Communication strategies used by private course students

Shofie Azizah[1], Adip Arifin[2], Syamsuddin Ro'is[3]
English Education Study Program, STKIP PGRI Ponorogo
Corresponding author
Email: adiparifin@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the types of communication strategies used by students at Ella Private Course to overcome vocabulary limitations in English speaking activities. This study applies the communication strategy theory proposed by Faerch & Kasper (1983) and Dörnyei (1995), focusing on achievement and reduction strategies. A case study design with qualitative approach was used, with data collected through non-participant observation and interviews. The results show that students employed a variety of strategies, including paraphrasing, approximation, non-verbal communication, code-switching, appeal for help, and stalling as achievement strategies, as well as message abandonment and topic avoidance as reduction strategies. Among these, non-verbal communication was the most dominant strategy used. These strategies helped students maintain communication despite vocabulary gaps and reflect their adaptive efforts to stay engaged in conversation. This study highlights the importance of strategic competence in supporting students' fluency and confidence in private English learning contexts. The study strongly emphasized that recognizing the strategies students naturally used is undeniable to manage vocabulary limitations in real communication context. Besides, the findings could assist teachers and curriculum developers design to provide more effective speaking activities to strengthen learners' communicative competence and vocabulary mastery.

Keywords: *Communication strategies; challenges; vocabulary limitation*

INTRODUCTION

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, limited vocabulary is a significant obstacle, especially in speaking activities that require spontaneous or direct communication (Daaboul, 2018; Ostovar-Namaghi et al., 2022). Faerch & Kasper (1983) argued that vocabulary limitations refer to the range or number of words that a learner can understand, remember, or use effectively in communication. This condition is often mirrored in learners' difficulties in expressing ideas, participating in discussions, or understanding messages due to a lack of lexical resources (Hashemian & Farhang-Ju, 2017). In speaking, limited vocabulary can cause pauses, simplification, or dependence on the mother tongue, which hinders communicative ability (Hardianti, 2017). This problem affects the fluency, confidence, and willingness of learners to communicate (Maryansyah et al., 2024).

Vocabulary challenges and other linguistic limitations are not something new in the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia. English is taught as a foreign language rather than a second language, which causes learners to frequently encounter various challenges such as pronunciation problems, vocabulary gaps, incorrect use of language structures, and even repeated mistakes (see Dörnyei, 1995; Arifin, 2019; Qomariyah et al., 2023). Pronunciation plays an important role in communication because mispronunciation can lead to misunderstandings, and such difficulties often come from both teachers and students (Putra & Rochsantiningsih, 2018). In addition, traditional methods used by teachers in teaching vocabulary frequently fail to motivate students, making it difficult for them to remember even simple words. However, according to Sholikah et al., (2020), alternative methods using songs and visual media have been proven to improve vocabulary mastery in a more enjoyable way than simply motivating students.

Another common phenomenon among learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Indonesia is code-switching, which naturally occurs when learners try to fill lexical gaps in conversation. In general, code-switching occurs when speakers switch between two languages during communication, whether at the word, sentence, or discourse level (see Nurvadhilah et al., 2022). Priyatna et al., (2018) highlighted that this phenomenon appears in bilingual communities where its members have the chance to use two or more languages in verbai interaction. A learner may start a sentence in English but insert an Indonesian word when they forget or do not know the English word. This behavior is not simply a sign of inadequacy, but a practical option that allows students to maintain the interaction flow.

A study on bilingual contexts by (see Sari et al., 2021) mentions that language switching is common among students in Indonesia due to the fact that most students are raised in multilingual environments. This phenomenon is often seen during speaking activities in class. Learners often switch to Indonesian when they encounter words they do not know, then return to English once they feel more confident (Arifin, 2015). Kartika et al., (2020) also emphasizes that code-switching in digital environments, such as social media, demonstrates students' creativity when switching between languages. This has led to this practice becoming more common in everyday communication. Nurvadhilah et al (2022) added that code-switching can appear in several forms, such as intersentential switching and intrasentential switching.

On the other hand, affective components such as language learning anxiety can also encourage students to use certain strategies more often (see Harida et al; 2025; Novitasari et al; 2025). Frequently, students are less able to express themselves fully in English due to nervousness or fear of making mistakes, so they prefer to communicate by code-switching or simplifying their messages (Suhardi & Harida, 2024). This shows that the limitations of English as a foreign language (EFL) and emotional and situational factors influence communication strategies.

In contrast to previous studies that have focused on communication strategies in non-classroom contexts and digital interactions (e.g., Sari et al., 2021; Kartika et al., 2020;

Nurvadhilah et al., 2022), hence to fill the gap, this study focuses on informal classroom context, where the students engage in more intensive and practical speaking activities during joining the course. This gap is necessary to be fulfilled, to provide a balance and comprehensive findings on the use of communication strategies in informal classroom activities. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the various communication strategies used by private course students to overcome their vocabulary limitations in real English-speaking activities.

METHOD

This study used a qualitative case study design (Yin, 2009) and was conducted at *Ella Private Course, Kampung Inggris*, Pare, Kediri, in May 2025. The research participants involved 10 secondary school students (five males and five females), aged between 17 and 25 years, who were purposively selected based on their active participation in speaking activities. Data were collected through non-participant observation, which included 36 hours of speaking classes, and semi-structured interviews with each participant lasting approximately 15 minutes. To meet the validity, crossing check the data from non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were done consistently by the researcher. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on the framework of Braun & Clarke, (2006), included the following steps: transcription, coding, theme grouping, and interpretation to identify patterns in the students' use of communication strategies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings show that students at Ella Private Course use various communication strategies when faced with vocabulary limitations, which are classified into achievement strategies and reduction strategies.

Achievement strategies

Achievement strategies are techniques that students use to keep a conversation going even when they have limited vocabulary. Instead of avoiding communication, students use alternative ways to express what they mean. The result of achievement strategies can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Achievement strategies used by students

Main Theme	Sub Theme	Findings Description	Participants' Quotes
Achievement Strategy	Paraphrase (Circumlocution)	Learners describe the concept using other words or longer expressions.	*"I forgot the word 'knifer', so I just said 'something we use to cut'."* – *R2*

	Approximation	Learners use a word that is close in meaning to the target word.	*"....If I forget the right word, I just use another word that is similar..."– R3*
	Gesture/Non-verbal communication	Learners use body movements, pointing, or facial expressions to support their speech	*"...I just point or move my hands so my friend understands what I mean. Sometimes, the gesture even helps me remember the word" – R4*
	Code Switching	Learners switching from English to Indonesian when facing lexical difficulties.	*"If I'm stuck and don't know the English word, I usually just say it in Indonesian..." – R5*
	Appeal for Help	Learners ask for assistance from the tutor/peers when they don't know a word.	*"I usually ask my friend ormy tutor if I forget a word. They tell me, then I repeat it so I can remember. That way, I can keep talking" – R6*
	Stalling/Time Gaining	Using pauses, fillers, or repetition to gain time while thinking of the right word.	*"Usually, when I forget, I say 'uhm' first, or speak slowly while thinking." – R7*

Based on Table 1, students use several achievement strategies; paraphrasing, approaching, nonverbal communication, code-switching, asking for help, and delaying or stalling. Of these strategies, nonverbal communication is the most frequently used. Students often use gestures, facial expressions, or expressions to describe the intended meaning, for example, mimicking scissors with their fingers when they cannot remember the word "cut." This strategy allows them to maintain fluency and ensure listener comprehension. Paraphrasing was also found, although infrequently. Students describe unfamiliar objects with longer explanations, for example saying "something we use to cut food" rather than "knife." Similarly, circumlocution occurs when learners use words with similar meanings, such as saying 'plant' for "grass." These strategies allow learners to continue the conversation without interruption. In addition, students use code-switching, inserting Indonesian words when they cannot remember English vocabulary, and sometimes re-explaining in English. Asking for help is another common strategy, where students directly ask classmates or tutors for missing vocabulary and repeat the word to reinforce their memory. Finally, delay or repetition expressions such as "uhm," "like," or "what's it called" are used to gain time while thinking.

Paraphrase (circumlocution)

Paraphrasing emerges as one of the achievement strategies, although it is not often used. This strategy allows students to explain unfamiliar words by using longer or more descriptive expressions than the exact terms. For example, when a student cannot remember the word "knife," they might say "something we use to cut food." This way, they can continue speaking while still conveying the meaning clearly. Paraphrasing, or circumlocution, is an important problem-solving strategy, according to Dörnyei (1995). This strategy allows students to communicate their message even when they lack vocabulary.

Approximation

Approximation strategies observed in student speech. Approximation involves selecting words that are semantically close to the intended word, even if they are not entirely accurate. This differs from paraphrasing, where students provide descriptive explanations. For example, students prefer to use the word "plant" when what is meant is "grass." As this approach shows, students prefer to speak fluently and avoid silence rather than try to find the right term. Faerch and Kasper's (1983) emphasizes that this strategy is widely used by learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) because it offers a practical solution to lexical problems without disrupting interaction.

Gestures/non-verbal communication

Of all strategies, nonverbal communication is the most frequently used. To support verbal communication, students often use body movements, facial expressions, or actions. When a student cannot remember the word "cut," he mimics the motion of scissors with his fingers. In situations where vocabulary memorization is limited, this strategy is very useful for keeping communication flowing and ensuring that the listener understands. As explained by Dörnyei (1995), nonverbal strategies, such as facial expressions and gestures, are the earliest and easiest ways for students to communicate when verbal resources are insufficient.

Code switching

The other achievement strategy observed was when students didn't know the right vocabulary, they inserted Indonesian words into English sentences. Students sometimes continued switching by explaining the term in English after recalling it or having it confirmed by their peers. This language switching helped the conversation flow smoothly, avoided long pauses, and reduced the risk of communication breakdown. It also reflects the students' bilingual background, where speaking to each other comes naturally. Studies (eg, Hestin, 2022; Maya Sari, 2021) have shown that switching languages to perform two tasks in a bilingual environment also helps speakers clarify meaning, emphasize ideas, and adjust to others.

Appeal for help

Students also often use this strategy to overcome vocabulary limitations. In situations like this, they directly ask their classmates or teachers to provide the missing vocabulary. In this study, a student paused and asked, "What is the English word for...?" then repeated the answer given to improve his memory. This method shows that students prefer to interact socially and ask for help rather than leave a message. It also shows that peers and teachers are very important for learning together in class. Faerch and Kasper (1983) say that asking for help is a way to communicate cooperatively with others. This shows that students are aware of the social resources available during interactions.

Stalling/time gaining

Furthermore, students often use delaying tactics or stalling for time to find the right words. They often use fillers such as "uhm," "like," or "what's it called" when speaking. Although these expressions do not enhance the substance of communication, this method allows students to continue speaking and avoid uncomfortable silences. Students' awareness of the flow of conversation and their efforts to remain engaged, even when they have difficulty remembering words, are demonstrated in this strategy. Dornyei and Scott (1997) state that time-delaying strategies are essential for maintaining fluency in speaking because they avoid interruptions and allow students to use their linguistic skills.

Reduction strategies

In contrast, reduction strategies involve avoiding or simplifying communication when students feel unable to express themselves due to vocabulary limitations. The result of reduction strategies is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Reduction strategies used by students

Main Theme	Sub Theme	Findings Description	Participants' Quotes
Reduction Strategy	Message Abandonment	Learners stop the message halfway due to lack of vocabulary	*"Sometimes, I forget the words I want to say, and I feel embarrased If I make a mistake. So I just change the subject and talk about something else." – R1*
	Topic Avoidance	Learners avoid topics that require unfamiliar or difficult vocabulary	*"If the theme is difficult or the topic is too heavy, I choose to avoid the conversation. So it's better for me to talk about things I know, like hobbies or school." – R2*

Table 2 shows that students also use reduction strategies, which include message rejection and topic avoidance. In message rejection, students start speaking but stop mid-sentence when they cannot find the right vocabulary. For example, a student stops his own sentence with "uh, never mind" before switching to a simpler idea. Topic avoidance occurs when students deliberately divert the conversation to topics that are more familiar to them, such as hobbies or school, rather than discussing more complex themes such as politics or environmental issues. These strategies, while preventing communication failure, often reduce interaction, as students tend to be fearful and lack confidence.

Message abandonment

Students start sentences but stop midway because they cannot remember the right vocabulary. One student used a rather simple concept to stop the utterance: "uh, never mind." This shows that students prefer to avoid communication disruptions rather than say what they think. When students cannot continue the intended utterance, message rejection is usually used as a reduction method (Faerch and Kasper, 1983).

Topic avoidance

Topic Avoidance: Students intentionally switch the discussion to more familiar topics, such as hobbies or school life, rather than discussing difficult topics, such as politics or environmental issues. Students feel more confident and reduce the possibility of making mistakes by choosing topics they are familiar with. According to Dörnyei (1995) topic avoidance is often used to reduce communication pressure and minimize mistakes, but it can limit opportunities for deeper interaction.

The finding that nonverbal communication is the most dominant strategy is quite interesting because it contradicts several previous studies (e.g., Panggabean & Wardhono, 2017; Apridayani et al., 2024), in which paraphrasing or circumlocution tends to be the most common. In this study, intermediate-level students relied more on gestures, facial expressions, or mimicry. This suggests that intermediate-level learners tend to choose quick and practical solutions that allow them to continue the conversation, rather than strategies that require more effort and complex language processing. The frequent use of asking for help also stands out. As observed by Wigati & Indriani (2021), learners at this level do not hesitate to ask for help from classmates or tutors when they get stuck. This habit reflects their dependence on the learning environment and the social support they receive, which helps them stay engaged in communication without losing confidence.

On the other hand, the use of reduction strategies such as avoiding certain topics reveals something equally important: students actively protect their fluency and confidence. Rather than forcing themselves into conversations that reveal their weaknesses, they choose to switch to topics they feel more comfortable with. This behavior supports Faerch and Kasper's (1983) claim that learners' choice of strategies is closely related to their level of proficiency and the context in which they find themselves. Overall, these findings show that students do not rely on a single method to overcome problems, but rather combine various strategies depending on the situation they face. Their

flexibility in doing so reflects the development of what is known as strategic competence—the ability to find ways to keep communication going despite limitations. This competence plays an essential role in building not only fluency, but also the confidence necessary to interact meaningfully in English.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the types of communication strategies used by ELLA Course learners to overcome vocabulary limitations in speaking activities. Findings show that learners use both achievement and reduction strategies, with nonverbal communication emerging as the most frequently used and paraphrasing as the least frequent. Other strategies include asking for help, approaching, delaying, code-switching, message rejection, and topic avoidance. These patterns demonstrate students' ability to adapt and continue interactions despite vocabulary limitations, which are influenced by their proficiency level and situation.

The results of this study recommend that teachers increase students' awareness of various strategies and provide opportunities to practice them through activities such as role-playing, drama, or Total Physical Response, which naturally integrate movement. This approach can boost confidence, reduce anxiety, and make communication more engaging. For further researcher, it is highly suggested to investigate communication strategies in different contexts and proficiency levels to broaden understanding of their role in language learning. Overall, this study contributes to a better understanding of how EFL learners manage vocabulary limitations in real communication. By recognizing the strategies students naturally use, teachers and curriculum developers can design more effective speaking activities that not only build vocabulary but also strengthen learners' communicative competence.

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