

# AN EXPLORATION OF FOURTH-SEMESTER STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS ON HOW VOCABULARY MASTERY AFFECTS THEIR SPEAKING ABILITY AT UNPARI

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**Abstract:** Vocabulary plays a central role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, particularly in speaking performance. This study explores the perceptions of fourth-semester English Education students at Universitas PGRI Silampari (UNPARI) regarding how vocabulary mastery affects their speaking ability. Using a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through open-ended questionnaires and analysed thematically. The findings revealed four major themes: speaking anxiety due to lexical limitations, compensatory strategies, vocabulary's role in message clarity, and the need for more contextual vocabulary instruction. It can be concluded that vocabulary mastery has a significant impact on students' fluency, confidence, and clarity in speaking. The implication of this study highlights the need for curriculum designers and educators to integrate more vocabulary-focused speaking activities in EFL classrooms to enhance communicative competence. Future studies are recommended to expand the scope to different proficiency levels or institutions to generalize the findings.

**Keywords:** EFL, speaking ability, student perception, vocabulary mastery

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## INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of second language acquisition, playing a critical role in all aspects of communication, especially speaking. Without sufficient vocabulary, learners often find it difficult to express themselves fluently and accurately. Nation (2022) emphasizes that vocabulary serves as the foundation upon which other language skills are built, and speaking, being an expressive and productive skill, is particularly dependent on lexical knowledge. Teng (2022) further highlights that learners with limited vocabulary tend to hesitate

more and lack confidence during oral tasks. According to Dano et al. (2023), strong vocabulary control enables learners to produce speech that is clearer and more structured. Fitriani & Wijayanto (2024) also assert that lexical mastery plays a key role in communicative competence, particularly in EFL environments. More recently, Arifin (2025) notes that vocabulary instruction tailored to real-life speaking contexts can significantly improve learners' oral fluency.

Speaking fluency requires the ability to access and apply appropriate words quickly and correctly during real-time interaction. According to Schmitt and Schmitt (2022), vocabulary knowledge not only influences the complexity of spoken language but also affects the speaker's confidence and ability to maintain meaningful conversation. Learners with limited vocabulary tend to rely heavily on repetition or filler words and often experience communication breakdowns (Khairani, 2023). Nasution & Hidayat (2022) found that vocabulary retrieval speed directly influences learners' ability to sustain dialogue. Salsabila et al. (2023) suggest that poor vocabulary mastery correlates with students' increased anxiety during speaking performance. Meanwhile, Azis (2024) emphasizes that learners with rich vocabulary perform better in both fluency and grammatical accuracy, indicating the integrative role vocabulary plays in real-time communication.

In the Indonesian higher education setting, particularly at regional institutions such as Universitas PGRI Silampari (UNPARI), the issue of vocabulary limitations continues to affect students' speaking abilities. Despite curriculum expectations that encourage communicative competence, many students express difficulty in articulating their thoughts due to inadequate vocabulary retention or contextual understanding (Aulia & Setiawan, 2021). Rahmawati & Yuliana (2022) argue that the traditional vocabulary instruction model is no longer sufficient for preparing students for practical speaking tasks. Anggraini et al. (2023) observed that learners from rural universities show more hesitation in oral tasks due to limited lexical exposure. Recent findings by Wulandari & Nugroho (2024) highlight that vocabulary gaps are a major factor in reduced speaking confidence among EFL university students. In addition, Yuniarti (2025) suggests integrating communicative vocabulary tasks in classrooms to close the gap between instruction and actual speaking performance.

In recent years, a growing body of research has highlighted the need to explore students' subjective experiences, perspectives, and beliefs about language learning in order to design more effective teaching approaches. As Godwin-Jones (2023) argues, language instruction

should account for learners' voices and lived experiences to ensure engagement and relevance. Harahap & Ramli (2022) stress that learners' perceptions are often overlooked in curriculum planning, which results in ineffective vocabulary teaching methods. According to Bakri et al. (2023), including students' reflections in language research can reveal unseen factors affecting speaking performance. Yusnita (2024) points out that students' self-awareness about vocabulary limitations often motivates them to seek more meaningful learning strategies. Furthermore, Pratama (2025) recommends incorporating reflective practices and feedback loops into speaking instruction to better address learners' real challenges.

Given this background, the present study aims to explore the perceptions of fourth-semester English Education students at UNPARI regarding how vocabulary mastery affects their speaking ability. Rather than focusing on numerical measurements, this research investigates how students interpret their own learning experiences and the role vocabulary plays in their oral performance. As supported by Creswell & Poth (2022), qualitative studies can uncover learners' deep-seated beliefs and challenges that may not appear in quantitative data. Siregar & Fauzan (2023) assert that exploring learner perspectives provides valuable input for instructional design. Lestari (2024) notes that understanding students' challenges with vocabulary helps educators formulate more relevant speaking activities. According to Rachmawati (2025), insights from learners' narratives can strengthen pedagogical decisions and language support systems. Therefore, this study is expected to offer practical implications for EFL educators, particularly those teaching in similar educational and cultural contexts in Indonesia. This study addresses the following research question: "How do fourth-semester English Education students at UNPARI perceive the influence of vocabulary mastery on their speaking ability?"

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive approach, aiming to explore students' personal perceptions and lived experiences regarding the influence of vocabulary mastery on their speaking ability. A qualitative approach is chosen because it allows the researcher to gather in-depth information, interpret participants' perspectives, and understand meaning through their own words and reflections (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Rather than measuring variables or testing

hypotheses, the study focused on understanding the phenomenon from the students' point of view, making it suitable for uncovering nuanced insights in the EFL learning context.

## **Research Subject**

The participants consisted of 23 fourth-semester students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas PGRI Silampari (UNPARI). These participants were selected through purposive sampling, as they represent a specific population with relevant learning experiences in both vocabulary and speaking courses. All participants are actively enrolled in the current academic year and have completed foundational English subjects, making them appropriate informants for this study. The sample size is considered adequate for qualitative research, where the goal is depth rather than breadth of information.

Data in this study were collected using an open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire is designed to explore students' perceptions regarding how vocabulary mastery influences their speaking ability. It consisted of several open-ended questions that encourage participants to reflect on their personal experiences, learning strategies, and challenges related to vocabulary use during speaking tasks. The use of an open-ended questionnaire allows for a broader range of responses while maintaining flexibility and depth in the data. It also enables participants to provide thoughtful answers without the time constraints commonly associated with interviews.

## **Data Collecting**

Participants were given the open-ended questionnaire to complete individually. The questionnaire can be completed either in written form or digitally, depending on students' preferences and accessibility. Before distributing the questionnaire, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and obtain informed consent from each participant. Ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were upheld throughout the data collection process. The completed responses were then collected and prepared for analysis.

## **Data Analysis**

The data from interviews and written reflections will be analyzed using thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022): familiarization with data, coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, and defining them. The researcher coded the transcripts manually, looking for recurring patterns, key phrases, and emotional cues that indicate students' beliefs and experiences. Themes such as "vocabulary-related speaking anxiety," "importance of word choice," "learning strategies," and "classroom vocabulary support" will be identified. Thematic analysis is chosen because it is flexible, accessible, and effective for making sense of qualitative data in educational settings.

Additionally, after familiarizing with the data, the researcher manually generated initial codes based on recurring phrases and expressions in the participants' responses. These initial codes served as the foundation for constructing meaningful themes, such as speaking anxiety, lexical gaps, and vocabulary strategies.

## RESEARCH RESULT

The following findings are presented to address the stated research question and illustrate how vocabulary mastery affects students' speaking performance.

### Finding

#### Thematic Analysis Process

After completing the familiarization and coding stages, the initial codes were grouped into sub-themes and further developed into four main themes. The coding tree below illustrates the thematic structure derived from participants' responses. Thematic analysis produced four major themes, as shown in Table 1.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Student Response
Speaking Anxiety due to Lexical Deficiency	Vocabulary Recall Difficulties	“Saya sering tahu apa yang ingin saya sampaikan, tapi tidak tahu kata-katanya...”
	Lexical Gaps in Speaking	“Jadi saya berhenti bicara atau hanya bilang ‘uhm... uhm...’.”
	Reduced Confidence in Speaking	“Saya jadi tidak percaya diri.”
Strategies for Overcoming Vocabulary Limitations	Verbal Compensation Strategies	“Kalau saya lupa satu kata, saya coba ganti dengan kata lain yang mirip.”

<https://www.publicresearchstudy.my.id/index.php/TGES>

Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Student Response
	Non-Verbal Communication Tools	“Saya pakai gesture supaya orang mengerti maksud saya.”
The Role of Vocabulary in Message Delivery	Vocabulary and Clarity	“Saya bisa menjelaskan pendapat saya dengan lebih jelas dan tidak muter-muter.”
	Lexical Precision and Impact	“Kalau saya pakai kata yang lebih spesifik, pembicaraan saya lebih dipahami...”
Pedagogical Needs in Vocabulary Teaching	Gap in Instructional Method	“Kita sering disuruh hafal vocabulary, tapi jarang dipraktikkan dalam speaking.”
	Practical Vocabulary Learning Needs	“Saya harap dosen memberi latihan vocabulary yang langsung dipakai untuk bicara.”

## Discussion

### Description of Emerged Themes

#### Theme 1: Speaking Anxiety due to Lexical Deficiency

This theme describes students' experiences of anxiety and hesitation during speaking activities due to limited vocabulary recall. The data reveal that a lack of lexical resources often results in communication breakdowns and reduced confidence. Participants expressed frustration when they knew what they wanted to say but were unable to find the appropriate words in English. One participant stated:

“Saya sering tahu apa yang ingin saya sampaikan, tapi tidak tahu kata-katanya dalam bahasa Inggris.”

*“I often know what I want to say, but I don’t know the words in English.”*

This response was coded as "limited vocabulary recall", which reflects difficulties in retrieving the necessary lexical items during spontaneous speech. Such difficulties often led to hesitation and the use of fillers, as noted by another participant:

“Jadi saya berhenti bicara atau hanya bilang ‘uhm... uhm...’.”

*“So, I stop talking or just say ‘uhm... uhm...’.”*

This was labeled as "use of fillers due to lexical gaps", illustrating the common strategy of stalling when vocabulary fails to emerge. These lexical barriers not only disrupted fluency but also impacted students' self-confidence, as evidenced by the following quote:

“Saya jadi tidak percaya diri.”  
(“I lose my confidence.”)

This final quote was coded as "speaking anxiety due to vocabulary limitation", suggesting that a lack of vocabulary can lead to emotional consequences such as fear, insecurity, and reduced willingness to participate in speaking tasks.

These findings align with Teng (2022) and Salsabila et al. (2023), who argue that vocabulary limitations are a major contributor to speaking anxiety in EFL learners. The emotional impact of lexical gaps underlines the need for integrated vocabulary and speaking instruction, where learners are supported both linguistically and psychologically.

## **Theme 2: Strategies for Overcoming Vocabulary Limitations**

This theme focuses on the strategies that students used to cope with vocabulary-related challenges during speaking activities. Instead of remaining silent when they forgot a word, many participants reported employing alternative tactics to maintain communication. These strategies are consistent with the concept of compensation strategies in second language acquisition, which help learners fill lexical gaps in real-time interactions.

One participant shared:

“Kalau saya lupa satu kata, saya coba ganti dengan kata lain yang mirip.”  
(“If I forget one word, I try to replace it with another similar word.”)

This quote was coded as "compensation through paraphrasing", indicating that the student used their lexical flexibility to maintain fluency. Paraphrasing allows speakers to convey meaning even when their vocabulary recall is limited. Another participant emphasized the use of physical gestures to support verbal expression:

“Saya pakai gesture supaya orang mengerti maksud saya.”  
(“I use gestures so that people understand what I mean.”)

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This response was labeled as "compensation through non-verbal cues", demonstrating the role of body language as a communicative aid when verbal vocabulary is insufficient.

These findings align with Oxford's (1990) theory of language learning strategies, particularly compensatory strategies used by learners to bridge gaps in communication. They also support the idea that even students with limited vocabulary can remain communicative and interactive by applying flexible and adaptive strategies during speaking tasks (Teng, 2022).

### **Theme 3: The Role of Vocabulary in Message Delivery**

This theme highlights students' awareness of how vocabulary directly affects the clarity and effectiveness of their spoken communication. Participants emphasized that having the right words helped them express their ideas more clearly and reduced misunderstandings during conversations.

One participant expressed:

“Saya bisa menjelaskan pendapat saya dengan lebih jelas dan tidak muter-muter.”  
(*“I can explain my opinion more clearly and not go in circles.”*)

This statement was coded as "vocabulary aids message clarity". It shows that sufficient vocabulary enables students to articulate thoughts with greater precision, leading to more structured and effective speech. The participant's use of the phrase “tidak muter-muter” suggests that vocabulary helps avoid vague or confusing explanations.

Another participant commented:

“Kalau saya pakai kata yang lebih spesifik, pembicaraan saya lebih dipahami.”  
(*“If I use more specific words, my conversation is more easily understood.”*)

This was labeled as "importance of precise word choice". It indicates that lexical precision enhances listener comprehension and reduces the need for repetition or clarification. The ability to choose accurate vocabulary supports both the fluency and intelligibility of speech.

These findings support Schmitt and Schmitt (2022), who assert that vocabulary knowledge influences the clarity and complexity of spoken language. In line with Azis (2024), specific and contextually appropriate word use improves both communicative effectiveness and grammatical accuracy.

This theme underlines that vocabulary is not only a building block of language but also a powerful tool for shaping meaning in communication. For learners, developing a broader and more precise vocabulary range directly contributes to more impactful spoken performance.

#### **Theme 4: Pedagogical Needs in Vocabulary Teaching**

This theme explores students' reflections on how vocabulary was taught in class and their desire for more practical, speaking-oriented learning methods. Many participants expressed that current vocabulary instruction often emphasized memorization rather than real-life application, which left them unprepared for actual speaking tasks.

One participant shared:

“Kita sering disuruh hafal vocabulary, tapi jarang dipraktikkan dalam speaking.”  
(*“We are often told to memorize vocabulary, but we rarely practice it in speaking.”*)

This was coded as "lack of speaking-oriented vocabulary instruction". It suggests that vocabulary learning was treated as an isolated activity, disconnected from the communicative context in which learners are expected to use it. As a result, students struggled to transfer what they had memorized into spontaneous speech.

Another participant noted:

“Saya harap dosen memberi latihan vocabulary yang langsung dipakai untuk bicara.”  
(*“I hope lecturers give vocabulary exercises that can be used directly for speaking.”*)

This quote was labeled as "need for contextual vocabulary practice". It reflects a clear expectation for vocabulary instruction that is integrated with speaking activities, such as role-play, dialogue creation, or situational tasks.

These insights align with Rahmawati and Yuliana (2022), who argued that traditional methods of vocabulary teaching are no longer sufficient to meet communicative needs. Yuniarti (2025) also emphasized that vocabulary instruction should be contextualized and linked directly to the learners' communicative goals.

Overall, this theme reveals that students are aware of the limitations of current pedagogical approaches and advocate for a more meaningful and functional way to learn vocabulary—one that not only builds lexical knowledge but also bridges it with active speaking performance.

### **Summary of Findings**

The thematic analysis of participants' responses revealed four main themes that reflect how vocabulary mastery influences their speaking performance. First, speaking anxiety due to lexical deficiency emerged as a common issue, where students reported hesitation, the use of fillers, and a lack of confidence when they were unable to recall the appropriate vocabulary. Second, participants demonstrated strategies for overcoming vocabulary limitations, such as paraphrasing and using non-verbal cues like gestures to compensate for missing words.

The third theme highlighted the role of vocabulary in message delivery, with students emphasizing that having a sufficient and precise vocabulary helped them express their ideas more clearly and effectively. Finally, students expressed the need for improved vocabulary teaching practices, indicating that current instruction often focused on memorization rather than practical speaking use. They advocated for vocabulary exercises that are contextual and directly applicable to real-life speaking situations.

Together, these findings suggest that vocabulary mastery is deeply intertwined with students' emotional, cognitive, and communicative experiences in speaking. They also point to a clear pedagogical implication: vocabulary teaching should be meaningfully integrated into speaking activities to reduce anxiety, support strategy use, and enhance clarity in communication.

## **CONCLUSION**

### **Conclusion**

This study explored the perceptions of fourth-semester English Education students at Universitas PGRI Silampari (UNPARI) regarding the influence of vocabulary mastery on their speaking ability. Through thematic analysis of participants' responses, four main themes were identified: (1) speaking anxiety due to lexical deficiency, (2) strategies for overcoming vocabulary limitations, (3) the role of vocabulary in message delivery, and (4) pedagogical needs in vocabulary teaching.

The findings revealed that vocabulary mastery significantly impacts students' confidence, fluency, and clarity during speaking tasks. Limited vocabulary often caused hesitation, the use of fillers, and a decline in speaking confidence. However, students actively used paraphrasing and gestures as compensatory strategies to maintain communication. Moreover, students recognized that having precise and appropriate vocabulary contributed to more effective message delivery. They also expressed a desire for vocabulary instruction that is more practical, contextual, and directly linked to speaking practice.

These results highlight the importance of integrating vocabulary learning into communicative tasks and considering students' perspectives in designing classroom instruction. Vocabulary mastery should not only focus on memorization but also on meaningful use, enabling learners to express themselves fluently and confidently in real-life speaking situations.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the findings, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. For EFL Lecturers:

Vocabulary instruction should be contextualized and incorporated into speaking activities. Exercises such as role-plays, situational dialogues, and vocabulary-based speaking tasks can help students practice lexical items in real-time communication.

2. For Students:

Learners are encouraged to actively use new vocabulary in speaking, not just memorize word lists. Engaging in self-practice, using paraphrasing, and incorporating gestures can enhance communication and build confidence.

3. For Future Researchers:

Further research may expand the participant scope to include students from different semesters or universities, or compare perceptions across levels of proficiency. Mixed-

method approaches could also provide richer insights into the link between vocabulary development and speaking performance.

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