

Self-Affirmation Strategies Prevailing in Thesis Defenses: Discourse Analysis of Iranian EFL Candidates

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Research Paper

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Abstract: The thesis defense session is a formal academic event where the candidates are supposed to save face and protect their positive self-view in response to criticisms by various affirmation strategies. The present study aimed at investigating the most prevalent self-affirmation strategies EFL candidates employ in their MA thesis defenses. The investigation was based on affirmation strategies mainly derived from Sherman and Cohen's study, along with other units of analysis designated by Taylor and Lobel, Wert, Fein, and Spenser. The data was gleaned from ten MA defense sessions conducted at two Iranian universities. Selected excerpts of talks collected by participant observation technique were transcribed and analyzed by the researchers, and interrater reliability was established. The data analysis showed that a considerable proportion of affirmation strategies used belong to two categories of *accepting the threat and using it as behavioral change* (43.58%) and *presenting real causes for events* (33.44 %). Yet, three strategies of *upward comparison*, *downward comparison*, and *attaching to interpersonal relationship as affirmation resource* did not have any occurrence in the current corpus. The results may give insight to the candidates to react in the most efficient manner in response to the examiners' criticisms and help them develop a high level of self-awareness.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, Institutional Talk, Self-affirmation, Self-integrity, Thesis Defense Sessions

Introduction

The sense of positive self-views is one that learners attempt to maintain by exhibiting defensiveness (Dunning et al. ,2004). Individuals try to protect their self-worth by either being resistant to threatening information or experiencing a behavioral change as a result of accepting the critical information (Sherman & Hartson, 2011). Steele (1988) first proposed self-affirmation theory and defined it as a desire of oneself to maintain the worth and integrity of the self. One pedagogical context in which the learner's identity, belief, and face can be threatened is a thesis defense session. Despite its importance, the issue of these sessions has been barely investigated in educational research. Interlocutors cooperate during a defense session in order to meet the thesis evaluation (Drew & Heritage, 1992).

The current study attempted to explore the self-affirmation strategies which are applied by candidates in order to provide responses to criticisms during thesis defenses in the context of Iranian MA defense sessions. The objective is to examine how the interlocutors try to maintain the sense of being an appropriate member of the community and which affirmational strategies are applied for protecting their self-worth.

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Statement of the Problem

In order to enter the area of foreign language teaching and learning, pivotal attention should be paid to the learners of the community. Promotion and advancement are achieved by considering learners' expectations in various academic contexts. One pedagogical context in which the learner's identity, belief, and face can be threatened is a thesis defense session. Despite its importance, the issue of the viva session has been barely investigated in educational research (Namaziandost et al., 2001). Despite its importance, the issue of viva, to the best of researchers' knowledge, has not been considered so much in the context of Iran.

Significance of the Study

One major goal of students in graduate programs is to provide a strong defense for their thesis and to be known as a successful member of their chosen specialization. Research in every aspect of this context, including students' attitudes would help them achieve this goal. It also sought to give insight to the candidates to react most efficiently in response to the examiners' criticisms and help them develop a higher level of self-awareness. The main characteristic of a thesis defense is its critical nature; therefore, there is a need to know more about candidates' strategies for protecting their self-integrity in response to examiners' criticisms.

Objective of the Study

The current study attempts to explore the self-affirmation strategies which are applied by candidates in order to provide responses to criticisms during thesis defenses in the context of Iranian MA viva sessions. The objective is to examine how the interlocutors try to maintain the sense of being an appropriate member of the community and which of the aforementioned categories is applied for protecting their self-worth. On the other hand, examiners may become more familiar with their students' personality aspects and try to present criticism in more effective ways. This research also attempts to provide answers to the following research questions:

Research Question One: How do Iranian L2 speakers of English respond to examiners' criticisms in the context of Master's thesis defense sessions? Do they seek separation or connection with examiners and their supervisor?

Research Question Two: What is the effect of self-affirmation on the performance of Master's thesis defense candidates?

Literature Review

Self-Affirmation Theory

Self-affirmation is a fundamental motivation that fosters an individual's self-worth and self-integrity, which in turn contributes to perceiving oneself as good, virtuous, and capable of controlling critical life outcomes and events. Research suggests that self-affirmation empowers individuals to face the challenges posed by external and internal agents. It promotes self-worth, resilience, and positive health behaviors (Pandey et al., 2020a).

People often make biased judgements based on their beliefs and desires. Even individuals who are healthily at risk may not agree to change their risky behavior and, as a result, engage in defensive responses. Reduction of defensive biases helps people to be more open to threatening information (Sherman & Cohen, 2002). The motivation to protect the perceived worth and integrity of the self is the reason why people respond in such a biased manner (Steele, 1988). In the current study, the candidates' responses to the threats in thesis sessions were analyzed based on a number of affirmational strategies gathered from different studies on self-affirmation theory. Most of these strategies were derived from

the study carried out by Sherman and Cohen (2006). Candidates may affirm the self by engaging in social (downward/upward) comparisons (Taylor & Lobel, 1989), gossiping negatively about a third party (Wert & Salovey, 2004), biased assimilation of new information, interpersonal relationships as affirmational resources, group-serving biases (Sherman & Cohen, 2006), derogating others (Fein & Spenser, 1997) and so on.

Thesis Defenses

Individuals tend to protect their self-image in situations where they may be threatened. A thesis defense is one situation in which candidates' self-integrity can be questioned by examiners' criticisms. In the current research, self-affirmation strategies were extracted from candidates' responses to criticisms in this specific genre.

After completion of the thesis by a candidate, he/she is supposed to present the work in a formal session in front of supervisors and sometimes committee members to prove him/herself as a qualified member of the community. Based on the nature of thesis sessions, candidates are supposed to introduce their research, pay close attention to examiners' comments or criticisms, and respond in a fluent way. Meanwhile, they attempt to save face and self-affirm whenever they experience a threat. Examiners should review the defense in advance to mention problems and present criticisms in a helpful manner (Don & Izadi, 2011; Recski, 2005).

Vivas are both formal and informal at the same time; they are formal because of the importance of the academic event and informal because there is an interpersonal relationship among participants (Grimshaw, 1989). Defense sessions may carry different concepts for participants with different roles in the session. From the candidates' perspective, it is an event of high importance which ends in success or failure and makes him/her a member of the community (Recski, 2005).

Self-affirmation Strategies

The self-affirmation strategies are those strategies which are used by the viva candidates in response to examiners' criticisms in order to protect their self-integrity.

Empirical Studies

Don and Izadi (2011) investigated ways of achieving face through relational connectedness in talk-interaction during Iranian thesis defenses. They attempted to go beyond the utterance level to the discourse level in order to characterize the relationship between participants (i.e. candidate, examiner, and supervisor) as separate from or connected with each other. It was found that four cultural concepts of *abru*, *ta'arof*, *shaxsiyat*, and *ehteram* play a crucial role in protecting face in vivas.

Izadi (2013) also studied linguistic politeness in vivas in Iran. He focused on negative politeness strategies in the interpersonal interaction and reported 'giving deference', 'hedging', and 'impersonalization' as the most frequent strategies.

Recski (2005), however, focused on the importance of modal certainty in academic spoken discourse based on two American thesis defenses. The result demonstrated that speakers' roles, aims, and their commitments affect modal choices. He also argued that interpersonal meanings as well as ideational ones are important in texts structure.

Methodology

Design of the Study

The research is a qualitative discourse study. Qualitative research is defined as a form of systematic inquiry into meaning through an interpretive and naturalistic approach (Shank, 2002). It is discourse

study as well because it is an instance of spoken or written language that has desirable internal relationships of form and meaning (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2000).

Corpus

In order to meet the research objectives, ten MA defense sessions amounting to ten hours and thirty minutes, held in English, at the state-run universities of Kerman and Shiraz during 2017-2019 were studied. Two factors including field of study (foreign language studies including Translation and TEFL) and genre (spoken academic discourse in thesis defenses) were kept homogenous. The corpus, which was constructed from the speech of ten thesis defense session candidates, was analyzed in order to extract the most prevalent self-affirmation strategies used by the candidates in response to the examiners' criticisms.

For the sake of this study, each of defense session was observed and audio-recorded via Sony digital voice recorder by the researcher. The total amount of recorded data is ten hours and thirty minutes. According to Swales (2004), these defenses are composed of four main phases: Introduction, Presentation by the candidate, Question and answer (Q-A), and Evaluation.

After observing and recording each viva session, the recorded data was transcribed by the researchers. In order to answer the research questions only the question and answer part of each defense session was transcribed turn by turn without making any changes to the conversations. Each response of the candidates to the examiners' criticisms was analyzed based on the categories to see which affirmation strategy was used by the candidate to regain self-integrity. After detecting the self-affirmation strategies in the viva sessions, the researchers counted their frequency of occurrence which are brought in the part of results.

This selection of just this part was due to the lack of time and lengthy and irrelevant discussions occurred in other parts. The transcription results were evaluated through content analysis and by an expert in discourse analysis (holding PhD in applied linguistics) and areas of ambiguity were discussed until consensus was achieved. Finally, the reviewers reached 100% agreement on the categorizations.

Self-Affirmation Strategies

The aim of the present research was to extract affirmational strategies which candidates use in response to examiners' criticisms in order to protect their self-integrity. Self-affirmation framework presented by Sherman and Cohen (2006) was applied in this study where all the affirmation strategies were put under three main categories proposed by Sherman and Cohen (2006) as follow:

A: Accepting the threat and using it as behavioral change

B: Ameliorating the threat by direct psychological adaptations:

1. Social comparisons:
 - 1.1 Comparing with similar others
 - 1.2 Comparing with more capable others (upward comparison)
 - 1.3 Comparing with less capable others (downward comparison)
2. Derogating others (blaming other people for the mentioned problem)
3. Gossiping negatively about a third party (evaluation of a known person who is not present at the time)
4. Self-serving and group-serving biases
 - 4.1 Seeking similarities between the self and standards of correctness
 - 4.2 Presenting real causes for events
 - 4.3 Attributing success to internal factors

4.4 Attributing failure to external factors

5. Attaching to interpersonal relationship as affirmation resource

C: Indirect psychological adaptations (reflecting on important aspect of one's life irrelevant to the threat).

This study adopted the above theoretical framework because the strategies were relevant to this specific academic context (i.e. defense sessions).

Data Analysis Procedure

After audio-recording and transcribing ten MA defense sessions, the above category of affirmation strategies was adopted as the basis for data analysis in order to extract the most prevalent strategies used by the candidates during thesis defense sessions. This study aimed to provide answers for the following research questions:

1: How do Iranian L2 speakers of English respond to examiners' criticisms in the context of Master's thesis defense sessions? Do they seek separation or connection with examiners and their supervisor?

2: What is the effect of self-affirmation on the performance of Master's thesis defense candidates?

Results

After data transcription, the data was analyzed based on the categorizations of self-affirmation strategies discussed in 3.2 section in order to extract the most frequent strategies used by the Iranian MA candidates. Table 1 is provided here to represent a holistic view of all the strategies, which are arranged from the most frequent to the least frequent ones along with their percentages of use. Overall, from a total number of detected strategies (n = 296), a large proportion belonged to the second category which is *ameliorating the threat by direct psychological adaptations* (n = 157). The next frequent strategy was the first category which was *directly accepting the threat* (n = 129). It must be mentioned here that two subcategories of social comparison strategy, namely *upward and downward comparisons* as well as *attaching to interpersonal relationship as affirmation resource* category, did not have occurrence in the current corpus. The candidates did not use these three strategies in response to the examiners' criticisms and as support for their decisions.

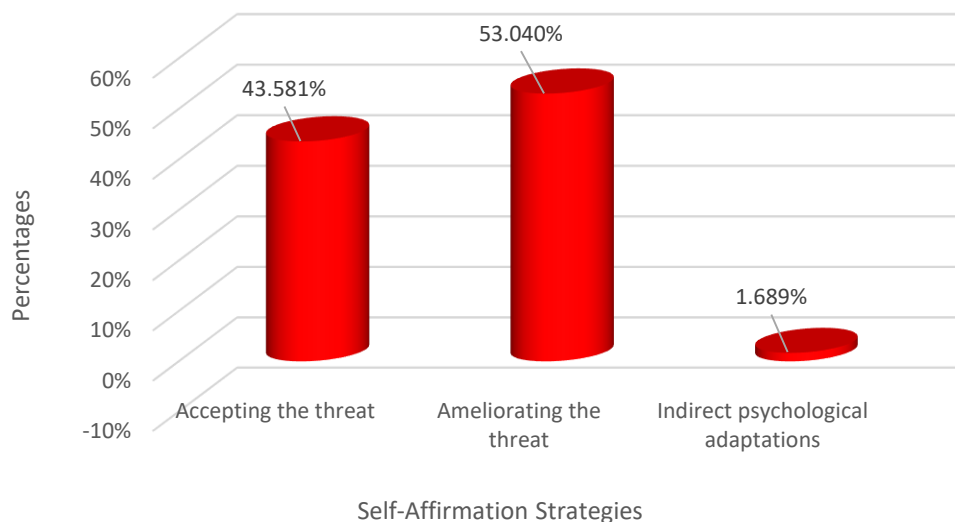
Table 1

Distribution of the Self-affirmation Strategies across the Corpus

	Strategies	n	Percentage %
1	Accepting the threat and using it as behavioral change	129	43.581
2	Presenting real causes for events	99	33.445
3	Attributing failure to external factors	27	9.121
4	Comparing with similar others	13	4.391
5	Seeking similarities between the self and standards of correctness	10	3.378
6	Attributing success to internal factors	8	2.702
7	Indirect psychological adaptations	5	1.689
8	Derogating others	3	1.013
9	Gossiping negatively about a third party	2	0.675
10	Upward comparison	0	0
11	Downward comparison	0	0
12	Attaching to interpersonal relationships as affirmational resource	0	0
		Total: 296	

Besides, to be more specific, Figure 1 illustrates the percentages and frequencies of the main three categories of affirmational strategies across the corpus.

Figure 1

Distribution of the Categories of Self-affirmation Strategies across the Corpus

For better comprehension, each strategy was discussed in the context. Besides, at least one example (i.e. one excerpt of conversation) was represented to make the results acceptable. It is worth mentioning that for each category it was discussed whether the candidates were seeking connection with or separation from the examiners. It must be noted that the statements have been transcribed and reproduced iteratively and grammatical or lexical errors were not corrected.

Accepting the Threat and Using it as Behavioral Change

Figure 1 illustrates the percentage and frequency of the first self-affirmation category, which is *accepting the threat and using it as behavioral change*. As was mentioned earlier, from the total amount of strategies used by the candidates, accepting the criticism was the most widely used one (43.58%).

In many situations where the examiners provided suggestions for changing some parts of the work or claimed that the candidate has made mistakes, the candidates only confirmed and accepted the mistake by using verification words and statements (e.g. yes, you're right, I see, alright, aha, sure). Here is an excerpt from the ninth defense session in which the candidate accepted multiple criticisms without providing any further justification.

Session (9) - Lines 2668-2693

- (1) C: More good? **Aha**.
- (2) EX: I'm getting to the grammatical problem.
- (3) C: **Aha yes**.
- (4) EX: And also on page 7 "foreign language learning progress practical" which is practical foreign language learning progress.
- (5) C: **Aha yes**. Programs?
- (6) EX: Yes. On page 5 you have problems of cohesion for example in the middle of the page.... yes yes the second paragraph after the quality of life has a great role.... did you find that? The second paragraph the fourth line.
- (7) C: **Yes, yes**.

(8) EX: Then after this line you have “thus mortality maximized...” and you see there is no relationship no cohesion...you could use a cohesive tie which links this sentence to the previous sentences which is missing here.

(9) C: **Aha yes, I see.**

(10) EX: And there is also the problem of linkage of this sentence to the following sentences as well.

(11) C: **Aha yes, I see.**

In this conversation excerpt, the examiner proposed different types of questions and suggestions, while the candidate answered them by only using some verification words such as “yes” and “I see”. The candidate of the ninth defense session for the most of the questions did not provide any further information; instead, she preferred to directly accept the criticisms and changed those criticized parts as the Examples (1), (3), (5), (7), (9), and (11) from this conversation show.

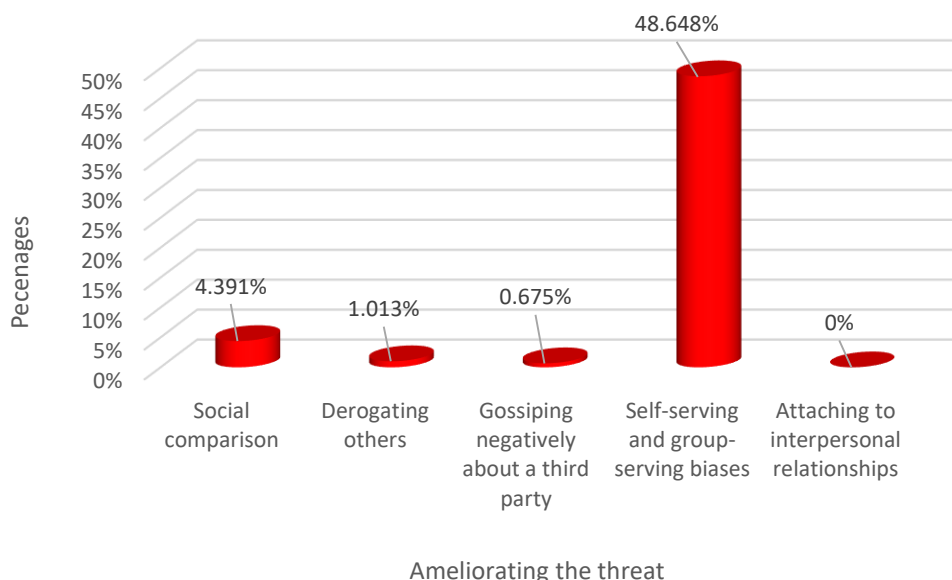
As it was mentioned earlier in this section, the candidates accepted criticisms without providing any justification, which illustrates that they were seeking connection with the examiner.

Ameliorating the Threat by Direct Psychological Adaptations

After counting the frequency of occurrence of the strategies, the second category (i.e. ameliorating the threat by direct psychological adaptations) was found to be the most frequent strategy with the percentage of 53.04% in all the data. This category consists of five subcategories: 1) *social comparisons*; 2) *derogating others*; 3) *gossiping negatively about a third party*; 4) *self-serving and group-serving biases*; and 5) *attaching to interpersonal relationships as affirmational resource*, which will be discussed in detail here. Fig. 2 illustrates the distribution of these five strategies across the current corpus. As the figure displays, the fourth strategy which is *self-serving and group-serving biases* has considerable percentage (48.64%), while the fifth strategy from this category which is *attaching to interpersonal relationships as affirmational resource* has not been used at all in the corpus.

Figure 2

Distribution of Ameliorating the Threat Strategies across the Corpus



Social Comparisons

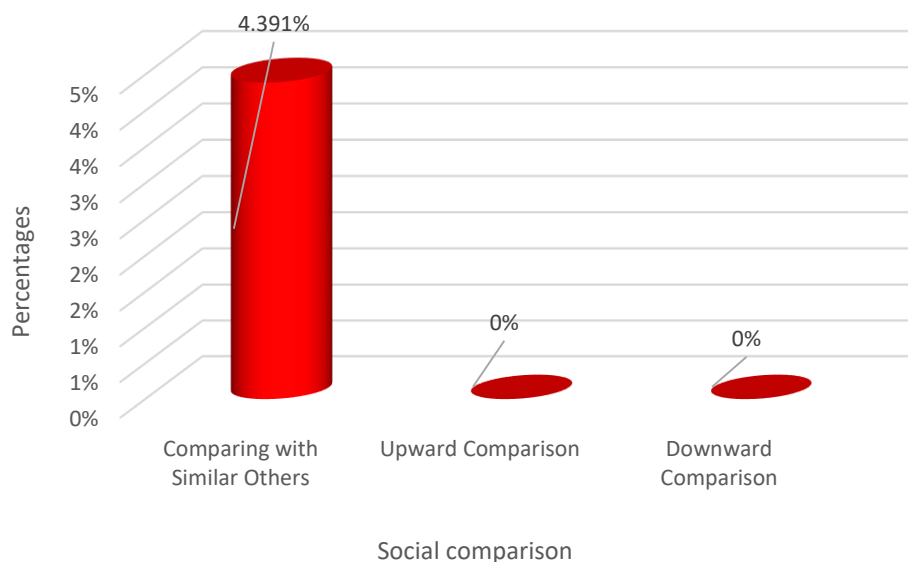
Social comparison theory was initially proposed by Festinger (1954) maintaining that individuals have a tendency to compare their opinions and abilities with others (on the relevant dimensions) in order to achieve accurate self-evaluation. Sherman and Cohen (2006) noted that if the aim of social comparison

is to protect the threatened self-image, after self-affirmation individuals should be less motivated to compare themselves to other people and they might be even more willing toward comparison to superior others. Taylor and Lobel (1989) elaborated more on two types of social comparisons: upward and downward. They stated that some researchers (e.g., Wheeler 1966) have interpreted the former as the desire to compare oneself to more proficient others while the latter is making comparison to less successful others in order to appear more capable (e.g., Suls, 1977).

Defense sessions candidates may prefer to defend themselves by comparing their work with others in different ways (Abbasi Aghdam & Mahdavid, 2024). In this study, three types of comparison were considered: *a) comparing with similar others*; *b) comparing with more capable others (upward comparison)*; and *c) comparing with less capable others (downward comparison)*. Fig.3 shows the percentages of usage of each strategy across the corpus. Obviously, none of the candidates in 10 defense sessions used *upward* and *downward comparisons*.

Figure 3

Distribution of Social Comparison Strategies across the Corpus



Comparing with Similar Others

Some of the candidates compared their work to similar studies previously done in order to justify their actions.

Session (3) - Lines 870-883

(12) EX: Just I guess it was better that she checked previous studies that have done.

(13) C: **They have just the T-test, all language testing, learning and**

(14) Supervisor: Yes, **in all of these journals.**

(15) EX: Ok, you need to show me.

(16) C: Ok.

(17) EX: Because I checked some of the papers just the other day, just these measures and I saw that actually

(18) C: **Most of the studies refers to in literature review also proposing on CAF also used the same test.**

(19) EX: I don't sure about what she did but I have to check it.

In Example 19 the candidate claimed that all the previous studies have done the same thing (using T-test as she has used), as a means to justify herself. In continuing this conversation, the supervisor, in her defensive role, confirmed the candidate's statement again by comparing the thesis to other similar works. When the examiner proposed the same problem again (Example 23), the candidate insisted on using the same strategy to convince the examiner.

Derogating Others

It can be claimed that the easiest way to compensate for a mistake is to blame other people for the problem, but it may not be acceptable in responding to an examiner's criticism during a defense session. From all the data, the candidates only in 1.01% of the situations used this strategy. In the following excerpt, the candidate used "because some of the people didn't give me the references", which is considered as *derogating others* technique.

Session (2) - Lines 409- 420

(20) EX: Ms X, thanks for your effort. There are some questions I wanna to ask you. One of them was the limitation of your research can you explain.

(21) C: Yes, the limitation, limitations are those the researcher face them.

(22) EX: In your research.

(23) C: Yes, I for example erm, there erm, there was no many references; it was not possible to access all of the references.

(24) EX: Why?

(25) C: **Erm, because some of the people did not give me the references** and some of the Persian and English translation they are not the same.

Gossiping Negatively About a Third Party

According to Rosnow (2001), networking, shoptalk, small talk, schmoozing, and shooting the breeze are all used to describe the act of talking about an absent other but the most frequent word is gossip. The least percentage in the category of *ameliorating the threat* belongs to *gossiping negatively about a third party*, which accounts for 0.67% of all the data. Here is an excerpt in which the candidate did not accept the responsibility of the problem; instead, she claimed that a third person guided her so that person was responsible for the mentioned problem.

Session (9) - Lines 3040- 3049

(26) EX: And this would be my last question or comment, you have devised some kinds of materials for teaching your experimental group on the basis of Oxford... my question would be two fold. Do you have any model study, any empirical study for.... That could serve as the model for choosing these textbooks and materials?

(27) C: **Actually I talked to a professor in Tehran and I asked for actually...tutoring and private classes and this was for her private classes, the topics and the...actually orders was like that.**

(28) EX: Yes, for teaching yes, you can have my and other comments...but for research...do you have similar research with similar materials?

(29) C: No!

Self-Serving and Group-Serving Biases

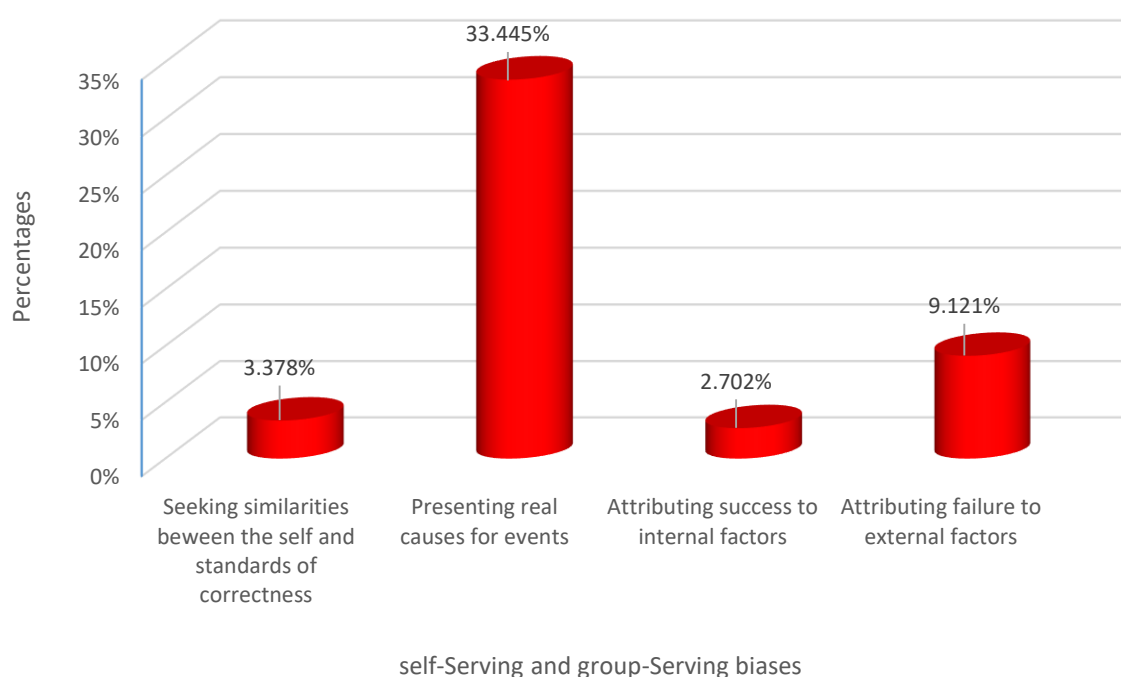
Duval and Silvia (2001) proposed a dual system model of self-serving attributions. The first system seeks similarities between the self and standards of correctness (Duval and Wicklund 1972; Duval and

Silvia 2001), and the second is a causal attribution system in which individuals try to present real causes for events (Heider 1944, 1958).

Among the five strategies under the subcategory of *ameliorating the threat*, the most frequent strategy was *self-serving and group-serving biases* accounting for 48.64% of the corpus. This subcategory consists of four strategies: a) *seeking similarities between the self and standards of correctness*; b) *presenting real causes for events*; c) *attributing success to internal factors*; and d) *attributing failure to external factors*. In the following sections, the strategies will be discussed in more details along with some examples from the corpus but before that, Fig. 4 is presented in order to show the distribution of these four strategies among 'self-serving and group-serving biases' subcategory.

Figure 4

Distribution of Self-serving and Group-serving Biases Strategies across the Corpus



Seeking Similarities Between the Self and Standards of Correctness

Using this strategy, the candidates compare their work to the standards which are acceptable for the examiners in the most cases. In this case, candidates may defend themselves by referring to related theories or approaches and also may claim that they have used documents from the library or qualified journals as models. As it is shown in Fig. 4, the percentage of usage of this strategy in the corpus is 3.37% of the data. The following examples will be clarifying.

Session (1) - Lines 1- 4

(30) EX: The abstract is not true by format ahh if this is the case that Must, so I don't have any

(31) C: **So, again that was a fixed format.**

(32) EX: Alright, aha

In the above excerpt, the candidate's first turn "So, again that was a fixed format" suggests that she is validating her work by claiming the use of a standardized format. Example 38 illustrates that the answer seems quite reasonable to the examiner.

In the next example (seventh viva session), from the statement proposed by the candidate it can be concluded that she standardizes her work by comparing it to some qualified theses from the library.

Session (7) - Lines 2431- 2435

(33) EX: Conclusion ok? and further reading are under one section I mean that they should be in two different parts. Conclusion and ...

(34) C: **Some theses in the library are like this and I used them as a model...yeah.**

Presenting Real Causes for Events

As Fig. 4 shows, this strategy is the most frequent one in *self-serving and group-serving biases* group, which shows a considerable difference with the other three strategies. Talking about the whole corpus, *presenting real causes for events* holds the second rank (33.44%) in all the data. This strategy was used whenever the candidates aimed to provide detailed explanation about a specific part of the work. In the following excerpt from the first viva session (Examples 42 and 43) the candidate answered the question directly only by providing further information.

Session (1) - Lines 93- 98

(35) EX: So, why didn't you report the validity?

(36) C: **I did,**

(37) EX: where?

C: **This version of measurement the validity of questioners was in fact measured after the questioners were made.**

Attributing Success to Internal Factors

The least frequent strategy in *self-serving and group-serving biases* is *attributing success to internal factors*. This strategy has the percentage of 2.70 from all the data. By the use of this technique, the candidates put emphasis on their own effort in the thesis process. An example from the ninth session is presented here. When the examiner asked from the candidate how she motivated her students and proceeded the research, the candidate stated that although it had been difficult, she worked hard to motivate them. In fact, she attributed it to her own effort, which is considered as an internal factor.

Session (9) - Lines 2879- 2891

(38) EX: ...and more importantly how did you motivate them, convince them to sit for your study, did you pay them? Did you...any reward for the contribution for the participation? Because... you know when I'm not interested and I'm not motivated I may not take part as you as the researcher expects, so how did you motivate them?

(39) C: Actually because...**that's why I am actually erm...studied for a long...ermm actually this many month**, first I couldn't find that participants that I wanted, I just have...I think 8 participants and after that...first I introduced the package, after the introduction of package they were motivated and those 8 ones actually encourage other friends and I have actually ermm...120 students and I actually chose among these ... because of some problems in their questionnaires 30 participants. **I have 120 because of...I tried to actually play some music, I tried to pick actually some topics that are interesting for them, it was hard but they were motivated.**

Attributing Failure to External Factors

Based on the results, *attributing failure to external factors* stands in the second rank in this group with 9.12% of the corpus. Defense candidates may attribute weaknesses of their works to external factors rather than feeling responsible for their goofs. They may make excuses such as lack of time or

insufficient documents. In the following example, in response to the examiner's question, the candidate claimed that the shortcoming is because of lack of time for writing the thesis.

Session (2) - Lines 627-631

(40) EX: Yeah, I know, I want to know whether they are paraphrase or not. Your sentences, also please look again to your thesis and correct editing and grammatical mistakes.

(41) C: **Because of lack of time.**

(42) EX: Lack of time?

(43) C: yes.

Below is another example in which the candidate asserts that the reason for her short conclusion is the limitation of the Word software.

Session (5) – Lines 1593-1596

(44) EX: Just one paragraph and conclusion is too short for a research and it is mixed with suggestions for further research. It is better to be a bit longer than ...

(45) C: But I tried to make it as brief as possible **because the word limitation does not allow use to repeat the conclusion again and again.**

Regarding the matter of seeking connection or separation by the candidates, it must be mentioned that in all the strategies in the second category (i.e. ameliorating the threat by direct psychological adaptations), the candidates were seeking separation from the examiners by presenting various excuses or responses for a criticism.

Indirect Psychological Adaptations

The last category of self-affirmation strategies is *indirect psychological adaptations*, which addresses important aspects of one's life or behavior irrelevant to the threat. In this case, the candidates put emphasis on a positive aspect of their thesis irrelevant to the problem proposed by the examiner in order to compensate for the mistake or weakness. As it was illustrated in Fig. 1, this category is the least frequent strategy and is considerably different from the first two categories. In Example 49, the candidate did not provide the necessary information for the question.

Session (5) - Lines 1654- 1664

(46) EX: If you compare chapter three and chapter four to chapter two you will see chapter two is only eight pages.

(47) C: Yes,

(48) EX: Too short.

(49) C: Yes, in fact because of newness of this research, in fact, there was, in fact limited literature for this kind of research and in fact especially, **and a part of for example L2 learners socioculture identity regarding their learning L2 and this was in fact, compensated by some other things like, for example qualitative stage which has been**

In the last category (i.e. indirect psychological adaptations), the candidates were seeking separation from the examiners by providing irrelevant answers to the examiners evaluations.

Findings and Discussion

Answer to RQ No.1: *Accepting the Threat and Using it as Behavioral Change as the Most Prevalent Strategy*

In order to explore the ways Iranian L2 speakers of English response to examiners' criticisms in defense sessions (research question 1), the data was analyzed based on the categorization of self-affirmation strategies. As Table 1 displayed, the candidates used nine self-affirmation strategies during their defense sessions, the most frequent one of which was *accepting the threat and using it as behavioral change* (43%) in which the candidates directly accepted the criticism and decided to change the mentioned sections without providing further justification. In line with the results of Don and Izadi (2011), one plausible reason for directly accepting the examiners' evaluation may be related to the cultural concepts of *aberu* (dignity), *ta'arof* (polite offerings), *shaxsiat* (social status) and *ehteram* (respect) which are important for Iranians. Candidates may accept whatever an examiner asserts only because of *ehteram*, or because of the examiner's *shaxsiat*. Concerning these cultural traits, the Iranian EFL candidates may directly accept a criticism to protect their own and examiners' *aberu* and *shaxsiat*.

In this study, it can be claimed that along with lack of knowledge, the above cultural concepts can explain why the candidates directly accepted criticisms. For instance, whenever examiners start the question and answer phase of a defense session by mentioning the strong points of a thesis and characterize it as a good thesis, then bring up a few criticisms or questions; or when they provide a criticism like a suggestion in a polite way, it is mostly common that the candidates only accept it and do not provide further justifications in order to self-affirm, which is normally because of *ehteram* and *ta'arof*. In fact, the candidates do not feel the need to self-affirm; because they are already sure of their acceptable and strong thesis; and, instead, prefer to keep this sense of connection with the examiner and accept the negative evaluation rather than self-affirmation.

The second frequent strategy was *presenting real causes for events* (33%), through which the candidates provided further information in response to a question. This strategy was used by the candidates whenever the examiners asked about the details of a specific part or whenever they wanted extra information about some parts of a thesis. In this case, the candidates provided extra explanation to convince the examiners.

As it is clear, a considerable proportion belongs to these two strategies which were widely used by all the candidates during thesis defense sessions, while other strategies were used far less than these two. It can be concluded that, the candidates mostly preferred to use one of these two types of reactions to the examiners questions; providing real or relevant causes for a question, or otherwise just accept the criticism and tend to change it. Other strategies such as blaming other people or some external factors were found to be far less used.

After providing answer to the first research question by representing the most prevalent strategies of candidates in response to the examiners' criticisms, analysis of the second part of the question was done to see whether the candidates sought separation from or connection with the examiners. It was claimed that whenever candidates accept a critical evaluations of the thesis, in fact they are seeking connection with the examiner who has proposed the question. On the contrary, if defense candidates had justified their work by presenting various reasons to reject a criticism, they were seeking separation from the examiner. As analysis of these ten defense sessions illustrated, in 43.58% of all the data, candidates sought connection with the examiners by directly accepting their evaluation, while in all the other strategies (54.72%), the candidates were seeking separation by rejecting evaluation of the examiners.

There also might be a sense of relational connection or separation between candidates and their supervisors. Regularly in thesis defense sessions, candidates start speaking by thanking the supervisor of the thesis and, meanwhile, the supervisor is expected to be on the side of the candidate because he/she

is considered as the secondary author of the thesis and this mutual behavior constructs a great sense of connection between them. Yet, it is possible that supervisors act otherwise and do not defend the candidates (Don & Izadi 2011). In the current corpus, the supervisors mostly projected connection with their candidates, except in a few cases. For instance, in Example 52, the supervisor wanted the supervisee to accept the examiner's criticism and apply it later.

Session (5) - Lines 3111- 3119

(50) EX: ... something about your table of content, you did not add abstract, the list of figures, the list of abbreviations in your table of content...you have started from chapter one...

(51) C: I just look at other thesis and I looked at their table of content, most of them are like it and you know...I asked Ms. X to make automatic table of content for me...she made it...it's an automatic word table of content.

(52) Supervisor: **Khanum doctor is qualified; you have to add these in your table of content ... thank you.**

Findings of this study regarding relational connection and separation was in line with the results of Don and Izadi (2011). They concluded that candidates in defense sessions might directly accept a criticism to protect their own and examiners' *aberu* and *shaxsiat*.

Answer to RQ No.2: Providing Various Justifications by the Self-affirmed Candidates

The second research question investigated the effect of self-affirmation on the performance of the candidates. As it was stated earlier, self-affirmation is one's desire to protect the integrity and worth of the self. In this context, candidates may try to protect their self-integrity in different ways. They may present real causes or relevant responses for a question based on their knowledge, compare their thesis to other similar qualified studies, or to less qualified ones to justify their work, or they may derogate and blame other people in order to self-affirm. There were, however, candidates who did not try to self-affirm and protect their self-image, directly accepted negative evaluations from the examiners without providing further information. As a result, separation from examiners by providing irrelevant answers to the examiners' evaluations occurs.

Limitations of the Study

One major limitation of this study is that the recording of viva sessions needs a long time which is not possible for a thesis process. Thus, more viva sessions could provide more accurate results. Another limitation is about the setting of the study. The researchers had access to just two universities in Kerman and Shiraz cities, but considering other universities could increase the validity of the research. The content analysis of the data was done by only one expert. The researchers delimited this study to analyzing just verbal language and the non-verbal ones were excluded because they demanded a lot of time as well as having a special expertise.

Implications of the Study

Results of this study may have implications for all the participants in viva sessions. It can give insight to examiners of thesis defense sessions about the power of their discourse. The results may give good feedback to the supervisors for being actively engaged in the process of defense session. Finally, the results of this study can help viva candidates to recognize the self-affirmation strategies which work and those which don't. They can also benefit from the results by trying to protect their self-image while being reasonable and convincing at the same time.

Suggestions for Further Research

The number of recorded viva sessions is one of the limitations of this study. Therefore, future researchers are encouraged to record more thesis defense sessions to provide more valuable results. Future studies could also add an interview to the research. An interview which contains questions about candidates' self-image before the viva session could help researchers to engage in a more accurate analysis. Also researchers can replicate this study in the context of PhD viva sessions to see whether there is any specific difference between MA and PhD candidates.

Conclusion

Self-image maintenance is an important challenge in everyone's life and this issue would be more vital if it could have an impact on getting specific results. The process of self-affirmation was investigated here in the context of MA thesis defense sessions through extracting affirmation strategies from the candidates' responses to the examiners' criticisms. Self-affirmation helped candidates to reinterpret events in a way that maintain their self-integrity. The results indicated that accepting a negative evaluation was one of the widely used strategies. This may have various reasons such as candidates' lack of enough knowledge, concern for cultural concepts of *ta'arof* and *ehteram*, pursuit of a sense of connection with the examiner, or the candidates' wish to get the best score. Regarding the second frequent strategy, it was observed that enough knowledge and confidence of a candidate makes him/her to present real causes in response to any question to reaffirm and maintain self-integrity. On the contrary, some candidates attributed any failure or weakness in their theses to external factors or other people.

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