



An Investigation into Academic Vocabulary Difficulties in Speaking of EFL University Students in the English Education Program

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the difficulties faced by EFL university students in using academic vocabulary during speaking tasks. Conducted with undergraduate students of the English Education Program at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia, the research employed speaking tasks, questionnaires, and interviews to collect data. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics were used to examine students' productive use of academic vocabulary, focusing on collocations, pronunciation, lexical range, and confidence. The findings revealed that remembering and applying collocations (72%) and pronouncing academic terms (65%) were the most common problems. More than half of the students also reported low confidence (58%) and limited lexical knowledge (50%), with only a small proportion (15%) expressing overall confidence in their academic vocabulary use. These results highlight a persistent gap between receptive and productive knowledge, as students often recognized academic vocabulary in texts but struggled to apply it in oral communication. The study concludes that targeted pedagogical strategies, including explicit collocation practice, pronunciation support, and confidence-building activities, are needed to strengthen students' academic oral proficiency and prepare them for academic and professional contexts.

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1. Introduction

Speaking is widely recognized as one of the most essential skills for EFL university students, as it serves not only as a means of communication but also as a medium for demonstrating academic competence. Effective oral communication enables learners to articulate ideas, participate in academic discussions, and achieve success in both academic and professional contexts (Dai & Sun, 2022). For students in English Education programs, speaking ability is even more significant because it reflects their readiness to function as future educators who must model proficient language use.

Despite its importance, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners to master, with vocabulary consistently identified as a key source of difficulty. Limited lexical knowledge often restricts learners' ability to express themselves fluently, accurately, and appropriately in academic settings (Tran &

Dang, 2022). In particular, the inability to retrieve suitable words in real-time communication leads to hesitation, reduced confidence, and limited participation in classroom discourse (Nguyen & Boers, 2019). Among the different dimensions of vocabulary, academic vocabulary presents distinctive challenges for EFL students. Unlike general vocabulary, academic words are less frequent in everyday conversation, often abstract, and context-specific, making them harder to acquire and use spontaneously in speaking tasks (Dang, Coxhead, & Webb, 2017). Students who cannot employ academic vocabulary effectively may struggle to construct coherent arguments, present complex ideas, or engage meaningfully in scholarly discussions (Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020).

Several studies have investigated the role of academic vocabulary in EFL contexts, with most focusing on reading and writing rather than speaking. For example, Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List has been widely applied in studies that examine vocabulary use in academic texts, while more recent research has explored learners' receptive and productive knowledge of academic vocabulary (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Although a few studies have begun to address oral use of academic vocabulary, findings suggest that students still face persistent challenges in integrating such vocabulary into spoken discourse (Tran, 2021).

However, research specifically targeting the oral use of academic vocabulary in Indonesian EFL university contexts remains limited. Most classroom practices continue to prioritize grammar and pronunciation, leaving the use of academic vocabulary in speaking underexplored. This creates a gap in understanding how EFL students manage the demands of spoken academic discourse and highlights the need for studies that focus explicitly on academic vocabulary difficulties in oral communication.

Against this background, the present study investigates the academic vocabulary difficulties encountered by undergraduate students of the English Education Program at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia (UPMI), Medan. The study aims to identify both lexical and affective challenges in students' oral performance, with the objective of providing insights into pedagogical strategies that can enhance learners' academic speaking proficiency and better prepare them as future English educators.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Academic Vocabulary

Academic vocabulary is central to academic success because it enables students to communicate ideas with precision and engage in critical discourse. Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) remains a cornerstone in vocabulary research, establishing the lexical items essential for academic literacy. However, subsequent studies have emphasized that academic vocabulary in speech differs from that in written texts, requiring additional attention to oral use (Dang, Coxhead, & Webb, 2017).

In English language teaching, developing academic vocabulary proficiency is increasingly viewed as essential not only for linguistic competence but also for preparing learners to function effectively in professional and academic communities. Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) argue that vocabulary instruction should go beyond frequency-based word lists and focus on equipping learners with strategies for flexible, context-appropriate usage. Recent studies further confirm that while many learners acquire receptive knowledge of academic vocabulary through reading, their productive use in speaking remains limited and often inaccurate (Tran & Dang, 2022; Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020). These challenges underscore the importance of targeted pedagogical approaches that foster the integration of academic vocabulary into oral performance, thereby enabling students to succeed in tasks such as academic discussions, debates, and presentations.

2.2 Challenges in Using Vocabulary for Speaking

Using vocabulary in oral communication presents unique challenges for EFL learners. The spontaneous nature of speaking requires fast retrieval of words, which is often hindered by limited lexical repertoire (Nguyen & Boers, 2019). Students may rely excessively on general vocabulary, making their speech less precise in academic settings (Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020). Moreover, difficulties with pronunciation, collocations, and word families frequently lead to communication breakdowns (Dai & Sun, 2022). These problems can affect students' confidence, reduce participation in class discussions, and limit opportunities to develop fluency (Nation, 2013).

2.3 Academic Vocabulary in Indonesian EFL Contexts

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language, and the teaching of vocabulary often prioritizes general words and grammatical accuracy over academic vocabulary. Studies indicate that many Indonesian university students still face difficulties in applying academic vocabulary in oral communication (Marzulina,

2018). A lack of exposure to authentic academic discourse and limited opportunities to practice speaking in academic contexts further exacerbate this problem (Astuti & Lammers, 2017). For English Education students, the issue is even more critical, as they are expected to model appropriate use of academic language for future learners. This highlights the need for classroom strategies that integrate academic vocabulary practice into speaking activities.

2.4 Previous Studies

Research on academic vocabulary has predominantly focused on learners' performance in written discourse, particularly in reading and writing. Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List (AWL) and Nation's (2013) framework on vocabulary learning emphasized the critical role of lexical knowledge in comprehension and composition, providing strong evidence of the link between academic vocabulary mastery and success in literacy-based tasks. However, such written-oriented perspectives do not fully capture the challenges that arise when academic vocabulary is used spontaneously in oral communication. To address this gap, Dang, Coxhead, and Webb (2017) developed the Academic Spoken Word List (ASWL), which highlights the lexical items most frequently employed in spoken academic contexts. Their work marked a significant step toward shifting the focus from text-based to speech-based academic language needs in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings.

Despite these advances, recent studies indicate that EFL learners continue to experience significant difficulties when employing academic vocabulary in speaking. Tran and Dang (2022) found that while learners often demonstrate receptive knowledge of academic words through reading tasks, their productive use in oral performance remains limited. Similarly, Alahmadi and Foltz (2020) revealed that many university students fail to integrate academic vocabulary effectively into oral communication, which negatively impacts their participation in academic discussions and formal presentations. These findings suggest that a persistent gap exists between learners' recognition of academic vocabulary and their ability to apply it in speaking, underscoring the need for more pedagogical attention to spoken academic vocabulary development.

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design to investigate the difficulties faced by EFL university students in using academic vocabulary during speaking activities. The qualitative approach was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of students' lexical challenges and the contextual factors influencing their oral performance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was conducted in the English Education Program at Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia (UPMI), Medan, during the academic year 2024/2025. Participants were 30 undergraduate students in their fifth semester, selected through purposive sampling. These students were chosen because they had completed foundational English courses and were expected to actively use academic vocabulary in their speaking classes and academic presentations.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments employed to collect data consisted of speaking tasks, questionnaires, and interviews. In the speaking tasks, students were asked to perform academic speaking activities such as short presentations and discussions, which were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. To complement this, a structured questionnaire was administered to identify students' perceptions of their difficulties in using academic vocabulary. The questionnaire emphasized aspects such as lexical knowledge, collocation, pronunciation, and confidence in oral performance. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten selected participants to obtain deeper insights into their challenges and strategies in integrating academic vocabulary into speaking.

3.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data were collected in three stages. First, students completed speaking tasks, which were audio-recorded. Second, all participants filled out the questionnaire. Finally, interviews were conducted with a smaller group of participants to triangulate the findings from the speaking tasks and questionnaire.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The transcripts of the speaking tasks were carefully examined to identify errors and gaps in academic vocabulary use. Particular attention was given to the misuse of collocations, incorrect pronunciation, and limitations in lexical range, which provided insight into the specific areas where students struggled in academic oral performance. The questionnaire data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, enabling the identification of common patterns of difficulty across participants, such as frequent lexical errors, lack of

collocational awareness, and low confidence in using academic vocabulary. In addition, the responses from the semi-structured interviews were coded thematically to capture recurring issues, strategies employed by students, and their perceptions of challenges in integrating academic vocabulary into speaking tasks.

4. Results

4.1 Speaking Tasks

The analysis of speaking task transcripts revealed that students faced several difficulties in using academic vocabulary. The most frequent errors involved the misuse of collocations, such as “*make a research*” instead of “*conduct research*.” Pronunciation issues were also observed, particularly with multisyllabic academic terms (e.g., *methodology*, *analysis*, *hypothesis*). In addition, many students demonstrated a limited lexical range, often relying on basic vocabulary rather than employing more precise academic terms, which affected the clarity and depth of their oral communication. These findings indicate that students’ productive use of academic vocabulary in speech remains restricted despite their exposure to academic texts.

4.2 Questionnaire Results

The questionnaire results showed consistent patterns regarding students’ challenges with academic vocabulary. A majority of respondents reported difficulties in remembering and applying collocations in oral tasks. Many also indicated problems with correct pronunciation and confidence in oral performance. Table 1 summarizes the main areas of difficulty reported by students.

Table 1. Students’ Reported Difficulties in Using Academic Vocabulary in Speaking

Area of Difficulty	% of Students Reporting
Remembering and applying collocations	72%
Pronunciation of academic words	65%
Confidence in oral performance	58%
Limited lexical knowledge	50%
Confident in overall use	15%

Table 1 shows the main difficulties students reported in using academic vocabulary during speaking. The most frequent challenge was remembering and applying collocations (72%), followed by pronunciation problems (65%). More than half of the students (58%) also lacked confidence in oral performance, while 50% admitted having limited lexical knowledge. Notably, only 15% of students felt confident overall in their use of academic vocabulary. These findings suggest that both linguistic and affective factors particularly collocation, pronunciation, and confidence are key barriers to effective academic oral communication.

4.3 Interview Results

The interviews provided deeper insights into students’ perceptions and experiences. Many participants admitted that they often avoid using academic vocabulary during speaking tasks because they fear mispronouncing words or sounding unnatural. Several students also highlighted the challenge of retrieving appropriate vocabulary spontaneously during discussions, even if they were familiar with the terms in reading contexts.

“I know the word ‘hypothesis,’ but when I need to say it in a presentation, I am not sure about the pronunciation, so I just use ‘guess’ instead.” (Student 4)

Another student admitted the struggle with collocations:

“I can remember words like ‘analysis,’ but I don’t know the right combination. I said ‘do analysis’ but the teacher corrected me that it should be ‘conduct analysis.’” (Student 7)

A few students (3 out of 10) reported actively practicing pronunciation and collocations as a strategy to improve, but overall, most participants emphasized the need for more explicit instruction and practice opportunities in oral academic vocabulary use.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that academic vocabulary presents a significant barrier to effective oral communication among EFL university students. The frequent errors in collocations, limited lexical range, and pronunciation difficulties observed in the speaking tasks align with previous research indicating that

learners struggle to transfer their receptive knowledge of academic vocabulary into productive use (Tran & Dang, 2022). This suggests that recognition of academic terms in reading does not automatically translate into accurate application in speaking.

The difficulty with collocations, reported by 72% of participants, is particularly noteworthy. Collocational knowledge has long been identified as an essential aspect of vocabulary competence, contributing to fluency and naturalness in speech (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). The students' tendency to produce incorrect combinations such as "*make a research*" echoes Nguyen and Boers' (2019) findings that productive academic vocabulary learning requires activities that promote generative use. Without explicit practice, students rely on direct translations or simplified expressions, which weakens their oral academic performance. Pronunciation challenges, reported by 65% of respondents, also mirror earlier findings. Alahmadi and Foltz (2020) noted that EFL learners often mispronounce complex academic terms, which hinders both their confidence and the comprehensibility of their speech. This is consistent with the interview excerpts in which students admitted avoiding academic words out of fear of mispronunciation. Such avoidance strategies, while reducing anxiety, limit opportunities for developing oral proficiency.

The limited lexical range and reliance on basic vocabulary observed in this study further support Coxhead's (2000) and Dang et al.'s (2017) arguments that academic vocabulary in spoken contexts requires distinct attention from written contexts. The Academic Spoken Word List (ASWL) was specifically developed to highlight this difference, yet classroom instruction in Indonesia still appears to emphasize written academic literacy over spoken use. This gap may explain why students recognize academic vocabulary in texts but fail to use it appropriately in oral tasks.

Interestingly, the issue of confidence, reported by more than half of the participants, underscores the affective dimension of academic speaking. Dai and Sun (2022) highlighted that students' willingness to use academic vocabulary is strongly tied to their perception of competence. The present findings reinforce this claim, as many students in interviews admitted deliberately avoiding academic words despite knowing them. This suggests that pedagogical interventions should address not only linguistic competence but also students' confidence and willingness to engage in academic discourse.

Overall, the results extend existing literature by offering empirical evidence from the Indonesian EFL context, particularly among English Education students who are future teachers. Unlike previous studies that primarily examined writing (Coxhead, 2000; Nation, 2013) or general productive vocabulary use (Nguyen & Boers, 2019), this study highlights the specific challenges faced in oral academic vocabulary use. By identifying collocation, pronunciation, lexical range, and confidence as key areas of difficulty, the findings provide a more nuanced understanding of how EFL learners struggle with academic oral proficiency.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the challenges faced by undergraduate students of the English Education Program in using academic vocabulary during speaking tasks. The analysis of speaking performances, questionnaire responses, and interviews revealed four main areas of difficulty: collocational knowledge, pronunciation, limited lexical range, and low confidence. Among these, collocational errors were the most frequent, indicating that students often lacked awareness of appropriate word combinations in academic contexts. Pronunciation problems were also widespread, particularly with multisyllabic academic terms, leading some students to avoid using such vocabulary altogether. Furthermore, students tended to rely on general or basic vocabulary, which limited their ability to express complex ideas precisely. Affective factors such as low confidence further contributed to their avoidance of academic vocabulary in oral communication. These findings highlight that students' receptive knowledge of academic vocabulary does not easily transfer into productive oral use. While they may recognize academic terms in reading and writing, many struggle to integrate them effectively into speaking tasks. This gap suggests that spoken academic vocabulary requires more explicit instructional attention in higher education settings, particularly in programs designed to prepare future teachers.

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