

## Vocabulary and oral expression: Linguistic barriers in young learners in EFL context

*Vocabulario y expresión oral: barreras lingüísticas en jóvenes estudiantes de EFL*

Dayse Abril Sanjines, Manuel Pila

### Abstract

Word-for-word the advanced English Language learners' vocabulary skills present a profound hurdle towards self-articulation, socially, academically, or otherwise, and with fluency. These gaps in vocabulary severely cripple effective communication simultaneously resulting in a paradoxical understanding of communication. This study, therefore, seeks to establish the extent to which lack of vocabulary skills affects oral skills and find the factors that constitute the gaps in communicative abilities. This study purposively collected quantitative data from 5th graders in Santa Ana Private Educational Unit and employed semi-structured interviews to collect qualitative data from teachers. Teachers gave some responses that enabled them to understand the communication problems that existed in the classroom. The study aimed to understand how vocabulary problems are proportioned to students not being able to express themselves articulately in desired discussions. Looking from both sides helps in understanding the situation in total. This helped understand the extent to which oral articulation and expression were inhibited due to great gaps in vocabulary.

Keywords: Oral expression; Linguistic; Education; Acquisition; Language development.

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## Resumen

El vocabulario de los estudiantes avanzados de lengua inglesa presenta un profundo obstáculo para la auto-articulación, social, académica o de otro tipo, y con fluidez. Estas lagunas en el vocabulario paralizan gravemente la comunicación eficaz, dando lugar simultáneamente a una comprensión paradójica de la comunicación. Este estudio, por lo tanto, pretende establecer hasta qué punto la falta de vocabulario afecta a las habilidades orales y encontrar los factores que constituyen las lagunas en las habilidades comunicativas. Este estudio recolectó intencionalmente datos cuantitativos de los alumnos de 5º grado de la Unidad Educativa Privada Santa Ana y empleó entrevistas semiestructuradas para recolectar datos cualitativos de los docentes. Los profesores dieron algunas respuestas que permitieron comprender los problemas de comunicación que existían en el aula. El estudio pretendía entender cómo los problemas de vocabulario son proporcionales a que los alumnos no puedan expresarse articuladamente en las discusiones deseadas. Mirar desde ambos lados ayuda a comprender la situación en su totalidad. Esto ayudó a comprender hasta qué punto la articulación y la expresión orales se veían inhibidas debido a las grandes lagunas de vocabulario.

Palabras clave: Expresión oral; Lingüística; Educación; Adquisición; Desarrollo del lenguaje.

## Introduction

One of the hardest challenges for EFL learners organizing their concepts with reason stems from the unsatisfactory control over the language and vocabulary. Research indicates that limited vocabulary negatively impacts oral skills, which impedes fluent communication (Snow, 2010). For students, these problems not only affect grades but also have an impact on social integration since vocabulary is necessary for participation in conversations, discussions, and even academic work. Therefore, students' capacity to communicate their thoughts and ideas is directly proportional to their vocabulary.

Numerous researchers have proved that the ability to perform academically is highly determined by the knowledge of vocabulary, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL). According to McKeown and Kucan (2013), intentionally missing vocabulary leads to significant problems in the students' information processing abilities, ability to follow instructions, and participation in oral activities. For learners of English as a foreign language, the above limitation also hinders their cognitive functioning as the ability to understand and express oneself in a foreign language is crucial for academic advancement.

Hence, Vygotsky (1978), supports the idea that language is a tool for development, and its presence determines the extent to which students are able to organize their ideas and thoughts and put them into words. In EFL classes, having good English vocabulary knowledge is crucial not only for understanding meaning but also for idea generation and articulation. In the case of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), the role of vocabulary increases further.

For learners of English, having mastered the vocabulary of the language is essential for effective comprehension and communication. Accordingly, vocabulary serves not only a semantic

function but also a cognitive one, enabling learners to plan, reflect, and articulate their ideas logically. Insufficient mastery of the English vocabulary impedes the learner's ability to express himself verbally and develop rational and critical thinking, which are important for proper language usage. These aspects complement one another in the process of learning a new language.

In addition, the gaps in vocabulary knowledge present not only an academic but also a social problem – insufficient English vocabulary prevents students from engaging in most basic social interactions and group work. These gaps in vocabulary often hinder EFL learners from engaging in class discussions, group activities, or other social encounters, which impacts their self-esteem and readiness to communicate in English. Thus, building a sufficient vocabulary is crucial for achievement in both academic and social life in the context of EFL instruction.

In Ecuador, learners of English as a second language encounter serious problems in vocabulary acquisition and fluent speech articulation. As indicated by the report of the Ministry of Education (2023), students usually have inadequate exposure to immersive linguistic contexts, which affects their vocabulary acquisition and utilization. Furthermore, more recent research like the one conducted by Ramírez and Gómez (2022), remarks that the conventional teaching style among many educational systems does not focus on the teaching dynamics of communicating, which stunts oral expression advancement.

This inquiry was performed at Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana with a focus on students in grade five who had challenges expressing themselves orally in English because of insufficient vocabulary. With a mixed-method research design combining quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (teacher interviews) approaches, the study sought to analyze the aspects that prevented learners from developing oral English expression. The analysis assisted in elucidating the particular difficulties these learners faced and proffered useful suggestions on further research or teaching practice modifications needed.

This study not only aims to give insight into the linguistic hurdles primary learners encounter in Ecuador but also seeks to highlight ways teachers can effectively intervene to enhance vocabulary knowledge and thus improve oral skills in English.

### *Theoretical framework*

Different fundamental cognitive development and learning theories explain vocabulary acquisition and oral expression in a second language. Lev Vygotsky (1978), notes that learning is a social phenomenon that develops through interactions with other people. His major idea is that of the Zone of Proximal Development, ZPD. This is defined as the range within which a learner is capable of performing tasks with the assistance of a more knowledgeable individual such as a

teacher or peer, but not without help. In the case of second language acquisition, this mediation is especially important for vocabulary and oral expression because students must go beyond the use of new terms to internalize them (Lantolf et al., 2015).

In a similar position is Piaget (1964), with his theory of cognitive development. He claims that learners can integrate new information only with the aid of pre-existing mental structures called schemas. This process of integration is vital in second-language teaching and learning where learners benefit from the use of cognates and other cross-language information (Feldman, 2019).

Anderson's (1983), Automation Theory deals with the phenomena of a student internalizing and automating linguistic knowledge as a result of constant practice. In vocabulary learning, as highlighted in this approach, DeKeyser (2017), argues that engaging students in the systematic repetitive use of oral expression activities for consolidation facilitates the fluent use of knowledge by the learners. Ausubel's (1963), Meaningful Learning Theory claims that students retain new information more effectively when there is a scheme of prior knowledge to which they can attach the new information.

For vocabulary learning, the students' comprehension and retention of new words is dependent on the contexts in which the words are embedded for them to be applied in oral production (Novak & Cañas, 2008). Lastly, the Technological Mediation Theory (Stockwell, 2021), analyzes the role of technology in vocabulary learning and oral expression through interactive multimedia resources. Applications and digital technology provide avenues to authentic and rich content, which enhance the retention of vocabulary and its elicitation in speech interaction (Godwin-Jones, 2019).

### *Literature Review*

The growth of vocabulary and speaking skills in young learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) is an essential part of their language development. Communication would be difficult without vocabulary since students will not be able to verbalize ideas without appropriate language. Young learners face challenges of communicating owing to inadequate vocabulary and pronunciation problems which are some of the aspects of language constraint.

The purpose of the literature review is to analyze the primary issues concerning vocabulary acquisition and oral expression of young EFL learners, focusing on the specific linguistic challenges and appropriate remedial techniques.

## *Vocabulary and Oral Expression*

For communication to take place, the most critical part is the foreign language vocabulary, which must be acquired before any interaction can happen. As earlier discussed, young learners seem to understand vocabulary best if it is taught in meaningful contexts and with some appropriate features (Feldman, 2019). One of the most well-known contemporary theorists of development, Vygotsky, emphasizes the role of social interaction in learning. Lantolf, Thorne, and Poehner (2015), stress too, the role of interaction in helping learners to process and use new vocabulary meaningfully in communication. Learning through social interaction means that students are taught aspects of language that will help improve their vocabulary and, consequently, their oral skills.

Along with that, another theorist who also addresses the development of the constructivist paradigm, Piaget, argues that learners also use vocabulary by attaching new concepts to words that they already know. As students draw on their background knowledge, the likelihood of receiving and using the language that is required increases, which in turn enhances their oral expression skills (Feldman, 2019). The automation theory that DeKeyser (2017), supports describes the central role of practice and repetition in achieving automated fluency in vocabulary.

Consistent interaction with vocabulary allows learners to progress from being just learners to employing automatic recall while conversing. Employing Task-Based Learning (TBL) has been equally successful in developing vocabulary and oral skills. Orth (2003) and Van den Branden (2016), argue that meaning-defined tasks enable learners to use vocabulary in authentic and communicative settings.

Ellis stresses that this approach leads to the proactive utilization of active vocabulary, and consequently, they are able to fluently express themselves orally. They point out that, through participation in goal-based activities, learners enhance not only their vocabulary but also their proficiency in real-life interactions. Vygotsky's term "the Zone of Proximal Development" refers to the distance between the actual developmental level of the child and the potential development of the child.

## *Linguistic Barriers to Oral Expression*

With all these advancements, younger learners still face limits to their speech orally. Low vocabulary is the single biggest obstacle to the learners communicating what they think in the speech. DeKeyser (2017), points out that students find it hard to recall vocabulary for use in a conversation, making them sound less fluent. This restricted vocabulary also entails an overuse of simple words that can hardly be avoided.

Pronunciation challenges make it difficult for younger learners who have not yet mastered the sounds of speech. Word mispronunciation can create barriers in communication and conversations. Without appropriate feedback or chances to work on their pronunciation, learners' challenges are only made worse.

In some cases, students' access to certain technology may impede their vocabulary and speech development. Chen and Lian (2021), noted that some students are unable to use digital tools and resources, including educational games and language learning applications, due to certain restrictions in place. A lack of these materials may result in students not being acquainted with a wider range of languages, which eventually leads to less vocabulary use and practice.

## Methodology

Participants were primary school students learning English as a foreign language. To analyze the vocabulary and speech production difficulties of young learners, this study used a sequential explanatory mixed methods design. Quantitative data was collected first from student questionnaires to determine the degree of vocabulary and speech production in EFL. Afterward, teachers were interviewed to explain the difficulties these students experienced from their limited vocabulary in learning English as a foreign language.

The issues were covered in the quantitative part, while the qualitative part explains the deeper underlying problem in greater detail. These phases were implemented in a certain order to first determine critical patterns and subsequently analyze the reasoning behind those patterns for the sake of complete and thorough evaluation.

This research considered 21 students from Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana fifth graders, 10 who were females and 11 males, all of whom were aged 9-10. In addition, the two English teachers from the institution were also a part of the sample and interviewed. These participants were all qualified educators who had a working proficiency in English at the B2 level.

The instrument of the research was a survey of ten questions with a five-point Likert scale which is capped with very important and closes with not important at all. Cohen, Manion, and Morrison say that a Likert scale is the most useful form of measuring certain attitudes and views because it gives in-depth quantitative information about students' perceptions.

In order to measure the validity and reliability of the instrument a pilot test was run with a handful of students and teachers from Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana. The pilot group consisted of 10 students from the same institute and 3 teachers. Pilot testing results show that the participants mostly understood the questions; nevertheless, some modifications in terms and scope were made to ensure they were appropriate for the audience.

A semi-structured interview was held with the teachers to discuss the educational challenges facing EFL learners and the instructional practices designed to address those challenges. Another question dealt with the use of cognates as a pedagogical device, which can aid in the comprehension and learning of English vocabulary as it refers to words that have similar forms and meanings in the mother tongue. Semi-structured interviews, as Kvale (2007), correctly argues, facilitate flexible and in-depth questions about the subject's narratives, and this was crucial for understanding the teaching of vocabulary and oral skills in English as a foreign language.

The first step in the process was seeking the consent of the relevant institutional stakeholders and notifying the students and their caregivers so that the instruments could be deployed. After obtaining consent, the next step involved conducting the classroom surveys during a normal teaching period. Students were given the paper survey in one of their English classes.

Survey responses were quantitatively analyzed while other types of information were processed and analyzed separately. Lastly, the institution's teachers were interviewed. This was done at a mutually agreed upon time and was conducted in an informal semi-structured format.

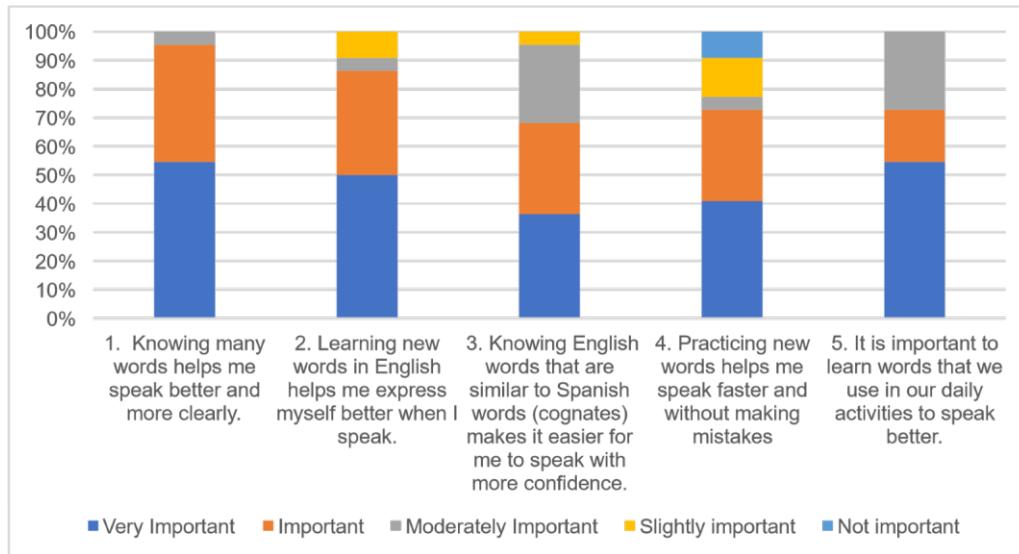
## Results

This study, conducted at Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana, focused on investigating the linguistic barriers faced by fifth-grade students. Using a mixed-method research approach, which involved student surveys and teacher interviews, the aim was to understand the specific difficulties related to vocabulary and oral expression in this educational context.

The teaching of English as a foreign language has become a key competency in the Ecuadorian education system, where mastery of vocabulary and oral expression are essential for effective communication. However, many primary school students face linguistic barriers due to a lack of adequate vocabulary, which limits their ability to express themselves orally in English.

Twenty-two fifth-grade EGB students from Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana participated in the survey. Their responses were divided into two categories to make the analysis more effective: (1) Vocabulary and oral expression (see Figure 1), and (2) Barriers to speaking (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Vocabulary and Oral Expression.



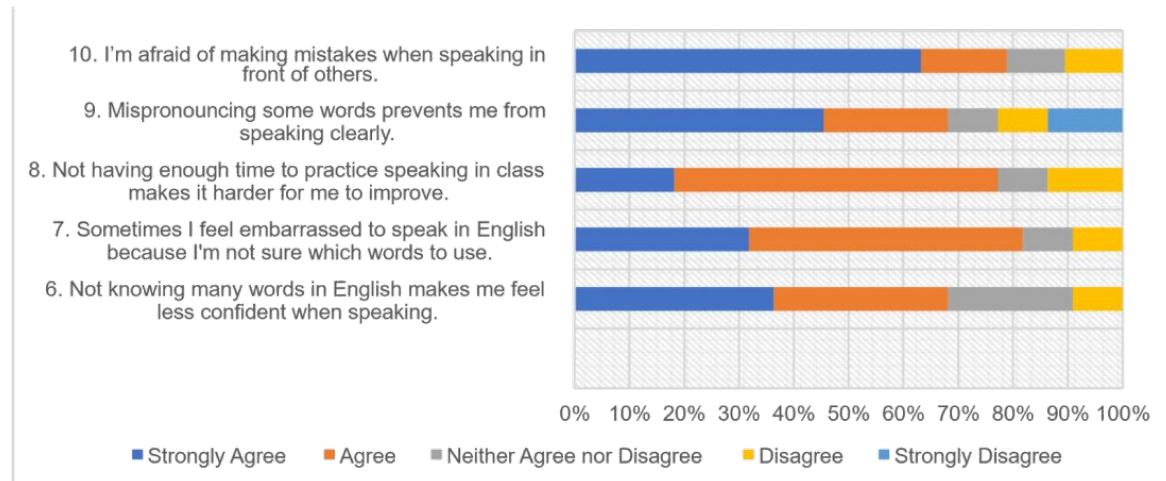
Source: own elaboration

At the end of the data collection, the results in Figure 1 show that 55% of the students consider that knowing many words is “very important” to improve their oral expression. 40% rate it as “important.”

Similarly, regarding the statement “Learning new words in English helps me express myself better when I speak,” 50% consider it “very important” for expressing themselves better, and 36% see it as “important.” Regarding the statement “Knowing English words that are similar to Spanish words (cognates) makes it easier for me to speak with more confidence,” 36% of students consider cognates “very important” for speaking with more confidence, while 38% rate them as “important,” and 23% perceive them as “moderately important.” Regarding the statement “Practicing new words helps me speak faster and without making mistakes,” 40% believe that practicing new words is “very important” for improving fluency and accuracy, while 16% consider it “slightly important,” and 9% do not find it relevant at all.

Finally, regarding the statement “It is important to learn words that we use in our daily activities to speak better,” more than 80% consider it important.

Figure 2. Barriers to Speaking.



Source: own elaboration

Figure 2 illustrates the obstacles students face regarding their ability to express themselves in English, highlighting five key barriers and the respondents' answers in terms of percentage of agreement. The statement that received the highest consensus was "I'm afraid of making mistakes when speaking in front of others," with approximately 60% of the students selecting "Strongly Agree" and "Agree," indicating a clear fear of making mistakes in public. Secondly, 50% of the students said they lack time to practice in class. ("Not having enough time to practice speaking in class makes it harder for me to improve.") negatively impact their progress. On the other hand, in the statement "Not knowing many words in English makes me feel less confident when speaking," 40% of the students strongly agreed, suggesting that the lack of vocabulary significantly decreases their confidence when speaking.

#### *Interview with English Teachers at Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana*

Interviews were conducted with teachers to acquire their perceptions on the primary linguistic barriers encountered by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in oral communication and the developed techniques and materials used to improve student's oral production. The teachers were able to pinpoint numerous barriers and solutions to improve the students' ability to express themselves in the second language. The following sections summarize the most relevant remarks provided by the teachers.

*With regard to the most prevalent linguistic barriers in their classrooms, teachers outlined three problem areas in their students' oral expression:*

**Insufficient vocabulary:** this is the most frequently cited barrier by teachers who feel that learners are completely unable to articulate their ideas appropriately.

**Problems with pronunciation:** nervousness and unwillingness to participate are caused by the inability to pronounce some words correctly or difficulty in pronouncing words that are new or difficult.

**Deficits in fluency and confidence:** there is a lack of fluency and self-confidence because of the fear of committing errors, which is a major worry for those students. These issues make students reluctant to participate actively in speaking tasks.

In terms of the linguistic barriers that students face, teachers described multiple strategies that they have tried to integrate into their teaching approach. Shadowing: Repetition of what is said was described by the teachers as helping in the pronunciation and vocabulary together with context.

**Role plays and interactive activities:** explained in detail as instructional techniques, these strategies allow learners to practice English in realistic contexts so that vocabulary and structures learned can be put to use.

**Use of audiovisual resources:** the participants acknowledged that students gain self-esteem accompanied by the correct usage of verbs because videos, songs, and recordings familiarize learners with the different ways of pronouncing and intonating a language.

**Breaking down long words into syllables:** this strategy is used in teaching of intricate words by concentrating on spelling them out into sections.

*When discussing the resources used to encourage oral expression, teachers reported the following:*

**Technological resources:** teachers use Flipgrid, Wordwall, Quizlet, and other resources that enable learners to record their oral answers and upload them so that they can be marked by their teachers.

**Visual resources:** flashcards and digital books are used as well as other interactive materials for learners to learn new words and correct their pronunciation.

Regarding strategies to motivate students to speak in English and increase their confidence, teachers shared the following:

**Positive feedback and remarks:** teachers noted the role of positive remarks to help motivate students as they work on set tasks. Many use fun ways or games to encourage people to join in.

**Creating a judgment-free environment:** to foster expression without curtailment, teachers do not correct the grammar or pronunciation of words when the student speaks in the early stages of oral activities, promoting a more comfortable environment where they cannot be judged.

With regards to measuring the success of the strategies implemented to enhance students' oral expression, teachers stated:

**Attitude towards oral activities:** students' engagement and willingness to participate in oral activities help in determining how effective the strategies have been. Other formal evaluations: Progress in oral presentations and exercises using videos are evaluated with the help of rubrics or checklists.

**When asked about the use of cognates to foster vocabulary, teachers shared that:** cognates are perceived as a helpful tool for expanding vocabulary, as students can easily recognize them. However, some challenges arise, particularly with incorrect pronunciation, which can lead to misunderstandings. Despite this, teachers see it as an opportunity to improve and compare pronunciation.

## Discussion

The results of the study reflect a high level of knowledge among both students and teachers regarding the importance of vocabulary for oral expression. From the interviews with teachers and surveys of students from Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana. It was evident that the lack of an extensive vocabulary is one of the main factors limiting students' fluency and confidence when communicating in English. Most indicated that knowing and learning many words is key to speaking clearly and effectively. However, despite this recognition, students face significant obstacles, such as fear of making mistakes, limited time for practice, and a lack of confidence due to gaps in their vocabulary. These factors align with previous studies that emphasize the crucial role vocabulary plays in effective communication (Snow, 2010; McKeown & Kucan, 2013). Moreover, both teachers and students agreed that barriers related to vocabulary and oral expression significantly affect confidence when speaking English.

The fear of making mistakes was identified as one of the main obstacles, especially by students who reported high levels of anxiety when speaking in public. This is supported by research on foreign language anxiety, which suggests that the fear of negative evaluation hinders classroom participation (Horwitz, 2016). Teachers also confirmed that immediate correction, while helpful in some contexts, can increase anxiety and reduce students' willingness to speak, which aligns with

the studies of MacIntyre and Gregersen (2012), who state that excessive correction can heighten anxiety and impact oral production.

Another important finding was that while most students consider expanding their vocabulary crucial for improving oral expression, some do not perceive a constant need to acquire new words, which may be related to a lack of opportunities to apply this vocabulary in real-life situations. Teachers indicated that although students are aware of the importance of vocabulary, they often struggle to integrate new words into communicative contexts. This challenge is particularly evident in the lack of effective strategies for regularly practicing vocabulary, which was also reflected in the surveys: many students believe that practicing new words is key to improving fluency and accuracy, but some do not recognize this relationship.

Regarding the use of cognates, a significant portion of students consider them as “moderately important” for gaining confidence in speaking. At the same time, teachers suggest they can be useful in the early stages of learning, though they should not become a long-term crutch. Cummins (2000), highlights the value of cognates in initial understanding but also emphasizes the importance of developing a more diverse vocabulary. On the other hand, this finding aligns with Amengual-Pizarro & Mélendez (2021), who warn that cognates require explicit instruction to avoid phonetic errors. Therefore, their usefulness depends on a balance between exploiting interlinguistic similarities and proactive correction.

Finally, a great many students understand the importance of learning vocabulary associated with everyday activities, and teachers stress the importance of applying functional vocabulary in class as the relevance and usefulness of vocabulary are limited. However, some students assessed this vocabulary as “moderately important,” which may be due to the limited possibilities to practice it in real-life situations.

## Conclusion

In summary, the absence of an adequate vocabulary and fear of public speaking are two major obstacles in English speaking for the fifth graders EFL students of Unidad Educativa Particular Santa Ana. Teachers understand the necessity to build a supportive classroom atmosphere where students are encouraged to use the language freely without being judged and where vocabulary enhancement is ongoing. Such an environment, in combination with purposeful exercises that encourage students to use learned language in practice, will increase students’ self-confidence and fluency in speaking. The findings suggest that vocabulary learning is not helpful in most cases without other considerations such as negative emotions like anxiety that prevent students from wanting to speak in English.

The most significant outcome of this study was the development of specific practical teaching methods for these problem areas. Educators underscored the value of paired vocabulary exercises with speaking activities like role-plays and group discussions, aiding students in putting new terms into context while incrementally fostering their speaking self-efficacy. The study's mixed-methods design offered a solid structure to understand these challenges with the measurable survey data and the teachers' views. This view confirms the value of vocabulary not only as a prerequisite to speaking, but also indicates a lack of pressure for students to freely make attempts with the language.

The study carries important findings for the teaching of English as a Foreign Language.. By prioritizing vocabulary development, along with opportunities for low-stakes speaking practice, teachers can help young learners overcome linguistic and emotional obstacles, thereby improving their ability to communicate in English. Furthermore, as explored in the teacher interviews, the focus on cognates as a pedagogical tool emerged as a promising strategy for facilitating vocabulary acquisition by leveraging students' existing linguistic knowledge of their native language. One limitation of this study was the challenge of collecting quantitative data, as it coincided with the semester exam period when students were busy with assessments while teachers were engaged in multiple academic activities. This likely influenced the availability and focus of both groups, potentially affecting the depth of their responses and the overall quality of the data.

Despite these limitations, the results suggest that integrating pedagogical strategies that combine vocabulary learning with frequent speaking practice is an effective way to overcome the identified barriers. Future research should expand the focus of this study, exploring in greater depth the impact of pronunciation practice and the use of interactive technology on vocabulary acquisition and improved public speaking confidence.

Finally, this study highlights the need for teachers to receive ongoing training on teaching strategies that foster a pressure-free learning environment, which is essential for long-term success in developing English speaking skills.

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