

## Navigating Vocabulary Limitations: Conversation Control Strategies of Indonesian EFL University Students

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### ABSTRACT

Vocabulary limitation remains a major challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking, particularly in higher education contexts. However, few studies have explored how learners perceive their vocabulary limitations and how they manage them in real-time communication. This study aimed to investigate Indonesian EFL university students' perceptions of vocabulary limitation and the conversation control strategies they employ. A descriptive qualitative design was used, involving 20 students through an open-ended questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The findings revealed that students perceived their vocabulary as sufficient for basic communication but limited in more complex contexts. Vocabulary limitation affected both speaking performance, leading to hesitation and simplification, and psychological factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence. To overcome these challenges, students employed various strategies, including paraphrasing, code-switching, using gestures, asking for help, and using fillers. These findings highlight the importance of integrating strategic competence into language teaching to support effective communication.

**Keywords:** *Vocabulary Limitation, Speaking, Communication Strategies, EFL Students, Strategic Competence.*

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### INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery is widely recognized as a fundamental component of second and foreign language learning, particularly in spoken communication. It provides learners with the linguistic resources necessary to express ideas, negotiate meaning, and sustain interaction effectively (Nation, 2001). In the absence of sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners often struggle to articulate thoughts, respond appropriately, and maintain conversational flow. Consequently, vocabulary limitation remains one of the most persistent challenges in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking.

In EFL contexts, vocabulary functions not merely as a component of language proficiency but as the primary tool for communication. Learners rely heavily on lexical knowledge to convey meaning, express opinions, and participate in interaction. The relationship between vocabulary and speaking performance has been well established, with studies indicating that vocabulary size and depth significantly influence fluency, lexical diversity, and overall oral proficiency (Uchihara & Clenton, 2020). However, vocabulary knowledge is not a uniform construct. It involves both lexical breadth, referring to the number of words learners know, and lexical depth, referring to how well those words are understood and used appropriately (Luo et al., 2021). Many EFL learners possess sufficient breadth to engage in basic communication but lack the depth required to express complex, precise, or contextually appropriate ideas.

This imbalance between lexical breadth and depth contributes to vocabulary limitation, which has been widely identified as a major barrier to effective communication. Learners with limited vocabulary often experience hesitation, frequent pauses, and reliance on simplified or repetitive expressions (Rahman & Isroyana, 2021). As a result, their spoken output tends to lack fluency, complexity, and clarity. In addition to affecting fluency, vocabulary limitation

also restricts learners' ability to construct more sophisticated utterances, leading them to avoid complex structures and rely on basic language forms (Wang-Taylor & Clenton, 2022). These findings suggest that vocabulary limitation not only reduces the quality of communication but also constrains learners' overall communicative development.

Beyond its linguistic impact, vocabulary limitation also has important psychological consequences. Learners frequently report feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and lack of confidence when they are unable to express themselves adequately (Liu et al., 2023). These affective factors are closely related to learners' willingness to communicate, which plays a crucial role in language acquisition. Learners who perceive their vocabulary as limited are more likely to avoid speaking situations due to fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood (Amerstorfer & Freiin von Münster-Kistner, 2021). This avoidance reduces opportunities for interaction and practice, thereby reinforcing their vocabulary limitation. In this sense, vocabulary limitation operates as both a linguistic and psychological barrier, creating a cycle that hinders language development.

Vocabulary limitation can also be understood within the framework of communicative competence proposed by (Canale & Swain, 1980), which emphasizes that successful communication involves not only grammatical knowledge but also sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Among these components, strategic competence is particularly relevant to learners with limited vocabulary because it refers to the ability to use verbal and non-verbal strategies to overcome communication problems and maintain interaction. Thus, students who lack lexical resources may still communicate effectively when they are able to employ appropriate communication strategies.

Furthermore, (Bachman, 1990) explains that language ability includes both organizational competence and pragmatic competence supported by strategic competence. This perspective suggests that vocabulary limitation does not necessarily result in communication failure, as learners may compensate through paraphrasing, approximation, code-switching, or asking for clarification. Therefore, examining students' perceptions of vocabulary limitation together with their strategic responses provides a more comprehensive understanding of spoken communication in EFL contexts.

Despite these challenges, learners are not passive recipients of difficulty. Research in second language acquisition highlights that learners actively employ communication strategies to overcome linguistic limitations and achieve their communicative goals. According to (Claus Færch & Gabriele Kasper 1983), communication strategies are conscious problem-solving mechanisms employed by language learners when they encounter difficulties in expressing their intended meaning. These strategies are used to compensate for gaps in linguistic knowledge and to maintain the flow of interaction. Faerch and Kasper classified communication strategies into two major categories: reduction strategies and achievement strategies. Reduction strategies occur when learners modify, simplify, or abandon part of their original message because of limited language resources. In contrast, achievement strategies are used when learners attempt to preserve their communicative goal by utilizing alternative means of expression. Such strategies may include paraphrasing, approximation, code-switching, restructuring utterances, asking for assistance, and using nonverbal cues such as gestures. Through these strategies, learners are able to maintain communication and prevent breakdowns, even when their vocabulary knowledge is limited. This study primarily adopts Claus Færch and Gabriele Kasper's (1983) framework as the main analytical lens.

Within this framework, conversation control strategies can be understood as a functional dimension of communication strategies that focuses on managing interaction in real time. These strategies involve maintaining conversational flow, negotiating meaning, and repairing communication breakdowns. They reflect learners' strategic competence, which is a key component of communicative competence. Strategic competence allows learners to adapt their language use to situational demands, demonstrating that effective communication depends not only on linguistic knowledge but also on the ability to use that knowledge flexibly and creatively (Mao & He, 2021; Riazi, 2021).

However, despite the growing body of research on vocabulary and communication strategies, existing studies tend to examine these aspects separately. Research on vocabulary often focuses on acquisition and measurable outcomes, while studies on communication strategies emphasize observable behavior without fully considering the underlying psychological and perceptual factors. As a result, there is limited understanding of how learners' perceptions of their own vocabulary limitations influence their communication behavior and strategy use. In the Indonesian EFL context, this gap is particularly evident, as most studies have focused on vocabulary mastery or general speaking difficulties rather than the interaction between perception, limitation, and strategic response (Rahman & Isroyana, 2021; Siregar, 2020).

This fragmentation in the literature highlights a critical need for a more integrated approach. Vocabulary limitation should not be understood solely as a lack of lexical knowledge but as a dynamic phenomenon shaped by the interaction of linguistic resources, psychological factors, and strategic behavior. Learners' perceptions of their vocabulary ability may influence their confidence, willingness to communicate, and choice of strategies, ultimately affecting their performance in spoken interaction (Heidari, 2024).

In response to this gap, the present study aims to explore Indonesian EFL university students' perceptions of vocabulary limitation and the conversation control strategies they employ in spoken communication. By integrating these dimensions within a single analytical framework, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of how learners navigate communication challenges in real time. This integrative perspective constitutes the novelty of the study, as it moves beyond isolated analyses of vocabulary or strategy use and instead examines their interrelationship in authentic communicative contexts.

Accordingly, this study is guided by the following research questions: *How do Indonesian EFL university students perceive their vocabulary limitations in speaking English? How does vocabulary limitation affect students' speaking performance and psychological state?, and What conversation control strategies do students use to manage vocabulary limitations in spoken interaction?*

## METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to investigate Indonesian EFL university students' perceptions of vocabulary limitation and the conversation control strategies they employ during spoken interaction. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as the study seeks to capture participants' subjective experiences and meaning-making processes in natural communicative contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Denzin, 2018). Rather than quantifying linguistic performance, this study focuses on how learners interpret their own limitations and strategically respond to them during communication.

## Participants

This study involved twenty undergraduate students enrolled in an English Education program at a public university in Indonesia. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, as the study required individuals who had relevant experience in using English for spoken communication. In qualitative research, purposive sampling is commonly employed to recruit participants who are able to provide rich and meaningful information related to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

Several criteria were applied to ensure the relevance of the data. Participants were required to have completed speaking-related courses and to be actively engaged in English-speaking activities, such as classroom discussions, presentations, or group interactions. These criteria ensured that participants had sufficient exposure to spoken English and were able to reflect meaningfully on their communicative experiences. The participants were from the second to fourth year of study and had varying levels of English proficiency, ranging from intermediate to upper-intermediate based on their academic performance and classroom participation.

In addition to the questionnaire respondents, four participants were selected for follow-up interviews. These participants were chosen based on the depth, clarity, and

relevance of their questionnaire responses, allowing for a more detailed exploration of their perceptions and communication strategies. This step enabled the study to obtain richer insights and develop a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

The number of participants was considered appropriate for qualitative inquiry, as the study prioritized depth of understanding rather than generalizability. The sample size allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and facilitated thematic saturation, defined as the point at which no substantially new insights emerge from the data (Denzin, 2018). To ensure ethical compliance, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary involvement. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all participants using pseudonyms, thereby protecting their identities throughout the research process.

## **Instruments**

Data were collected using two instruments: an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The use of multiple instruments was intended to obtain rich and complementary data, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of participants' perceptions and communicative strategies.

The open-ended questionnaire consisted of ten questions organized into two main domains: (1) students' perceptions of vocabulary limitation in speaking, and (2) strategies used to manage communication difficulties. This instrument was selected for its ability to elicit detailed, reflective responses while providing participants with flexibility in expressing their experiences in their own words (Plano Clark, 2017). Open-ended formats are particularly suitable for qualitative inquiry, as they enable participants to elaborate on their thoughts without being constrained by predetermined response options.

To complement the questionnaire data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four selected participants. The interviews aimed to gain deeper insights into participants' experiences, clarify their questionnaire responses, and explore their use of conversation control strategies in greater depth. An interview guide was developed to ensure consistency across interviews while still allowing flexibility for probing and follow-up questions. This approach enabled the researcher to capture both anticipated and emerging themes during the interaction.

To ensure the quality of the instruments, content validity was established through expert review by a lecturer in the field of English language teaching. The instruments were also evaluated through peer review to assess clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility (Patten, 2016). Based on the feedback, revisions were made to improve wording, eliminate ambiguity, and ensure alignment with the research objectives. This validation process was intended to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data collection instruments.

## **Procedures**

The data collection process began with the distribution of the open-ended questionnaire to participants via an online platform. Prior to participation, all participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained before they proceeded with the questionnaire, ensuring that participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any consequences. Participants were also assured that their responses would be treated confidentially and used solely for research purposes.

Participants were encouraged to provide detailed and honest responses in order to capture their authentic experiences and perspectives. This step was essential to ensure the richness and depth of the qualitative data collected. Following the completion of the questionnaire, four participants were invited to participate in follow-up semi-structured interviews. The selection was based on the depth and relevance of their initial responses. The interviews were conducted online and were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent. Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and allowed for further exploration of participants' perceptions of vocabulary limitation and their use of conversation control strategies.

After data collection, all questionnaire responses and interview recordings were transcribed and organized systematically. The researcher conducted repeated readings of the data to become familiar with the content and to identify preliminary patterns. This process of data familiarization served as an initial step in the analysis, enabling the researcher to gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences related to vocabulary limitation and communication strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Data analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved six stages. First, the researcher familiarized herself with the data by reading and re-reading the questionnaire responses and interview transcripts. Second, initial codes were generated inductively by identifying meaningful units related to vocabulary limitation, psychological responses, and communication strategies. Third, the codes were grouped into broader categories to form potential themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and clear distinctions between categories. Fifth, the themes were defined and named, resulting in four main themes: (1) perceived vocabulary limitation, (2) impact on speaking performance, (3) psychological effects, and (4) conversation control strategies. Finally, the themes were interpreted in relation to the theoretical framework of communication strategies proposed by Faerch and Kasper (1983).

To enhance analytical rigor, representative excerpts from both questionnaire and interview data were included to support each theme. The analysis was conducted iteratively, allowing the researcher to revisit the data multiple times to ensure accuracy and depth of interpretation. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies were employed. Data triangulation was achieved by combining questionnaire and interview data, allowing for cross-validation of findings and a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. In addition, peer debriefing was conducted to review the coding process and ensure consistency in interpretation. The study also employed thick description by providing detailed explanations and direct quotations from participants, enabling readers to understand the context and meaning of the findings. Furthermore, the researcher engaged in iterative analysis by revisiting the data multiple times to ensure that the interpretations accurately reflected participants' perspectives.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Students' Perceptions of Vocabulary Limitation

The findings of this study indicate that Indonesian EFL university students generally perceive their vocabulary knowledge as sufficient for basic communication but limited when dealing with more complex, academic, or unfamiliar topics. This perception reflects a clear distinction between everyday communicative competence and more advanced language use, suggesting that students are aware of the boundaries of their lexical resources (Heidari, 2024). From a theoretical perspective, this distinction can be understood within the framework of communicative competence proposed by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980), where learners may demonstrate basic communicative ability while still lacking the linguistic resources required for more complex discourse. This indicates that students' self-perception is not merely subjective but reflects an underlying awareness of their communicative limitations.

Many participants described their vocabulary level as "basic," "limited," or "enough for daily conversation but not for academic discussion." For instance, one participant stated, *"I think my vocabulary is enough for daily conversation, but when I talk about academic topics, I feel limited"*. Similarly, another participant explained, *"My vocabulary is quite basic, so I can communicate, but not in a complex way"*.

These responses suggest that vocabulary limitation is not perceived as a complete barrier to communication, but rather as a constraint that becomes more salient in cognitively demanding contexts. Students appear to possess what may be described as "survival vocabulary," enabling them to maintain basic interaction, yet insufficient for expressing

nuanced or abstract ideas. This aligns with previous research indicating that EFL learners often develop functional communicative ability without achieving lexical depth or flexibility (Uchihara et al., 2025).

Furthermore, participants identified specific contexts in which their vocabulary limitations become more apparent. Academic discussions, formal presentations, and interactions with more proficient speakers were frequently mentioned as challenging situations. One participant noted, *"I usually feel limited when I have to explain something in detail or during presentations"*, while another stated, *"When I speak with fluent speakers, I feel like I don't have enough vocabulary"*.

This context-dependent perception highlights that vocabulary limitation is not static but varies according to communicative demands. It also suggests that students' awareness of their limitations is influenced by social and academic expectations, where higher levels of linguistic precision and complexity are required. Another important finding is that students associate vocabulary limitation with difficulty in expressing ideas accurately and completely. Several participants reported that they often know what they want to say but cannot find the appropriate words to express it. For example, one participant stated, *"Sometimes I know the idea in my mind, but I cannot express it because I don't know the words"*.

This indicates a gap between conceptual knowledge and linguistic expression, which is a common issue in second language learning. The inability to retrieve appropriate lexical items disrupts the encoding process in speech production, leading to incomplete or simplified messages. From a theoretical perspective, this supports the view that vocabulary knowledge is essential not only for comprehension but also for effective production in spoken communication (Nation, 2001). The findings demonstrate that students possess a clear awareness of their vocabulary limitations, particularly in relation to communicative context and task complexity. This awareness plays a crucial role in shaping how they approach speaking tasks and how they respond to communicative challenges. Importantly, this study contributes to the existing literature by showing that vocabulary limitation should be understood not only as a linguistic issue but also as a perceptual and context-dependent phenomenon, where learners actively evaluate their abilities and adjust their communication accordingly. This highlights the need to consider learners' perceptions as a key factor in understanding speaking performance in EFL contexts.

The findings further reveal that vocabulary limitation has a significant impact on both students' speaking performance and their psychological state. These effects are closely interconnected, as linguistic difficulty often triggers emotional responses that influence communicative behavior. From a theoretical perspective, this relationship reflects the role of strategic competence within communicative competence, as proposed by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain (1980), where learners must manage both linguistic limitations and communicative demands simultaneously. This suggests that vocabulary limitation is not only a linguistic issue but also a factor that shapes learners' overall communicative experience.

From a performance perspective, participants reported several observable difficulties, including hesitation, pauses, repetition, and simplification of ideas. One participant explained, *"When I don't know the word, I usually pause for a long time or repeat simple words"*. Another stated, *"Sometimes I simplify my sentence because I don't know the exact word"*.

These behaviors indicate that vocabulary limitation disrupts fluency, which is a key component of speaking proficiency. Instead of producing smooth and continuous speech, students experience breakdowns that interrupt the flow of communication. As a result, their spoken output becomes less coherent and less effective in conveying meaning. In addition, participants reported that vocabulary limitation affects their ability to express complex or precise ideas. One participant noted, *"I cannot explain my ideas clearly because I don't have enough vocabulary"*. This suggests that lexical limitation constrains not only fluency but also accuracy and complexity, leading to reduced communicative quality.

Beyond linguistic performance, vocabulary limitation also has a strong psychological impact. Many participants reported feelings of anxiety, nervousness, and lack of confidence when speaking English. For example, one participant stated, *"I feel nervous when I cannot find*

the right words", while another explained, "It makes me less confident because I am afraid of making mistakes". In more extreme cases, vocabulary limitation led to avoidance behavior. One participant expressed, "Sometimes I prefer not to speak because I feel embarrassed if I cannot express my ideas". This finding is particularly significant, as it shows that vocabulary limitation can reduce learners' willingness to communicate, which is essential for language development.

The relationship between vocabulary limitation and psychological factors can be understood through the concept of affective barriers in language learning. When learners experience anxiety or fear of negative evaluation, their cognitive resources are partially diverted away from language processing, further exacerbating communication difficulties. This creates a cycle in which linguistic limitation leads to anxiety, which in turn worsens performance (Liu et al., 2023).

These findings are consistent with previous research highlighting the link between vocabulary knowledge, confidence, and speaking performance. However, this study extends existing literature by showing how these factors are experienced and articulated by learners themselves, providing a more nuanced understanding of the issue. Specifically, it demonstrates that vocabulary limitation should be viewed not only as a deficit in linguistic knowledge but also as a dynamic interaction between cognitive, linguistic, and emotional factors that shape learners' communicative behavior.

The findings indicate that vocabulary limitation has both direct and indirect effects on speaking performance. It directly affects fluency, accuracy, and complexity, while indirectly influencing confidence, anxiety, and willingness to communicate. These results highlight the importance of addressing both linguistic and affective dimensions in language teaching, as improving vocabulary alone may not be sufficient without also supporting learners' confidence and emotional readiness to communicate.

### **Conversation Control Strategies Used by Students**

Despite the challenges associated with vocabulary limitation, the findings demonstrate that students actively employ a range of strategies to maintain communication. These strategies correspond to the concept of communication strategies proposed by Faerch and Kasper (1983), which describe the techniques learners use to overcome linguistic difficulties during interaction. Rather than allowing communication to break down, students attempt to adapt their language use and manage interaction in ways that enable them to convey meaning effectively. These strategies reflect learners' strategic competence, a key component of communicative competence that enables individuals to overcome communication breakdowns and maintain interaction (Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1980). This finding suggests that learners are not passive recipients of linguistic limitations, but active problem-solvers who strategically manage communication in real time.

Analysis of the questionnaire responses reveals several commonly used strategies. Students frequently reported using simpler words to replace unfamiliar vocabulary, as well as paraphrasing to express ideas when specific lexical items were unavailable. In addition, code-switching was often employed, particularly in peer interactions, allowing students to insert elements of their first language to maintain conversational flow. Non-verbal strategies, such as the use of gestures, were also utilized to support meaning-making. Furthermore, some students reported asking for help from their interlocutors when encountering difficulties, while others relied on fillers to gain time to think and avoid long pauses during speech. These patterns indicate that students employ both verbal and non-verbal strategies, highlighting the multimodal nature of communication in EFL contexts.

These findings are similar to Rahman and Isroyana (2021), who found that Indonesian EFL learners frequently use communication strategies such as code-switching, approximation, and asking for assistance to maintain interaction. However, the present study extends these findings by demonstrating that strategy use is closely linked to learners' perception of their own vocabulary limitation, suggesting that internal awareness plays a crucial role in triggering strategic behavior.

## Using Simpler Words and Paraphrasing

One of the most frequently used strategies among students is simplifying language and paraphrasing to manage vocabulary limitations during spoken interaction. When learners are unable to recall specific lexical items, they tend to replace them with more familiar or general expressions to ensure that their message remains understandable. For instance, one participant stated, *"If I don't know the word, I use a simpler word with similar meaning,"* while another explained, *"I try to explain it in another way or use simple sentences."* In addition, paraphrasing was commonly used, as reflected in responses such as, *"If I forget a word, I describe it using other words."* These examples indicate that learners actively reformulate their utterances to maintain communication.

From a theoretical perspective, these strategies reflect learners' ability to prioritize meaning over linguistic accuracy. Rather than abandoning communication, they adapt their language to fit their available resources. This supports the concept of communication strategies proposed by Claus Færch and Gabriele Kasper (1983), who define such strategies as problem-solving mechanisms used to achieve communicative goals. Similarly, Dörnyei and Scott (1997), categorize paraphrasing and simplification as compensatory strategies that enable learners to maintain interaction when lexical retrieval fails.

These findings also suggest that learners possess a degree of strategic competence, allowing them to manipulate their linguistic resources flexibly in real-time communication. This indicates that even with limited vocabulary, learners can maintain communicative effectiveness by adjusting their language use according to situational demands. However, while simplification and paraphrasing facilitate interaction, frequent reliance on these strategies may limit the use of more complex vocabulary. This implies a potential trade-off between communicative fluency and linguistic development, as learners may prioritize immediate understanding over language expansion. Nevertheless, they remain essential in helping learners sustain communication despite vocabulary constraints.

## Code-Switching

Code-switching was another commonly reported strategy, particularly in interactions with peers who share the same first language. When students encountered difficulty in recalling English vocabulary, they switched to Indonesian to maintain the flow of communication. For example, one participant stated, *"Sometimes I switch to Indonesian when I cannot find the English word,"* while another noted, *"I mix Indonesian and English so the listener can understand."* These responses indicate that code-switching functions as a practical solution to immediate lexical gaps.

From a theoretical perspective, code-switching can be categorized as a compensatory communication strategy that allows learners to achieve communicative goals despite linguistic limitations. According to Claus Færch and Gabriele Kasper (1983), such strategies enable learners to maintain interaction by drawing on all available linguistic resources. Similarly, Dörnyei and Scott (1997), identify code-switching as a strategy that supports fluency and prevents communication breakdown.

While code-switching is effective in sustaining interaction, it may reduce opportunities for target language practice if used excessively. This suggests that while code-switching supports immediate communication, it may also slow down long-term vocabulary development if not balanced with target language use. Nevertheless, it reflects learners' ability to strategically manage communication and ensure mutual understanding.

## Using Gestures

In addition to verbal strategies, students also relied on non-verbal communication, particularly gestures, to convey meaning when they lacked appropriate vocabulary. Several participants reported using hand movements or facial expressions to support their spoken messages. For instance, one participant stated, *"I use gestures to help explain my meaning,"* while another explained, *"Gestures help me when I don't know the word."*

These findings highlight the multimodal nature of communication, where meaning is constructed not only through language but also through physical expression. From a theoretical standpoint, gestures can be viewed as part of compensatory strategies that assist in meaning-making when linguistic resources are insufficient. They allow learners to reinforce or clarify their message, thereby reducing the risk of misunderstanding. This also indicates that communication is not solely dependent on linguistic competence, but involves the integration of multiple semiotic resources.

The use of gestures also reflects learners' strategic awareness, as they actively employ alternative channels to support communication. Although gestures cannot fully replace verbal expression, they play an important role in maintaining interaction and enhancing comprehensibility, particularly in face-to-face communication.

### Asking for Help

Another strategy identified in the findings is asking for help, which reflects a more interactive and collaborative approach to communication. When students encounter vocabulary difficulties, they seek assistance from their interlocutors to complete their message. For example, one participant stated, *"I ask my friend what the word is."* This indicates that learners do not rely solely on internal resources but also utilize external support to overcome communication challenges.

From a theoretical perspective, asking for help can be categorized as an interactional strategy that involves negotiation of meaning. It aligns with the view that communication is a collaborative process in which speakers and listeners work together to achieve mutual understanding. By requesting assistance, learners are able to maintain the flow of conversation while also expanding their vocabulary knowledge.

This strategy also reflects learners' willingness to engage in communication despite their limitations. Rather than avoiding interaction, they actively seek solutions, demonstrating both strategic competence and communicative persistence. However, its effectiveness depends on the responsiveness of the interlocutor and the communicative context.

### Using Fillers

Students also reported using fillers as a strategy to manage vocabulary limitations and maintain fluency during speaking. Fillers such as *"umm," "uh,"* or phrases like *"what I mean is"* were commonly used to gain time while thinking of appropriate words. One participant explained, *"I use fillers to think before I speak."* This strategy helps learners avoid long pauses that may disrupt the flow of communication. By using fillers, they are able to hold the conversational turn while searching for lexical items, thereby maintaining interaction. From a theoretical perspective, fillers function as a temporal strategy that supports speech planning under real-time processing constraints.

The use of fillers also indicates learners' awareness of conversational norms, as maintaining fluency is an important aspect of effective communication. However, excessive use of fillers may affect the clarity and perceived fluency of speech. This suggests that fillers serve as a compensatory mechanism for cognitive processing limitations, reflecting the real-time pressure of speech production in a second language. Despite this limitation, fillers remain a useful strategy for managing cognitive load and sustaining communication.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study explored Indonesian EFL university students' perceptions of vocabulary limitations and the conversation control strategies they use during spoken communication. The findings indicate that vocabulary limitations extend beyond insufficient lexical knowledge, influencing learners' speaking performance, confidence, and communicative behavior. Rather than preventing communication, limited vocabulary encourages students to employ strategies such as paraphrasing, code-switching, and negotiation of meaning to sustain interaction, highlighting the importance of strategic competence in EFL communication. These findings suggest that language instruction should integrate

communication strategy training alongside vocabulary development while fostering a supportive classroom environment that reduces anxiety and promotes confidence. Such an approach can help learners communicate more effectively despite linguistic limitations. However, this study involved a limited number of participants from a single university and relied primarily on self-reported data, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should include larger, more diverse samples and employ observational or experimental methods to examine the effectiveness of strategy-based instruction in improving speaking performance.

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