.79%), question tags (26.71%), wh-questions (18.55%), and declarative questions (17.21%) constitute approximately 96% of all question instances, while alternative questions and incomplete questions count for less than 5%. Table 5 also reveals that the preferences of question forms are varied among distinct participant roles. Both IE and EE particularly favour yes/no questions and question tags (58-59%), wh-questions and declarative questions (36-37%), while alternative questions and incomplete questions are relatively less favoured? (4-5%). For advisor, yes/no questions are the majority (46%), wh-questions and question tags (44%) are second. Although candidates prefer yes/no questions (34%) and declarative questions and question tags (53%), wh-questions (12%) are relatively less preferred compared with those used by examiners and advisors.

	Question forms	Candidate		Advisor		Internal examiner (IE)		External examiner (EE)		Total number	
		Raw	%	Raw	%	Raw	%	Raw	%	Raw	%
1	Declarative questions	23	27.06%	3	7.32%	46	14.79%	44	18.57%	116	17.21%
2	Wh-questions	10	11.76%	7	17.07%	67	21.54%	41	17.30%	125	18.55%

3	Question tags	22	25.88%	11	26.83%	90	28.94%	57	24.05%	180	26.71%
4	Yes/No questions	29	34.12%	19	46.34%	92	29.58%	81	34.18%	221	32.79%
5	Alternative questions	0	0.00%	1	2.44%	13	4.18%	11	4.64%	25	3.71%
6	Incomplete questions	1	1.18%	0	0.00%	3	0.96%	3	1.27%	7	1.04%
	TOTAL	85	100.00%	41	100.00%	311	100.00%	237	100.00%	674	100.00%

Table 5. Distribution of question forms in TCTD

In the aspect of question functions, Table 6 shows the prevalence (95%) of audience-oriented questions that occur with distinct participant roles frequently interacting, seeking confirmation, seeking clarification, seeking common ground tags, and managing oral defence interaction, but seldom asking for new information, checking comprehension, or examining questions. Despite that, individual participant roles are found to have their own unique favourite selections of question functions. Both committee members predominantly ask for clarification (31-37%) and confirmation (22-27%), but, surprisingly, seldom seek new information from candidates (4-7%), check comprehension (4-9%), or pose formal examine questions (1-2%), such as "*what's the focus of your study?*" (OD-2). Similar to committee members, advisors seek confirmation (33%) and clarification (26%), while candidates mainly ask for confirmation (54%). Regardless of their distinct roles, all participants strive to build common ground with their interlocutors, by using seeking common ground tags (9-17%), to maintain interpersonal relationships with others. Advisors and candidates appear to pay more attention to managing oral defence interaction as their questions for the function of discourse management (19-20%) are almost twice as common as examiners' (6-13%). On the other hand, only 5% of all questions are content-oriented questions used to deliver information to others, instead of seeking information from them.

The prevalent use of questions seeking confirmation and clarification shows that IE and EE meticulously examine specific parts that were not clearly or sufficiently discussed in candidates' theses, while they rarely sought new information, checked comprehension, or asked examining questions, as indicated by Trafford and Leshem (2002). On the contrary, candidates' questions heavily focus on seeking confirmation from committee and advisors and occasionally relate to discourse management. Like committee examiners and candidates, advisors tend to ask questions seeking confirmation and clarification, as well as for discourse management.

The above suggests that distinct participant roles do have their own preferences in utilising questions that might enable them to achieve their own communicative purposes and fulfil their specific participant roles and duties in oral defences.

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Question functions	Candidate		Advisor		Internal examiner		External examiner		Total	
	Fre	%	Fre	%	Fre	%	Fre	%	Fre	%
Audience-oriented questions	**78**	**94%**	**41**	**97%**	**295**	**93%**	**223**	**96%**	**637**	**94%**
1. Seeking confirmation	45	54%	14	33%	85	27%	52	22%	196	**29%**
2. Seeking clarification	2	2%	11	26%	98	31%	86	37%	197	**29%**
3. Seeking common ground tags	13	16%	5	12%	54	17%	21	9%	93	**14%**
4. Discourse management	17	20%	8	19%	18	6%	29	13%	72	**11%**
5. Seeking new information	1	1%	1	2%	23	7%	10	4%	35	**5%**
6. Comprehension check	0	0%	2	5%	13	4%	21	9%	36	**5%**
7. Examining questions	0	0%	0	0%	4	1%	4	2%	8	**1%**
Content-oriented questions	**5**	**6%**	**1**	**2%**	**22**	**6%**	**9**	**3%**	**37**	**5%**
8. Rhetorical-structural questions	4	5%	1	2%	4	1%	5	2%	14	**2%**
9. Pointing forward questions	0	0%	0	0%	14	4%	1	0%	15	**2%**
10. Rhetorical questions	1	1%	0	0%	4	1%	3	1%	8	**1%**
TOTAL	83	100%	42	100%	317	100%	232	100%	674	**100%**

Table 6. Proportions of question functions used by distinct participant roles in TCTD

5. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

To explore how examiners, candidates, and advisors contribute to shaping the discourse of question-response sessions in master's thesis oral defences through their use of questions in ELF universities, the present qualitative discourse analysis directs attention towards the predominant question functions used by distinct participant roles. This builds upon the quantitative analysis findings presented earlier. Through meticulous discourse analysis of the extensive context of these questions, five noteworthy interaction patterns and characteristics exhibited among different participant roles are discerned. This advances our understanding of how participants, through the use of questions, fulfil their distinct institutional roles and dynamic interpersonal communicative purposes in oral defences.

5.1. Responsible and skilful examiners

In TCTD, the most prevalent question function is examiners seeking candidates' responses to clarify unclear points in their theses. This appears to function as a polite approach employed by examiners to indicate deficiencies and inadequacies in candidates' work, which might have hindered the effective communication of ideas in their theses.

As illustrated in Example (1), rather than overtly pinpointing an ambiguous part in the candidate's research method, EE employs a subtle approach by inquiring, "*Is this motivational program an addition, or does it replace some traditional method?*" (lines 1-2), inviting the candidate to explain it further. This strategic use of questioning not only endeavours to preserve the candidate's dignity but also mitigates the 'face-threatening act' of signalling deficiencies in the thesis (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Furthermore, throughout this small questioning on this specific issue (lines 1-14), both EE and candidate seem to cooperatively build rapport, fostering a positive and harmonious relationship. When the candidate politely requests the EE to repeat their question (line 3), the EE promptly and skilfully employs various polite tactics to ensure the candidate fully comprehends it. The EE consistently reiterates the questions, such as, "*you have a motivational material, right?*" and "*writing programs also have some standard traditional methods, right?*" (lines 4, 6, 7). Via these question tags, EE is patiently and carefully building up more shared knowledge with the candidate to help them to comprehend the question better. Furthermore, EE tends to be thoughtful towards the candidate by condensing an expected answer into a yes or no question, "*does it replace some of the old programs?*" (line 7), and repeats the same question explicitly, but in Chinese (你有沒有取代傳統的方法?) (line 8), ensuring complete comprehension for the native Chinese-speaking candidate. After the candidate responds negatively (line 9), EE transforms their question into a confirmation-seeking mode, asking, "*So this is just additional, just new material, added material?*" (line 10) and "*So the traditional … you still teach the traditional?*" (line 12), confirming their grasp of the candidate's clarification. The candidate confirms as expected (line 11, 13).

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Example (1) (Extracted from Oral Defence-5)

1	EE:	I see … motivational program. So ***is this motivational program an addition, or does it***
2		***replace some traditional method?***
3	C:	Sorry. Can you say again?
4	EE:	Um … okay. You have … ***you have a motivational material, right?***
5	C:	Uh huh.
6	EE:	But this is a writing program, so ***writing programs also have some standard traditional***
7		***methods, right?*** … so this new program, ***does it replace some of the old programs?***
8		你有沒有取代傳統的方法? [does it replace some of the old programs?]
9	C:	Ah … no
10	EE:	***So this is just additional, just new material, added material?***

11	C:	Yes.
12	EE:	Added material. I see. Okay. ***So the traditional … you still teach the traditional?***
13	C:	Ah … yeah.
14	EE:	I see. Okay. Good…

5.2. Dynamic cooperative alliances among committee members and candidates

In oral defences, most of the time, IE and EE collaboratively form a union examining the candidate while they might work in alliance with the candidate to solve communication failures in order to let the questioning move on (Examples (2) & (3)).

Example (2) (Oral Defence-2)

1	IE:	I have one question on page 28
2	C:	28
3	IE:	… briefly … to learn foreign language. ***Why … did you particularly mention***
4		***environment and culture here?***
5	C:	no actually it's the same with … the table on page 27, item 26.
6	IE:	item 26
7	C:	not 26 sorry. Items 11 and 7… so I just summarise actually this table.
8	IE:	ah … okay
9	C:	yes so this is from the table
10	IE:	ah that's what you meant
11	C:	no, not from the other
12	IE:	okay
13	EE:	so supposed as can be seen in table 4.4
14	IE:	Um … okay

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In Example (2), EE and the candidate temporarily form a union against IE's question: "*Why did you particularly mention environment and culture here?*" (lines 3-4). "*Okay*" (line 8) and "*that's what you meant*" (line 10) signal IE's satisfaction with the candidate's responses that environment and culture were two items taken from a specific table mentioned earlier (lines 5, 7, 9). However, IE is suddenly confounded by the candidate's subsequent negative response: "*no, not from the other*" (line 11), denying previous positive remarks. To resolve this confusion, EE jumps in to help the candidate re-confirm that environment and culture were quoted from Table xx (line 13). "*Okay*" (line 14) signals IE's understanding and resolves the mis-communication between IE and the candidate to let the examining continue.

Example (3) (Oral Defence-2)

1	EE:	this person prior to teaching experience … find out who is actually that person and…
2	C:	***so you mean I make it a more specific one, like who chose this item and why he disagrees***
3		***with that belief?***

4	EE:	***… I am thinking you need to add to the discussion, right?***
5	IE:	right
6	EE:	that part can enrich your discussion. Otherwise, now, I mean the current form … make your
7		discussion in depth and interesting or in depth, I think you can move to the directions
8	IE:	it takes forever [ALL: laughter]
9	EE:	and I don't know probably to do with gender because … ***Is that to do with gender?***
10	C:	well thank you about that
11	IE:	it's still your … up to you and your advisor
12	EE:	I just give you some suggestions
13	C:	but that's a really good suggestion. Thank you, Prof.
14	EE:	Yeah, you can discuss and as I told you how you would like to modify.

In Example (3), IE and the candidate momentarily cooperate against EE's suggestion. EE endeavours to convince the candidate to illustrate with more details of the informants' teaching experience (lines 1, 4, 6-7). EE intends to build some common ground with the candidate, saying: "*I am thinking you need to add to the discussion, right?*" (line 4). After that, EE points forward for a further study focus with another question: "*Is that to do with gender?*" (line 9). On the contrary, IE disagrees with EE trying to take them back on track, saying: "*it takes forever*" (line 8), and even outspokenly reminds the candidate that: "*it's still your … up to you and your advisor*" (line 11). Eventually, EE stops but once again attempts to convince the candidate to accept their suggestions to modify the thesis.

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5.3. Examiners as discourse managers of oral defences

Example (4) reveals that committee members also pay attention to watching and managing the flow of a question-response session while questioning the candidate.

Example (4) (Oral Defence-1)

1	EE:	So we … ***any further questions for chapter two and chapter three?*** No. Okay so
2	IE:	***Are you okay [name of the candidate]?***
3	C:	Thank you, Prof.
4	EE:	Finally, we can go to chapter four and chapter five and
5	IE:	Alright, so on page 25…

After discussing Chapters Two and Three, EE politely checks with IE whether it is time to move on to a new chapter, asking "*any further questions for chapter two and chapter three?*" (line 1). As soon as it is confirmed that s/he has no further questions, IE draws attention to the candidate, "*Are you okay?*" (line 2), friendlily addressing the candidate by their first name in an attempt to reduce the tension between examiners and defender in the question-response session. After the candidate's polite response, "*Thank you, Prof.*", the committee members move their questioning on to the next chapter.

5.4. Advisor as arbiter in a communication deadlock

Although questioning the candidate is their most prominent obligation, committee members occasionally receive assistance from an advisor, who most of the time remains quietly observing the interaction but does not hesitate to get involved whenever it is necessary, such as to resolve a deadlock between examiners and candidate.

Example (5) Exchange 1 (Oral Defence-1)

1	IE:	You mentioned about … relevant research migrant workers learning English … at the
2		top of page 5 you talked about the older Chinese migrant students having the strongest
3		instrumental motivation because learning brra… brra… ***right?*** And I don't remember
4		that you uhm ***is there a similar finding in your study?*** because uh are older migrant
5		workers that IOU cos you mentioned about their age from twenty to forty years old.
6	C:	Yeah
7	IE:	***Do you see the same patterns?***
8	C:	Okay … I am not focusing … age of participants. I just focus on their motivation…

In Example (5), IE and the candidate have got stuck for three exchanges of question and answer on the same issue: *how the factor of age might have impacted on foreign workers' motivation in English language learning*. In Exchange 1, IE asks: "*is there a similar finding in your study?*" (line 4), '*do you see the same patterns?*" (line 7), like those findings found in studies discussed in the literature review chapter. The candidate is guided to see what IE expects them to see, but unsuccessfully. The candidate transparently indicates that *age* was not a factor discussed in their study (line 8), probably implying that comparing their findings with those of studies discussed in the literature review is not relevant.

In Exchange 2, IE does not give up and tries to build a closer relationship between what the candidate has done in the thesis and the factor of *age*, by asking: "*you did compare instrumental and integrative motivation, right?*" (line 1) and "*you say that instrumental is higher*" (line 3). After receiving the candidate's confirmation, IE once again indicates that participants' ages should have influenced their motivation to learn English. S/he carries on to ask: "*So you didn't analyse that?*" (line 8), implying that the candidate should have taken the factor of participants' ages into account. Nevertheless, the candidate still responds negatively (line 9) to IE's comments for a second time.

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Example (5) Exchange 2 (Oral Defence-1)

1	IE:	But ***you did compare instrumental and integrative motivation, right?***
2	C:	Right, right!
3	IE:	***But you say that instrumental is higher?***
4	C:	Yeah
5	IE:	overall
6	C:	yeah, overall
7	IE:	but the thing is you have students younger like 20 years old versus 40 years old. I
8		think this is quite different. ***So you didn't analyse that?***
9	C:	No. I didn't analyse their ages, Prof.

In Exchange 3, again, IE consistently strives to convince the candidate by illustrating that informants' ages do affect their motivation to learn English. "*Could it be the same or could it be the opposite?*" (line 1) brings in IE's further explanation and examples in Taiwan and Hong Kong, learning English motivation for those foreign workers who are between 20 and 40 years old is very different (lines 3-6, 8-9). Nevertheless, a simple and unclear response, "*ok*" (line 10), implies that the candidate has understood IE's comment but might not accept it. Until now, neither side seems ready to compromise or give in on this issue.

Example (5) Exchange 3 (Oral Defence-1)

1	IE:	*Could it be the same or could it be the opposite?*
2	C:	oh …
3	IE:	because Hong Kong content is different from Taiwan. … *Is it in Hong Kong?*
4		Yeah, *that was in Hong Kong, right?* … in Hong Kong English is quite important,
5		English is the 2nd language, but in Taiwan it is quite different, it is a foreign language.
6		So, it could be that for older IOU students still learning English is not for instrumental.
7	C:	Hmm
8	IE:	because they are quite old, they volunteer for a job that's not too busy … for travelling,
9		trips or like you say status, they wanna grow, they wanna be a better person. …
10	C:	Oh … ok

In Exchange 4, the advisor jumps in, in an attempt to resolve the above communication deadlock between IE and the candidate. On the one hand, the advisor endeavours to make sure that the examiner's suggestion has been received respectfully by explicitly instructing the candidate to properly include the *age* factor of informants in their study by referring to Wong's definition, which is mentioned in the literature review chapter of the candidate's thesis. On the other hand, the advisor also carefully maintains solidarity and common ground with the candidate, by posing a question tag: "*You say older migrant Chinese students, right?*" (line 2), before asking for new information: "*so how does Wong define older?*" (line 4), which is apparently not available in the thesis nor known to the candidate. To respond to the advisor's instructions, initially the candidate appears to have an uncertain attitude, "*Oh … OK, Prof.*" (line 3), but eventually offers assurance and acceptance: "*Yes, Prof.*" (line 7). Until this stage, the above deadlock is successfully resolved by the advisor who came in to speak for IE by giving the candidate definite instructions to amend problematic parts of the thesis.

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Example (5) Exchange 4 (Oral Defence-1)

1	A:	Maybe you could check Wong's study and make sure age is mentioned here.
2		*You say older migrant Chinese students, right?*
3	C:	Oh … OK, prof.
4	A:	*so how does Wong define older?* Go back and check the reference again and see
5		the age definition. And do whatever Dr XX just suggested so you can tell whether age
6		is important or a crucial factor that influences their motivation types
7	C:	Yes, Prof.

5.5. Candidates' questions

In oral defences, a candidate does pose questions, predominantly to certify their approach to the examiners' queries, comments and instructions in order to respond to them properly and accurately.

Example (6) (Oral Defence-4)

1	C:	maybe I should include my observation note too [entertain] because according to my observation,
2		she is really an active learner. She never, she was never late for my TA sessions …
3	EE:	Yeah, I think we need that kind of support.
4	C:	***More, right?***
5	EE:	Yeah … to sort of … triangulate.
6	C:	Oh, I see, I see.
		…
7	IE:	Right, and also because it's, it's a case by case, you present it case by case. Then I … actually was
8		jumping back and forth to try to understand.
9	C:	***How I define?***
10	IE:	The coding, yeah, yeah. The coding system, because uh … the example presented … on page 37.
11		Even that um … you, you provide an example of an active learner. I also want to know so what's a …
12		***what are other possible themes? Can you provide … maybe … my suggestion would be to provide a***
13		***more complete coding system.***
14	C:	***Like a sheet?***
15	IE:	Maybe in the appendix.
16	C:	Oh … 24.

In Example (6), in the extensive process of questioning, the candidate occasionally takes a turn to seek the examiners' confirmation that s/he has understood their ideas precisely by posing short questions: "*more, right?*" (line 4), "*how I define?*" (line 9), and "*like a sheet?*" (line 14). The candidate's queries immediately receive examiners' responses, either confirmation: "*yeah … to sort of … triangulate*" (line 5), "*the coding, yeah yeah*" (line 10), or correction: "*maybe in the appendix*" (line 15). Subsequently, the candidate signals their comprehension of the examiners: "*Oh, I see, I see*" (line 6), "*Oh …*" (line 16), to end these short exchanges seeking the examiners' confirmation in a question-response session.

6. CONCLUSION

Drawing on the study of questions in oral defences in the context of English as L1 (Mežek & Swales, 2016; Trafford, 2003; Trafford & Leshem, 2008), this research has added important findings to our understanding of question-response sessions for

English-medium master's thesis defences in Taiwan universities, in the context of English as an academic lingua franca. A wide distribution of questions throughout the TCTD attests to questions being a vital rhetorical device that enables participants to achieve their dynamic communicative purposes and to fulfil their distinct participant roles and duties in oral defences. To our surprise, instead of being strict and rigorous, committee members patiently and masterfully manipulate the use of questions by repeating, rephrasing, explaining, simplifying, and justifying them, striving to assist the candidate to fully comprehend their questions and appropriately respond to them; and whenever necessary, they temporarily form an alliance with the candidate to resolve communication barriers so as to facilitate a smooth examining process. As for their counterpart, instead of being a passive defender, the candidate interactively engages in a question-response session by asking for clarification of their understanding of the examiners' questions in order to answer them appropriately. Finally, the advisor is not merely a hushed spectator but an active and impressive authority dealing with communication deadlocks between committee members and the candidate.

While carrying out their institutional roles and duties, individual participants strategically establish diverse and dynamic interpersonal relationships with others. Thus, animated interaction patterns are co-constructed throughout question-response sessions accordingly. When performing their academic personas as repositories of expertise and questioners in a conflict relationship with the defender, committee members attempt to show their caring and friendly aspects as human beings, establishing interpersonal relationships with the candidate by lowering the tension, the seriousness, of a high-stakes academic event. On the other hand, the candidate also carefully strives to build interpersonal relationships with committee members by finding common ground and unity when responding to them. Finally, the advisor is particularly careful to maintain a harmonic relationship in oral defences by ensuring that committee members' questions and comments are respected and the candidate clearly understands how to follow up when being an arbitrator between examiners and a candidate.

Building on previous studies on the interpersonal dynamics of oral defenses (Don & Izadi, 2011; Mežek, 2018; Recski, 2005), the present research reveals persistent efforts of committee members, candidates, and advisors to foster harmonious relationships and cultivate shared understanding, despite the inherent conflict and tension among their distinct participant roles. Such concerted efforts are undertaken with the aim of facilitating and fulfilling their various institutional duties and dynamic communicative purposes in oral defences.

This study distils the interactional characteristics of question-response sessions in oral defences to make them more transparent for non-native English-speaking participants to understand and take part in them in the context of English as an academic lingua franca in higher education. Furthermore, contributing to prior research endeavours focused on the development of taxonomies outlining question forms and functions within conversational contexts (Athanasiadou, 1991; Freed,

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1994) and academic lectures (Chang, 2012; Chen, 2018; Schleef, 2009), this study extends the scholarly discourse by examining question-response sessions in English-medium master's thesis defences in ELF Taiwanese universities. Notably, the analytical framework employed in the study is transferable and can be applied to similar datasets, enhancing its utility and relevance beyond the specific context studied here. Nevertheless, this study relies on a limited, discipline-specific dataset, so further research integrating data from diverse academic domains would enhance the generalisability and provide novel insights into disciplinary norms of oral defences. Furthermore, exploring committees' and candidates' perceptions of their question use would significantly contribute to legitimising the interpretation of their functions.

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Appendix 1

Proportions of domestic and international students in higher education in Taiwan
from 2015 to 2023

Year	Domestic	%	International students	%
2015-2016	1,234,979	98.74%	15,775	1.26%
2016-2017	1,213,757	98.56%	17,759	1.44%
2017-2018	1,183,056	98.24%	21,135	1.76%
2018-2019	1,158,164	97.62%	28,294	2.38%
2019-2020	1,129,231	97.27%	31,678	2.73%
2020-2021	1,114,726	97.21%	31,955	2.79%
2021-2022	1,102,161	96.97%	34,475	3.03%
2022-2023	1,060,065	96.77%	35,407	3.23%
Overall increase/decrease %	-16.50%		55.45%	

Appendix 2

Data and participant demographics

Data	No. of words	Duration of Q & A (minutes)	Candidate	Advisor	Internal examiner	External examiner
Oral Defence-1	8,368	56	Indonesia	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan
Oral defence-2	7,591	42	Indonesia	Taiwan	Japan	Taiwan
Oral defence-3	3,328	18	Philippines	Taiwan	Taiwan	Hong Kong
Oral defence-4	8,482	66	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan	Hong Kong
Oral defence-5	3,646	65	Philippines	Taiwan	Taiwan	Taiwan
Oral defence-6	1,857	26	Gambia	Taiwan	Japan	Hong Kong
TOTAL	**33,272**	**273**				

Appendix 3

Taxonomy of question forms

	Question forms	Explanation	Examples
1	Declarative questions	A statement with a rising tone to seek responses (Swan, 2005).	(13) **EE:** *But then you say that they use the same language to instruct?* **C:** Sure…yes… (OD-6)
2	Wh-questions	Wh-question with or without auxiliary verbs (Biber et al., 1999, p. 206).	(14) **EE:** *Why do you think it is a cross-cultural study?* (OD-6)
3	Question tags	A question tag, such as right, okay is attached to a declarative form, usually with a rising tone in the end to seek confirmation or solidarity (Biber et al., 1999, p. 206).	(15) **EE:** *They also can ask questions, right?* (OD-3)
4	Yes/No questions	Yes/ No questions with auxiliaries (do, does, did, to be) and with modal auxiliaries (can, could, might, etc.). Yes/no-questions are also frequently elliptic in which the verb is missing (e.g. '[Are] You alright?'); or both	(16) **IE:** *Does it look systematic?* (OD-4)

	Question forms	Explanation	Examples
		the verb and the subject are omitted (e.g. '[Have you] Got what you want?') (Biber et al., 1999, p. 206).	
5	Alternative questions	Alternative questions include yes/no and wh-alternative questions (Biber et al., 1999, p. 206).	(17) **EE:** *Do they also have a role here or you only think that future investment?* (OD-4)
6	Incomplete questions	An incomplete statement, phrase or word is ended with a pause and rising or falling intonation to seek the addressee to provide information to complete (Chang, 2012).	(18) **S:** *Explain… uh…* (a pause)? **EE:** Uh, where did you use. **A:** And how did you use it? **S:** How did … uh… let me find example. (OD-4)

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