

# A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION IN MA THESIS ORAL EXAMINATION: REFLECTIONS FROM ETHIOPIA

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## ABSTRACT

*Teacher-student interaction is supposed to be harmonious since it plays an important role in the development of research in higher academic institutions. However, in Ethiopia, teacher-student interaction in the context of MA thesis oral examination remains a serious problem and many conflicts and misunderstandings among instructors and students were reported. This critical discourse analysis study highlights the relations of power in teacher-student interaction in the context of MA thesis oral examination sessions at University of Gondar which is one of the first generation universities in Ethiopia. Five oral examination sessions were audio-recorded and interview sessions with three teachers and three students were conducted to substantiate the audio data. Both the audio and the interview data were transcribed and then analyzed based on Furlough's (1995) critical discourse analysis model. Based on the analysis, teachers were found powerful authorities in mistreating students by abusing their power. Students on the other hand were found inferior to teachers who were unable to play their discursive role in presenting their research papers. It is thus recommended that teachers and students in this academic events need to create harmonious relation that would help them to freely share their research experiences. Teachers also should create a conducive atmosphere for students during oral examination sessions so that students can present their research work freely and confidently.*

**Key Words:** Critical discourse analysis, teacher-student interaction, oral examination

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As partial fulfillment of the requirements for a university degree, writing thesis and defending it in public has been a long-standing practice in higher academic institutions. Accordingly, MA students are required to write their theses on relevant issues and present their work orally in public. Oral events are extremely important to university students who often come to face uncertainty regarding how the work will be received by the academic authorities assigned to determine the value of students' written and oral performances (Tinkler and Jackson, 2004).

There is much we do not know about the discourse features and power in MA thesis oral examination sessions as an academic rite and a special form of academic communication. As to the researcher's understanding of the area, the discourse features and power relations of this communication genre remain unstudied. There are indeed scholars who contend that researches done on the characteristics and structures of written dissertations have received considerable attention than researches done on oral examinations. Still researches which have been conducted from the discourse perspective are limited to a small number (Burling, 1997; Grimshaw, 1989; Grimshaw & Burke, 1994; Hartley, 2000).

In the efforts to locate prior local researches done on the area, the researcher could find out only few works worthy to the purpose of the present research. For example, Zewdu (2012) conducted a research to investigate the research culture of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University. His focus of investigation was the technical issues involved through the entire process of postgraduate training in the department (Zewdu, 2012). Wosenu (2009) also carried out a quantitative research on the examiners' questioning and the relevance of questions in PhD defense in the context of the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Addis Ababa University. Yekoyealm and Belay (2015) studied graduate student supervision in AAU with special reference to the perceived case of advisee-advisor credibility. Habtamu (2015) investigated challenges of PhD Dissertation Supervision at AAU: Education, Humanities, and Social Sciences in Focus. These studies, however, did not address the oral aspect of MA thesis examination.

In addition, to the best of the researcher's understanding, the discourse of teacher-student interaction in MA thesis oral examination sessions in the context of Ethiopian higher academic institutions remains an unexplored territory. Globally also, researches related to the actual characteristics of teacher-student interaction in oral examination sessions are limited to a small number of studies (Burling, 1997; Grimshaw, 1994). Thus, to partially contribute to the knowledge gap in the field, this study focuses on the interactive conditions that prevail in MA thesis oral examination sessions which are conducted at the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Gondar which is one of the first generation universities in Ethiopia. As far as the researcher's assessment is concerned, no research study

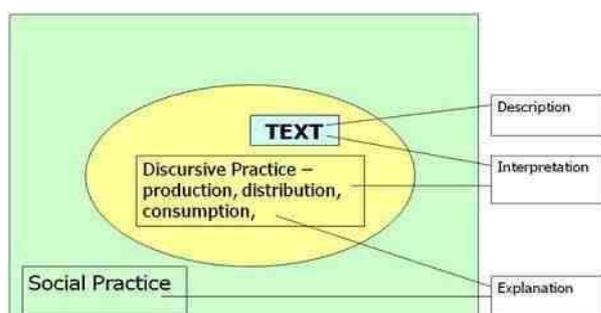
in this area is conducted locally, and nothing is known about this oral academic communication genre and the processes involved in the oral examination of MA thesis in Ethiopian higher academic institutions. Therefore, the study will shed light on how oral examination sessions offer the academic discourse community useful information regarding the nature of teacher-student relations in such kind of academic communicative event in Ethiopian higher academic institutions.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 2.1 What does the power relation between teachers and students in MA thesis oral examination look like?
- 2.2 How does the power relation affect the practice of MA thesis oral examination and the postgraduate research?
- 2.3 how do teachers and students in MA thesis oral presentation sessions organize their talk in their interaction?

## 3. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis is the theoretical as well as a methodological framework which sees discourse and discourse analysis as: *a text* (level of textual description), *a discursive practice* (level of interpretation) and, *a social practice* (level of explanation) exploring not only the text itself but also its production and interpretation within a larger social context. Any discursive "event" (i.e. any instance of discourse) is simultaneously a piece of text, an instance of discursive practice and an instance of social practice.



**Figure 1:** Fairclough's three-dimensional model for discourse analysis (Source: Fairclough 1995:98)

The **text** dimension is the language analysis of texts. Fairclough (1989: 106) also presented what he called a 'mini reference manual' in the form of a list of questions and sub-questions. The major divisions are as follows:

- What experiential values do words and grammatical features have?
- What relational values do words and grammatical features have? What expressive values do words and grammatical features have? What metaphors are used?
- What interactional conventions are used?
- What larger scale structures does the text have? How are (simple) sentences linked together?

Each of these questions has a set of sub-questions. For example, the question "How are simple sentences linked together?" has a detail of questions as:

- What types of process and participant predominate?
- Is agency unclear?
- Are processes what they seem? Are nominalizations used?
- Are sentences active or passive? Are sentences positive or negative?

The **discursive practice** dimension involves processes of text production, distribution, and consumption which specifies the nature of the processes of text production and interpretation, for example, which types of discourse are drawn upon and how they are combined.

The **social practice** dimension deals with issues that are important for social analysis such as the institutional circumstances of the discursive event (i.e. the discourse of research presentation) and how that shapes the nature of the discursive practice and the constitutive effects of discourse (Fairclough, 2003:16). So the social theory of discourse can start to account for the relationships between texts, discursive practices and wider social and cultural dimensions, and thus can show how the production and reception of texts are ideologically shaped by relations of power.

#### 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Teachers and MA students in the Department of English Language and Literature, UoGare participants of this study. Five MA thesis oral examination

sessions were randomly selected, audio-recorded and transcribed. Three instructors and three students were also interviewed regarding the nature of oral examination sessions which is intended to validate the audio data. Finally, after major discourse themes were identified, analysis was made based on Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis Model.

#### 5. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

##### 5.1 Analysis of Teacher-Student Power Relations

The interpretation of asymmetry in discourse studies has been based on the unequal opportunities given to individuals and institutions to access resources (Fairclough, 1989, 1992; Van-Dijk, 1995). This situation is certainly found to be true in this study. In teacher-student interaction, the asymmetrical relation is manifested as a form of: teachers' alignment with the institutional authority, teachers as experts, and students' submission to teachers' authorities which are presented in the subsequent analyses as follows.

##### 5.1.1 Teachers' Alignment with Institutional Authority

In this study, teachers were found to align with the institution's authority. This is evident in their comments with pronouns. They used them with the aim of giving credibility to: the performance of self through the use of the first-person singular *I*; the performance of self within the institution through the use of the first person plural *we*; and the performance of exclusion of the student through the use of pronoun *you* in subjective and objective forms (Fairclough, 1989). How teachers used them through their comments and questions is presented in the following extracts.

- a) The use of the first person plural *WE*

*(Extract 1)*

No leave it please. I am bored with what you are saying now. This is just to help you. Now, the problem is **we teachers**. The institution provides **us** great responsibility. Offering an MA qualification is great authority. At the same time, it is great

responsibility. However, **we** could not compromise the two. This is what **I** always try to comment on. Anyway, if you have questions, you can ask.

(Taken from audio-recording 2)

The teacher's self-presentation through the institutional **we** invokes the academic authority through a linkage to a larger unspecified entity (Fairclough, 1989, 1992). The pronoun **we** is also used as a persuasive device through the institutional role of the teacher. The institutional power is baldly mentioned as a source of the teacher's power that the teacher is provided with the responsibility of evaluative decision on the student's work. **The problem is we teachers** above attributes it to a source that is beyond him which is also evident from the extract above **the institution provides us great responsibility**. The teacher asserts that he is responsible and authorized to offer MA degree to students. This can be understood as a power that adjusts the teacher's examining role with the institution, which gives him the power to assert his claims and convince the student to accept his comments.

Here, the teacher's use of the first-person plural **we in we could not compromise the two sets** the oral examination in the wider context of the university. Not the teacher alone, the teacher's alignment with the institution is responsible for the candidate's better performance, as was the case in the previous example. This implies that the collective authority of the institution strengthens the teacher's individual authority and that the two cannot really be differentiated. Of course, since the institution does not exist without teachers, it could be argued that the examining role is attributed with the institution.

In the following extract, the examiner shifts from **we to I** which is his examining role. Fowler and Kress (1979) suggest that power relations may be acted in the alternative use of personal pronouns, which are under scored by the different roles a person plays in a social context. The first person singular **I**, a sin **I was in academic commission for a long time** in the above extract seem store in force his role as, I, the examiner, has a long experience on the issue, so I am in a position to give you what you should do in your future work. Though it is a comment, which does not demand a response from the candidate, the fact that the candidate did not say anything about this speech

act of self indicates his co-operation in this a symmetrical framework of teacher-student interaction.

(Extract 2)

T: ...an academic agenda. So they follow the university's legislation. **I** was in Academic Commission for a long time. So most of the agenda was about student and teacher affairs. Nothing else except this. Now do you mean?

What does language use look like?  
You know it shouldn't be what speech  
acts say this and that something like that.

(Taken from audio-recording 1)

(Extract 3)

T:  
Don't be fixed. Your advisors and I asked the coordinator. It is better to  
call for a meeting because our students read variety of materials  
however, they struggle to take their research towards the postivist  
paradigm but that is not the case.

(Taken from audio-recording 1)

The teacher's utterance above also suggested that a call for a meeting regarding failure in postgraduate research is urgent and he has the role to initiate the meeting with the MA students' advisors which is an aspect of maximizing his credibility which otherwise has no relation to the agenda at issue.

The term "You" is an indefinite pronoun, which has a relational value in interaction referring to people in general (Fairclough, 1989:180). In MA thesis oral examination sessions, teachers were found to use this pronoun frequently to address their comments and criticisms to students.

(Extract 4)

T: Coming to chapter two, four pages!  
Four pages of review!  
Wow surprising! Other papers rather the review is bigger. So much to review you know that in other papers, the review tends to be fifteen to twenty pages. So much! Four pages! What happened to **you**?

S: You know the problem is I  
confined much of the studies done on the

Nile and I have been told by  
**my**  
**advisor** to concentrate on  
 studies on the Nile  
 discourse.

T: **You** have four pages of  
 Literature which is  
 too little. Because  
**you** don't have  
 enough materials to  
 start.

S: Yeah.

T: So this is a short coming.  
 Somaybe what connecti  
 on the literature review  
 what  
 people have talked about  
 methods dealing with.  
 Because **your** table of co  
 ntents, **your** bibliograph  
 y at the end is big, a lot!

(Taken from audio-recording 1)

It is evident in the university legislation  
 that PhD candidates conduct their researches under the  
 supervision of their advisors (UoG Legislation, 2015). Advi  
 sors are also responsible to  
 advise their students and confirm for their thesis when their w  
 orks are mature enough for defense. Accordingly, the  
 thesis is not only the candidate's own work  
 but also the work of the advisor. This being the case,  
 the repetitive use of the pronoun **you** shows that it is only the  
 student who took all the  
 responsibilities to the work as clearly depicted from the teach  
 ers' comments and criticisms in the extract above.

The above extract shows that the candidate presented his pil  
 ot report with a review section of four  
 pages. The size of this section clearly shows a  
 short coming in the candidate's report that there is a  
 departmental convention, which limits the size of a review s  
 ection for an M A thesis. The teacher in his  
 utterance showed his surprise for the deficiency with  
 hyperbolic tone as in the extract **four pages!** to which the  
 teacher added in his comment that the average size of the pap  
 er had to be fifteen to twenty pages. **Waw!** (Sign of  
 great surprise) **Four pages! What happen to  
 you?** (With great surprise). In the  
 examiners' turns above, however, the comments simply  
 an exclusion of the  
 student and inclusion of the student's advisor who is also  
 responsible for the quality of the

thesis. This indirectly implies that teachers claim a  
 common ground with advisor-ship identity or they  
 include the advisor-  
 ship role whereas they exclude the role of student-  
 ship which may imply polarization toward the institutional  
 role.

(Extract 5)

T: We will come to the details later. You have some general ques  
 tions.

You will come to the detail.

S: Uhhhm

T: Let me give him one example. He  
 said that he was correct but told  
 him that he was not correct and he should do it correctly. If he g  
 oes on this

way, he will never get an MA  
 degree because

I am sure, it is the wrong methodology.

S: Ok. What I did on the methodology...

T: Have you finished?

S: Ok, you can go ahead.

(Taken from audio-recording 2)

In the extract above, the teacher's performative utterance **If  
 he proceeds in this way, he will never claim an MA** can be  
 interpreted as an infelicitous commissive speech act which co  
 uld rather be mitigated as, **If you proceed in  
 this way, it will seriously affect your final work.** Austin  
 (1962:39) labeled such type of  
 speech act as "an action, which is performed without expect  
 ed thoughts or feelings motivated by  
 abuses." An abuse is an infelicitous performative utterance  
 that is committed  
 intentionally. The intention of the teacher seems just to exer  
 cise his power over the candidate as if  
 he is the only one who has the mandate to offer an  
 MA degree to the student while it is only the  
 academic institution, which is in  
 charge of executing such a  
 duty. Though there are methodological problems in the  
 student's report, in the teacher's final remark, **I am  
 sure, it is the wrong  
 methodology, I am sure** implies that there is one general rule  
 and one conventional way  
 of developing a methodology in doing research and the tea  
 cher is in control of that convention.  
 Since knowledge is distributed or not possessed by individu  
 als, the teacher could have left room to the candidate's  
 experience taming his comment, which could be

paraphrased as, “**in my opinion, as far as I am concerned, etc.**” (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

*(Extract 6 from Interview)*

Yeah, some teachers could be unnecessarily you know unfairly angry at students and may abuse for some reasons and at this time the student becomes offended.

*(Taken from teacher interview 1)*

In the previous extract above, the teacher’s utterance *he will never get an MA degree because I am sure, it is the wrong methodology* can be understood as an intimidating discursive act that the teacher used to get the candidate readily accept his views. The teacher’s comment taken from the interview data above is a confirmation to how teachers in thesis oral examination sessions abuse their power aligning their examiner role with the institutional authority.

### 5.1.2 Examiners as Experts

Teachers in MA thesis oral examination sessions were found powerful figures who claim to have complete control of the resources of research knowledge who were positioning MA students as mere recipients of their knowledge claims, that is evident in the subsequent analyses below.

*(Extract 7)*

T: Generally, I can give you the whole of the ideas here to be included. The first one is the societal background.

*(Taken from audio recording 2)*

*(Extract 8)*

T: Well, I don’t know. It is not well as good you know report at all. Even you are not aware about the table of contents. This is writing for the sake of writing yeah.

*(Taken from audio recording 2)*

In the extracts above, the teacher appears an expert who has a complete control of the knowledge of academic research. He, in his utterance used... *Generally*, which is an adverb that presupposes what he was

commenting so far was acceptable without further argument is needed. The teacher’s modal choice *can* in *I can give you* according to Halliday (1970) is a high value modal auxiliary verb which shows the examiner’s certainty of knowledge claim about the whole research issue that the student is expected to include in the background of the study. From the researcher’s observation of MA thesis oral examination, teachers’ perspectives regarding ideas that should be included in a research background differ widely. The teacher’s suggestion *I can give you the whole of the ideas* in the above extract clearly demonstrates that the teacher is the one who monopolized the knowledge of research, which is a kind of departure from the normative oral examination, which does not totally leave a little room to the student’s research experience.

The teacher’s utterance *It is not as good you know report at all. Even you are not aware about the table of contents. This is writing for the sake of writing yeah* also criticized that the work is irrelevant and poorly rated that he could not mention to label. His utterance *Well, I don’t know* intensifies the weakness which is followed by a series of criticisms that downplay the quality of the student’s work. The student seems a powerless participant of talk who is left doomed and discursively helpless, which may be seen as a forecast of bad fortune to the rating of his work. Most of the teacher’s comments *I don’t know, It is not well as good you know report at all, Even you are not aware* are negatively marked. The repetitive use of the negation implies a valuation of the teacher’s expertise by devaluing the student’s performance; in this case, the teacher magnifies his superiority on the student’s expense through egotism (Swales, 2004: 163).

### 5.1.3 Candidates’ Subordinating to Examiners’ Authority

The students’ submissive act to teachers’ authority is one of the themes which was identified as one way of revealing the nature of power relations persisting throughout teacher-student interaction in MA thesis oral examination sessions. The power relation is manifested not only by the teachers’ control of the students’ freedom of action but also when the students behave in a subordinate fashion at the same time through compliance to the teachers’ questions and

commands, which are the directive speech acts that gave teachers the right to control teacher-student interaction, but forced students to comply in accordance with their subordinaterelation to teachers (Fairclough, 1989:46).

One feature of MA students' act of submissiveness is acceptance of control. MA students were receiving the massive information given to them with no question trying to carry out the wishes and wants of examiners whether these be directly expressed through imperatives or indirectly as declarative forms as presented below.

**(Extract 9)**

T: ... so what does it talk about? Discourse analysis.

S: Discourse, DA, discourse analysis as a method and theory.

T: Let me tell you as a method and [a theory?

S: [a theory.

T: [which one did you take? As a method or as a theory?

S: [It can be used because I used discourse analysis] as a method and theory.

It is possible.

T: Both?

S: Yes, It is possible to use discourse analysis both as a method and a theory.

T: Ok, now, where is the theory aspect?

S: Theoretical framework.

T1: Theoretical framework doesn't mean that. It is not discourse analysis. It is not discourse analysis.

T2: Ok. So what?

S: Ummm

T: So please, if you accept... [time, place...

S: [No, I am ready to accept. I will accept. It is valid information. I will accept, ok.

*(Taken from audio recording 1)*

In the first line of the extract shown above, the teacher asks the student to know what issues the section discourse analysis in the thesis is dealing with. As clearly indicated in the student's answer, discourse in this particular research is used as a theory, as well as, a method. The teacher echoing the student's response trying to show that discourse analysis couldn't be selected as a method and as a theory at the same time which is evident in his utterance *let me tell you now as a method and [a*

*theory? And which one did you take? As a method, or as a theory?* The student's claim appears quite logical that discourse analysis could be used as both a theory and a method which is evident in many books written in relation to discourse analysis such as Gee's (2011) as the student mentioned in his previous responses. The student in his response seems consistent that discourse analysis could be both a theory and a method. As can be seen in the extract that the teacher forced the student to simply accept or comply with his wishes and wants. The student then accepts naively the whole issue what the teacher imposed without hesitation. The implication of the teacher's utterance *So please, if you accept...* can be understood as a precondition which obliges the student to readily accept his views which otherwise may have a negative consequence. The student's response *No, I will accept, accept. It is quite important evidence. Ok.* Also suggests a kind of submissiveness to the teacher's self-evident authoritative power that can be understood as quick withdrawal from the debate by taking greater care of addressing the face wants of the teacher which seems the student's intention of seeking the teacher's fairness in the evaluation of the student's work. Morand (2000) cited Dahl (1957) contends that subordinates are careful not to offend or infringe on those upon whom they are dependent; power relation by definition implies dependency.

**(Extract 10)**

T: Is that discourse? This is rather procedure.

S: Didn't I [try to...?]

T: [>Nonono] wait wait wait <. This is to help you learn from the comments. You are so nervous. Wait wait!

S: I, I am eager to learn. I am eager to learn because you are senior instructors.

T: [Nono.] please leave it. I am bored with this.

*(Taken from audio recording 1)*

**(Extract 11)**

T1: The chairperson didn't do this. Is that discourse? Is it a procedure?

S: Didn't I[tryto...?]  
 T1:  
 [>Nonono<]waitwaitwait.Tolearn,don'tb  
 elikethis,wait,wait.  
 T2: I,I ameagertolearn.I ameagertolearn.I  
 ameagertolearnbecause  
 youareseniorinstructors.  
 T1:[Nono.]  
 T2:  
 [Nono]Notthis,leaveitIamboredwiththis.T  
 hisistohelpyou.  
 (Taken from audio recording 1)

In the above extract also, the students's utterance *Did not I[try to...* shows that he is in need of being free from the teacher's criticism. The utterances of the teacher *Is that discourse? Is it a procedure?* are invoking to a positive feedback of praise which is instead rejected by the teacher, and interrupted with a rushing intrusion in to his psychological territories > *No no no*<followed by a comment on the student's appeal to the teacher's authority. As Morand (2000) cited Dahl (1957) claims, in the extract shown above, the praise in most occasions comes from the student to the teacher as in the utterance *I, I am eager to learn. I am eager to learn. I am eager to learn because you are senior instructor* though it is rejected and held in contempt by the teacher when he baldly said, *I am bored with such sort of things* which is evident in the above extract.

(Extract 12)

T: different. Teacher education, it is definitely teacher training ok? It is equivalent to teacher training. Teacher well, teacher education or teacher training meaning that it is the field of study...  
 S: Is that? Is that?  
 T: Pardon.  
 (Taken from audio recording 2)

It is possible to understand from the above extract that the teacher in his utterance distorted the definition of "Teacher training". Nevertheless, the student attempted to comment the examiner for his wrong definition; rather he showed a hesitation *Is that? Is that?* a strategy of restricting his freedom as if he was not sure of it though he clearly knew the teacher's definition was wrong which was later confirmed by

the teacher himself in his utterance *Pardon*. Mulholland (1995) asserts that speakers hedge or speak hesitatingly in order to indicate that the act being performed is not intended to impose on the hearer or to restrict his or her freedom.

(Extract 13)

T:  
 ...WhatdoyoumeanbyabletouseEnglish?Yeah,yeah  
 .  
 S: Yeah,canI,canIreact?  
 T:  
 [Failure,shortage,shortageoftimeandforCPDsuccess,indicators  
 ofsuccess,pairinggroupingstudents.Thatisyouknow  
 indicatorof  
 success.

(Taken from audio recording 2)

The students' act of subordinating to teachers 'authorities' in MA thesis oral examination sessions was also evident through the students' diffident behavior as seen in most of the students' responses. The above extract shows that the teacher posed a question expecting the student to make clear what he meant by *able to use English*. While the teacher's question demands the student's answer, which is its common adjacency pair (Schegloff, 1979:210), the student's question *Yeah, can I, can I react?* is a kind of request that shows his sycophancy. Linell (1990:159) points out that "asking questions is a well-known dominant strategy unless questions that show submissiveness often by a subordinate one intended to show deference and respect".

(Extract 14)

T: Yeah, do it that way. Do it that way. CPD trainers' interview, trainers' interview, ok?  
 S: [And...  
 T: [What about the questionnaire there?  
 S: The questionnaire [is...  
 T: [What is the questionnaire there?  
 S: The questionnaire is meant for [English language...  
 T: [No, no I am not saying any other thing.  
 S: [English ahm ...

T: [What is the questionnaire? Is it students' questionnaire? Teach

ers' questionnaire? (Taken  
from audio recording 1)

The above extract also shows that, in all cases of the student's responses, the teachers simply pass into his next question without regarding what the student has said; the teacher also interrupted the student's response, or cut it short with some dismissive remark though oral examination requires patient questioning so does it also necessitate good listening (Pearce, 2005: 91). The teacher's interruptions are taken-for-granted by the student. When the teacher interrupts, the student fails to pursue his speech and adjusts himself to the teacher's discursively sequenced interruptions according to Fairclough (1989: 137; 2003, 47), a denial of access to interaction voluntarily without any resistance to the teacher's disruptions. Scott (2006: 130) describes: those powerless participants of talk are subordinating to the powerful for different reasons such as: fear of punishment (fear psychic or sanction punishment), self-interest that emanates from prestige, relative power position, lack of self-confidence and so forth. From the analysis so far, it is possible to conclude that MA students thus seem to share the reasons suggested by Scott about their submissiveness to teachers' dominance.

Students were also interviewed to reflect on the interactional problems they faced during MA thesis oral examination sessions. They pointed out a variety of reasons contributed to their submissiveness to examiners' power and dominance. Below is the data taken from a student's interview:

**(Extract 15)**

Ok, yeah, both do have ideologies I think. The examinee comes with a certain ideology about the examiner as I have said. Candidates always ask other people who have been examined by the examiner to whom the candidate is assigned. They always ask how he acts and he evaluates. Basically, people should not ask such questions because the questions she forwards and the comments she makes should depend on the work that examinee has produced. So they are always related to other factors.

(Taken from student's interview 1)

As can be seen in the student's response above, teachers and students have their own preconceived notions about each other's behavior. Students try to collect information from seniors about the behavior of their teachers in advance of the conduct of oral examinations. This will help them to know how to act in oral examination sessions and adjust themselves to the way their teachers act during oral examination. This apparently shows that when students tend to use submissiveness as an interactive strategy, they can easily get teachers' credence and can easily pass through and stay in a safe situation.

**(Extract 16)**

...so anyway there is a kind of power difference. Teachers are always the ones who have to put their heads down not for showing respect of course but to show that teachers are always all knowing and whatever the questions teachers ask, the student may not be in a position to defend. If the student defends, he may think that it may result in unnecessary or unexpected consequences. So he has to always accept them but teachers ask questions and student try to answer but do not challenge.

(Taken from student's interview 3)

The student in the above extract further states that the students' subordination to teachers' authority is also motivated by respecting teachers' power through compliances because trying to argue with teachers is considered negatively as "defensive" behavior which is seriously condemned by teachers as in the following extract taken from the interview.

**(Extract 17)**

A student should come open-minded so that he/she can take comments, he/she can get feedbacks. So, one has to be open-minded. One has to be ready to learn from

the process from the interaction. In  
 ean they do not have to be defensive  
 . They  
 do not have to really try to defend th  
 eir work.

(Taken from teacher's interview 3)

There is a  
 contradiction between the use of the term "defensive" in the  
 teacher's comment above and the name given to this  
 academic event that is "Thesis defense" or "thesis oral  
 examination". While the purpose of conducting such  
 academic sessions is to create opportunities  
 for students to keep their position by responding  
 to teachers' questions, defensive is perceived by teachers n  
 egatively as an obstinate behavior which  
 can be understood as a motive for  
 making students submissive to teachers' dominance.

## 5.2 Analysis of Interruptive Speeches

The analysis of interruptive speeches  
 will provide us an answer for the question how teachers  
 and students in MA thesis oral examination sessions  
 organize their talk in their interaction. Before  
 conducting the analysis, criteria were set which is  
 adapted from West and Zimmerman (1983)  
 to decide what constitutes interruptive speech in the con  
 text of teacher-student interaction in oral examination  
 sessions. The subsequent extracts analyzed in  
 the forthcoming sections depicted that teachers and studen  
 ts used interruptions for  
 different intentions. Teachers used interruption to stop stu  
 dents from giving "irrelevant" information, to ensure  
 students give the key information teachers expected of  
 them. Interruption as one dimension of power relation  
 between teacher and student is discussed with  
 subsequent extracts below.

(Extract 18)

T:  
 Well, it is just written in that manner. Ok, uhm classroom o  
 bservation, ok?  
 What does it mean interview there?  
 S: Inter [view...  
 T :[>No, no, no<I  
 am saying it says you know [there are many interviews.  
 S:  
 [Yeah, yeah.

T:  
 Animals interview, plants interview, what does that mea  
 n?

S: Well, it says somewhere in in in [the...

T: [No, I  
 don't just put it somewhere. Why don't  
 you just give me a straight forward answer yeah?

S: I interviewed CPD trainees.

T: Shall we say it in trainees' interview?

S: CPD trainee yeah.

T: Yeah, do it that way. Do it that way.

(Taken from Audio recording 3)

In the extract above, the teacher frequently interrupted the  
 candidate. In all cases, the candidate's  
 responses are failed attempts. As clearly seen in the  
 teacher's  
 utterance *What does it mean interview there?* the teacher pro  
 sed the  
 question with the intention of letting the student make clea  
 r the group to whom the interview is set as he mentioned in  
 the methodology section of his thesis.  
 While the student was trying to respond to the question *Inter  
 [view...*, the teacher quickly interrupts the student  
 nullifying his response as if it was irrelevant and non-  
 existent without giving due attention to what the  
 response might be. The interruption at the  
 third syllable of the word  
*Inter[view...*, and the repetitive use of the negation *no, no,  
 no, no I am saying it says you know* demonstrate the  
 teacher's wrong assumption that the student may not  
 be able to come as intended by  
 the teacher. In his attempt to interrupt the teacher *yeah, yeah,*  
 the student  
 gave a  
 confirmation to the teacher's assertion *there are many inte  
 rviews there* because the main goal of the speaker's assertion  
 (the teacher in this case) is to have his view accepted without  
 discussion or question (Mulholland,  
 1995: 165). The teacher's interruption of the student's  
 preceding contributions introduced a new but the same  
 question accompanied with  
 utterances that are diminishing the work of the  
 student, which is evident in his utterance above *Animals  
 interview, plants interview, what does that mean?* that  
 has no relation with the purpose of the oral examination.  
 Therefore, it is possible to conclude that teachers have  
 the right to control the production of the discourse of MA  
 thesis oral examination sessions, which  
 was also confirmed by the interview made with a student  
 participant.

*(Extract 19)*

No, no, no. By the way, you see a unidirectional session. Examiners do have a time or room to say as much as they want as much as they need. Let alone the attendants, the presenter or the examinee is allowed to say a sentence or two sentences. Not more than that. Let alone the attendants who simply stay there up to the end of the session. Simply observing and listening to what was said by the boss, you see better to say.

*(Taken from student's Interview 2)*

The extract above further illustrates that teachers are in a position to control the floor and monopolize the discourse space that students need to share. Collins and Guetzkow (1964) argue that monopolizing the floor is a more important means of achieving dominance. The interview further indicates that oral examination sessions are unidirectional that teachers are in a privileged position to exercise their power over students. In principle, teachers are required to create conducive environments for students to get them freely involved in the interaction than to brush off their contributions through frequent interruptions.

*(Extract 20)*

T: ... if you look at the indicators colon, ELIP, the aim the major aim of ELIP was to help to improve English teachers. Indicators for success or failure for success, the indicator was that a table to use English and failure, short age of time that is not clear. What do you mean by a table to use English, yeah, yeah.

S: [Yeah, can I, can I react?]

T: [Failure, shortage, shortage of time and for CP D success, indicators]

of success, ahhh pair in grouping students. That is you know indicate of success. So when teachers are able to form groups and you know make students work in pairs,

S: [Yeah, yeah.]

T: Animals interview, plants interview, what does that mean?

S: Well, it says somewhere in [the...]

does that mean they are successful in teaching and failure to teaching peer work? That part is not clear.

S: Shall I?

T: Yeah.

S: Ok, in the first case, in the case of ELIP, I was, I was a trainee and a trainer

*(Taken from Audio-recording 1)*

In the exemplar above, the teacher read a list of variables that were not clear for him in his pre-presentation reading of the student's thesis, and asked a question *What do you mean by able to use English?* a kind of speech act which normally seeks an answer from the student. The student asked a counter question to get the teacher's approval and clarify his points. However, the teacher ignored the student and continued his questioning repeatedly reading the variables accompanied with longervocal fillers *ahhh* which depicted the discomfort he felt in reading the student's work. The student's failed attempt to get the floor implies that the teacher could limit the student's contribution from getting an access to the interaction, which may give him the chance to reflect on the question posed by the teacher. However, in his second attempt, the student could get the chance to reflect on his views. This can be understood as and reflected that research oral examination sessions do not seem to be set for extended development of arguments for the revelation of the student's true self.

*(Extract 21)*

T: Can you just tell me the tools that you have? You have classroom observation, interview, and the questionnaire

S: Yeah.

T: Well, it is just written in that manner. Ok, uh, classroom observation, ok? What does it mean interview there?

S: Inter [view...]

T: [ >No, no, no < I am saying you know [there are so many interviews there.

T: [No, I don't just put it somewhere! Why don't

you just give me a straight forward answer, yeah?

S: I interviewed CPD trainees.

T: Shall we say it trainers' interview?

S: CPD trainer yeah.

T: Yeah, do it that way. Do it that way. CPD trainers' interview, trainers' interview, ok?

S: [And...]

T: [What about the questionnaire there?]

S: The questionnaire [is...]

T: [What is the questionnaire there?]

S: The questionnaire is meant for [English language...]

T: [No, no I am not saying any other thing.

S: English [ahm...]

T: [What is the questionnaire? Is it students' questionnaire? Teachers' questionnaire?]

S: No, English language teachers.

(Taken from audio-recording 1)

One easily visible feature which is marked by the square brackets in the above extract is the number of times the teacher interrupts the student. The teacher interrupted the student and controlled his contributions. The teacher's interruption began when the student started to respond to his question trying to make clear what he meant by interview in his work. The teacher's interruption in the third syllable of the word *Inter* [view... there repetition of the negation [ >No, no, no < can be understood as a refusal to the student's complete response. The teacher then paraphrased his question into a statement with the intention of making his question

clear to the student. Though the student's response *Yeah, yeah* shows that he is clear with the intention of the question, the teacher still continued asking a question accompanied with a comment *Animals interview, plants interview, what does that mean?* which may have a threatening effect on the student's face wants (Fairclough, 1989:46).

The power relationship between the teacher and the student is also expressed when the student is repeating the preposition *in* three times in his utterance *Well, it says somewhere in in in in the...* and lose his way as a result of the teacher's interruption which shows his confusion to think and go forward clearly. Thus, the student's utterance *somewhere* implies, I don't really know the exact place where the point is located in his thesis. This further exposed the student to the more outrageous comment, which may evoke illness on the student's face. In the same vein, the student tries to give a complete answer for the question posed in the preceding turns but his attempt is made aborted by the teacher's question *What about the questionnaire there?* The teacher's interruptive speeches are frequently underscored by negation and put the student in a position of facing frequent challenges of perusing his speech to reflect on his views. Referring back to teacher-student interaction in their preceding exchanges, most of the interruptions in the above extract are tend to cluster when the student's responses are not meaningful as expected by the teacher.

(Extract 22)

Yeah, I think it is a coward situation that means in most cases examiners are dominant. They dominate the candidate even when the candidate starts to outshine and narrate his feelings they try to interfere, try to pause and there is a kind of unequal power relation and this is seen as domination. They therefore reflect their authority during defense.

(Taken from student's interview 2)

The textual quote above also illustrates that the situation in oral examinations regarding teacher-student interaction looks intimidating to students due to the

dominant teachers have over the oral examination discourse through interfering and stopping the students and reflecting their views which depicts their authoritative power.

*(Extract 23)*

Well, whether there was a friendly or friendly interaction between the two or not, there is still interaction. There are still opinions that are given right? The opinion will be helpful.

*(Taken from teacher's interview 1)*

In the above interview made with the teacher also asserts that teachers are found to be speakers than listeners whose opinions seem to be readily acceptable. The teacher's comments from his utterances above might be interpreted as that there is an interaction between teachers and students, and teachers give their opinions which are helpful to students. However, the expression *whether or not* shows there is still interaction, but they try to hide whether and what type of interaction exists between teachers and students. From this and from the analyses so far, one can argue that much of the discourse pace in teacher-student interaction in MA thesis oral examination sessions is under the control of examiners.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, attempt has been made to examine the power relations between teachers and students in the context of MA thesis oral examination in the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Gondar. In so doing, the major themes (a) Teachers' alignment to institutional authority, (b) Teachers' as experts, (c) MA students' subordination to institutional authority, and (d) teachers' and students' interruptive speeches were identified and critically analyzed. The analysis thus depicted that teachers were found to exercise their personal power to show their expertise as well as their institutional power through aligning themselves with the institutional authority. Students, on the other side, displayed consent and cooperation with submission to teachers' authorities.

Aligning with institutional authority is one of the themes that are identified in this research. In MA

thesis oral examination sessions, pronoun choice is found a powerful discursive technique through which the examining role is enacted in teacher-student interaction. The most frequently used pronouns include: first-person singular *I*; first person plural *we*; and pronoun *you* in subjective and objective forms (Fairclough, 1989). Teachers use the institutional *we* for variety of purposes such as: to display the production framework of talk or a footing in which the speaker only speaks on behalf of the authoritative source to connect with the power of the institution, to invoke a larger authority to legitimize their institutional power that helps them to freely control the discourse. Teachers also interchangeably use *we* and *I* to strengthen their institutional power with the power of their examining role, which means, the relations teachers have with students were also enacted through the alternative use of personal pronouns. Teachers also use pronoun *you* to address the problems in the oral examination to the students. It was also found that the teachers' frequent use of the pronoun *you* was an indicative of exclusion of the candidacy role, which is one of the teachers' roles in higher academic institutions.

Teachers' lack of consideration to students' research experiences and controlling of the discourse of oral examination sessions is one of the manifestations of teachers constructing of their power relations with students. Teachers in these sessions found to be powerful figures who claim to have complete control of the resources of research knowledge positioning students as mere recipients of their knowledge claims. Teachers valuing their expertise power by devaluing of the students' presentations, on their expense through egotism (Swales, 2004:163). This contradicts with the assumptions the conduct of such sessions are built upon. Rorty (1979) regarding this states that knowledge as a cultural product, constructed by the practices of the discourse community through interaction (academics involved in oral examination sessions) and constituted not just conveyed.

The analysis further revealed that while teachers were committed to the truth value of propositions in their claims, students showed expressions of lack of commitment to the truth value of their propositions due to lack of confidence in reflecting issues in their research. Their modal choice was also associated with

the subordinate position they have in presentation sessions. Teachers and students were also found to show their commitments towards their propositions in different degrees. Their modal choice put them in different positions. While teachers frequently used high value modals that show a strong commitment, students used low value modals, which imply a weak commitment to their propositions. So it is possible to infer that oral examination sessions are academic rituals where teachers predominantly control the knowledge claim of academic research.

Students also found subordinate to teachers as a strategy of getting credence in order to secure a positive evaluation of teachers. They used such strategies as: quick withdrawal from the debate, showing dependency on teachers through obedience to their dos and don'ts, pretending to take greater care to the face wants of teachers, through appeal to pity, and servility through praising insincerely.

Interruptive speech is one of the themes that were examined to see how teachers and students organized their talk in their interaction. The analyses depicted that majority of the interruptions were made by teachers. Teachers' interruptions were mainly aimed at stopping students from giving "irrelevant" information, and asking students to give the key information expected by them. The analyses also indicated that teachers' interruptions were discursive tools that gave them to control the oral examination discourse to freely ask questions and give comments. The analysis so far also made clear that the teachers' interruptions were successful in controlling the discourse of such academic events. Though interruption may sometimes signal involvement rather than power and dominance, the teachers' interruptions however were likely to be related to power and dominance to get their points accepted. Based on this, it seems being logical to conclude that teachers have the right to interrupt candidates with their comments and questions.

Unlike teachers, students on the other hand made interruptions very rarely not to oppose and make counter arguments, not to ask questions and illicit information from examiners but to give confirmations to teachers' assertions, as well, to get examiners'

approval and clarify their points. It was also found that students comply and answer in accordance with their subordinate relation to teachers. From this, it is possible to conclude that teachers are powerful participants who were able to treat interactional conventions in a more cavalier way, as well as to allow or disallow varying degrees of latitude to the powerless participants (MA students). This implies that in MA thesis oral examination sessions, teachers are licensed to interrupt students; whereas, students are working under the interactive conditions that are framed by teachers. In general, the greater the inequality between teachers and students, the more likely it is that their interruptive speeches will be non-reciprocal, that is teachers as powerful participants have the right to interrupt students at any time and any place without showing apology, which is not totally allowed to students to do. To conclude, teacher-student power relations in MA thesis oral examination sessions have been found to have an implication to the poor quality of the students' theses work.

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