

USING SYNONYMS TO ENHANCE VOCABULARY IN SPEAKING CLASSES FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS AT THE FACULTY OF ENGLISH, HANOI OPEN UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *This study investigates synonym use in enhancing lexical diversity in speaking classes among first-year students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 100 students through questionnaires and open-ended questions. Results indicate that students hold highly positive perceptions of synonyms' role in avoiding word repetition and enriching speech ($M = 4.14$), with a strong desire to learn more ($M = 4.05$). However, the actual perceived frequency of synonym use remains moderate ($M = 3.28$), with high levels of difficulty reported ($M = 3.78$), particularly in selecting contextually appropriate words (67%) and managing time pressure during communication (54%). Classroom support for synonym practice is limited ($M = 2.89$). The study highlights the gap between awareness and practice and recommends that instructors systematically integrate synonym teaching through contextual explanation, concrete examples, and guided practice activities.*

Keywords: *first-year students, lexical diversity, speaking skills, synonyms, vocabulary*

I. Introduction

In the context of globalization, English is increasingly important in Vietnam, particularly in education and international communication (Nguyen & Le, 2011). However, speaking skills remain a major challenge for Vietnamese students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). One of the key factors affecting English communication ability is vocabulary, especially the ability to use diverse and rich vocabulary in speaking (Uchihara & Clenton, 2020).

Recent research has demonstrated a close relationship between lexical

richness and English speaking proficiency (Zaytseva et al., 2021). Lexical richness is measured through three main aspects: lexical density, lexical diversity, and lexical sophistication (Shinjae, 2023). Among these, lexical diversity, the ability to use many different words to avoid repetition, is considered an important indicator reflecting learners' language proficiency (Yang & He, 2025). However, many studies indicate that EFL students, especially first-year students, often struggle to use diverse vocabulary when communicating (Duong & Le, 2022).

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One effective strategy for enhancing lexical diversity is the use of synonyms. Synonyms not only help learners avoid word repetition but also allow them to express ideas more accurately and richly in communication. Albelihi (2022) demonstrated that teaching lexical chunks systematically can significantly improve EFL learners' speaking ability. Similarly, Kitjaroonchai and Sukman (2025) emphasized the role of lexical complexity in enhancing communication quality.

Despite the recognized importance of lexical diversity in speaking proficiency, research specifically examining synonym use among Vietnamese EFL learners remains scarce. Existing studies have primarily focused on general vocabulary size or breadth (Nguyen & Webb, 2017), with limited attention to how learners actually deploy synonyms in spontaneous oral production. This gap is particularly concerning for first-year university students, who are at a critical developmental stage where they transition from basic communicative competence to more sophisticated academic and professional language use.

Furthermore, while international research has documented the challenges of learning near-synonyms (Webb, 2007), the specific difficulties faced by Vietnamese learners may differ due to L1 transfer effects and the particular pedagogical contexts in Vietnam, where traditional grammar-translation methods have historically dominated language instruction (Le & Barnard, 2009). Understanding these context-specific challenges is essential for developing appropriate instructional interventions.

Although there has been much research on the relationship between vocabulary and speaking skills, there remains a lack of specific studies on the

role of synonyms in enhancing vocabulary for first-year students in Vietnam. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate: (1) the current state of synonym use among first-year EFL students in speaking classes; (2) students' perceptions of the role of synonyms in enhancing their speaking skills; (3) the difficulties students encounter when using synonyms in oral communication; and (4) the forms of instructional support students need to improve their synonym use. These questions aim to bridge the identified gap in understanding synonym use specifically among Vietnamese first-year students, a population that represents a critical transition point in EFL learning.

II. Literature review

2.1. Vocabulary and speaking skills

Vocabulary plays a foundational role in EFL speaking development. Uchihara and Clenton (2020) confirm that vocabulary size significantly correlates with oral communication ability. Beyond quantity, the quality of vocabulary use, particularly productive vocabulary depth, is the strongest predictor of speaking proficiency, accounting for 47% of variance in learners' spoken output (Tong et al., 2022). Lexical richness, comprising lexical density, diversity, and sophistication (Shinjae, 2023), serves as a key measure of language proficiency, with lexical diversity most clearly distinguishing EFL learners from native speakers (Yang & He, 2025). Research by Zaytseva et al. (2021) further demonstrates that lexical diversity improves most markedly when learners practice in authentic communicative environments.

2.2. The role of synonyms in vocabulary learning

Synonyms, words sharing similar meanings but differing in nuance, context, or formality, are a critical component

of lexical diversity. Yu and Hsu (2013) highlight that near-synonyms present particular challenges for EFL learners, as their contextual distinctions are difficult to grasp. Research by Barcroft (2009) further shows that synonym generation tasks may negatively affect vocabulary retention if not carefully designed, underscoring the need for deliberate, context-sensitive synonym instruction. Albelihi (2022) demonstrates that systematic lexical chunk teaching significantly improves speaking fluency, while Kitjaroonchai and Sukman (2025) confirm that lexical complexity positively impacts communication quality.

2.3. Vietnamese and Southeast Asian EFL context

Vietnamese EFL learners consistently struggle to deploy diverse vocabulary in spoken communication, with prior vocabulary knowledge predicting lexical complexity and fluency (Duong & Le, 2022). This challenge is partly attributed to the dominance of grammar-translation pedagogy in Vietnam, which prioritizes passive over active vocabulary knowledge (Le & Barnard, 2009). Across the broader Southeast Asian EFL context, similar patterns have been documented in Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia, where learners demonstrate strong receptive vocabulary knowledge but encounter significant difficulties deploying vocabulary actively in real-time speaking tasks (Kitjaroonchai & Sukman, 2025; Tong et al., 2022). These shared regional patterns suggest that the challenges faced by Vietnamese first-year students reflect a broader pedagogical issue that requires systematic intervention.

2.4. Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in the lexical richness framework (Shinjae, 2023; Yang

& He, 2025), which treats the use of synonyms as central to lexical diversity. It also draws on skill acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2020), which explains the knowing-doing gap: declarative knowledge of synonyms must be proceduralized through extensive practice before automatic deployment in real-time speech. Usage-based theory (Tomasello, 2003) further informs the emphasis on contextualized instruction, positing that synonyms are best acquired through repeated exposure in authentic communicative contexts rather than isolated definitional study. Together, these frameworks explain why high synonym awareness ($M = 4.14$) does not automatically translate into frequent productive use ($M = 3.28$), and guide the study's focus on systematic, context-driven synonym instruction (Oxford, 2017).

III. Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Participants were 100 first-year students enrolled in Speaking 1, 2, or 3 during the second semester of the 2024-2025 academic year at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University, selected through convenience sampling. The sample comprised 68% female and 32% male students; 45% were in Speaking 1, 38% in Speaking 2, and 17% in Speaking 3. The majority (58%) had been learning English for 7-10 years, 27% for over 10 years, and 15% for fewer than 7 years. While convenience sampling is appropriate for this exploratory case study, it limits the statistical generalizability of findings to other institutions or populations.

Data were collected via a researcher-developed questionnaire comprising six sections: (A) demographics; (B) current

synonym use, 5 Likert items (1 = Never to 5 = Always) and 1 multiple-choice item on learning sources; (C) perceptions of synonyms' role, 6 Likert items (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree); (D) difficulties, 5 Likert items (1 = Not Difficult to 5 = Very Difficult) and 1 multiple-choice item; (E) support needs, multiple-choice allowing up to 3 selections; and (F) 2 optional open-ended questions. Content validity was ensured through reviews by two experienced English instructors and a pilot test with 15 students, which preceded the main data collection. Importantly, all quantitative scores, including the reported level of synonym use ($M = 3.28$), reflect students' self-reported perceived frequency rather than objectively measured performance, a distinction acknowledged as a key methodological limitation (see Section 6.3). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, frequency, percentage) in Excel, while qualitative data from 73 open-ended responses (73% response rate) were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach.

IV. Results

The study collected 100 valid questionnaires from first-year students at

Table 1. Current state of synonym use (N = 100)

Item	M	SD
Use synonyms when speaking in class	3.12	0.89
Actively look up synonyms when learning new words	3.45	0.95
Attempt to replace simple words with synonyms	3.28	0.87
Instructors encourage the use of synonyms	3.67	1.02
Classroom activities help practice synonyms	2.89	0.93
Overall mean	3.28	0.73

Note. Scale: 1 = Never; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Sometimes; 4 = Often; 5 = Always. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation. All scores reflect students' self-reported perceived frequency of synonym use.

4.2. Perceptions of the role of synonyms

Table 2 shows that students have highly positive perceptions of the role of

the Faculty of English at the Hanoi Open University. Among the 100 participating students, 68% were female, and 32% were male. Regarding course distribution, 45% of students were enrolled in Speaking 1, 38% in Speaking 2, and 17% in Speaking 3. The majority of students (58%) had been learning English for 7-10 years, 27% for more than 10 years, and 15% for less than 7 years.

4.1. Current state of synonym use

Table 1 presents the results on students' current use of synonyms in speaking classes. The results show that the self-reported level of synonym use is moderate, with an overall mean score of 3.28 ($SD = 0.73$). Specifically, students report being most encouraged by instructors to use synonyms ($M = 3.67$, $SD = 1.02$), indicating that instructors pay attention to vocabulary enhancement. Students also demonstrate a positive attitude by actively looking up synonyms when learning new words ($M = 3.45$, $SD = 0.95$). However, classroom activities supporting synonym practice remain limited ($M = 2.89$, $SD = 0.93$), reflecting a lack of specific teaching methods. Regarding learning sources, online dictionaries are the most popular source (78%), followed by instructors (65%) and IELTS/TOEIC preparation books (52%).

synonyms in enhancing vocabulary and speaking skills ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.57$). In particular, students strongly agree that synonyms make their speech more

varied ($M = 4.31$, $SD = 0.65$) and help avoid word repetition when speaking ($M = 4.23$, $SD = 0.72$). Notably, the majority of students desire to learn more about using synonyms ($M = 4.05$, $SD = 0.79$), with 83 students (83%)

choosing Agree or Strongly Agree, reflecting strong learning needs and awareness of the importance of synonyms. This result is consistent with the research by Zaytseva et al. (2021) on the role of lexical diversity in speaking skills.

Table 2. Perceptions of the role of synonyms (N = 100)

Item	M	SD
Help avoid word repetition when speaking	4.23	0.72
Make speech more varied	4.31	0.65
Important for improving speaking skills	4.18	0.71
Help express ideas more accurately	4.15	0.68
Help feel more confident when speaking	3.92	0.85
Want to learn more about usage	4.05	0.79
Overall mean	4.14	0.57

Note. Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

4.3. Difficulties in using synonyms

Table 3 presents the difficulties students encounter when using synonyms. The results show that students face high levels of difficulty ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.72$). The greatest difficulty is choosing appropriate synonyms quickly during communication ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 0.87$), reflecting time pressure in real communication. This is followed by difficulty in knowing the appropriate

context for use ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.88$) and distinguishing meaning differences between synonyms ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.91$). These difficulties are consistent with Yu and Hsu's (2013) research on grasping contextual differences of near-synonyms. When asked about their greatest difficulty, 67% of students indicated not knowing which word fits the context, 54% lacked time to think when speaking, and 48% confused words with similar meanings.

Table 3. Difficulties in using synonyms (N = 100)

Item	M	SD
Choosing appropriate words quickly during communication	3.93	0.87
Knowing the appropriate context for each word	3.85	0.88
Distinguishing meaning differences	3.78	0.91
Using naturally when speaking	3.71	0.89
Remembering and retaining many synonyms	3.62	0.95
Overall mean	3.78	0.72

Note. Scale: 1 = Not Difficult; 2 = Slightly Difficult; 3 = Moderately Difficult; 4 = Quite Difficult; 5 = Very Difficult. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation.

4.4. Support needs and qualitative findings

Table 4 presents the forms of support that students desire. The results show that students most desire explanations of

differences between synonyms (72%), followed by concrete examples of usage (68%), and lists of synonyms by topic (59%). This need reflects a lack of specific guidance on using synonyms in appropriate contexts.

Table 4. Students' support needs (N = 100)

Form of support	n	%
Explanation of differences between synonyms	72	72.0
Concrete examples of usage	68	68.0
Lists of synonyms by topic	59	59.0
Practice activities/games	51	51.0
Error correction when used incorrectly	45	45.0
Reference materials (books, apps)	38	38.0

Note. Students could choose up to 3 forms. n = number; % = percentage.

Qualitative analysis of 73 open-ended responses (73% response rate) reveals four main themes. First, students recognize the positive impact of synonyms: "When I know many synonyms, I don't get 'stuck' when I can't remember a word" (S08), and "Using synonyms helps my speech avoid being boring from repeating the same word" (S15). Second, contextual difficulties were frequently mentioned: "I know 'big', 'large', 'huge' but don't know when to use which one" (S12), "I'm afraid of using the wrong word because I don't understand how the meanings differ" (S23), and "Many words have similar meanings but are used in different situations, I often make mistakes" (S31). Third, time pressure in communication makes it difficult for students to apply synonyms: "When speaking, I don't have time to think of better words" (S19), and "During conversation, I can only think of the simplest words" (S42). Fourth, students express a need for specific guidance: "I want the teacher to explain when to use 'happy' and when to use 'delighted'" (S27), "There should be lists of synonyms by topic for learning" (S35), and "More practice exercises are needed in class" (S48).

4.5. Discussion

The results reveal a substantial gap between students' highly positive perceptions of synonyms (M = 4.14) and their moderate self-reported use (M = 3.28),

consistent with Duong and Le (2022), who found that vocabulary knowledge does not automatically translate into effective speaking performance among Vietnamese EFL learners. Skill acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2020) explains this knowing-doing gap: declarative synonym knowledge must be proceduralized through extensive practice before it can be automatically deployed under the cognitive demands of real-time speech, a level of automaticity that current classroom activities appear insufficient to develop (M = 2.89).

The greatest difficulties, contextual appropriateness (M = 3.85) and time pressure (M = 3.93), reflect deficits in pragmatic and collocational knowledge (Yu & Hsu, 2013) and limited classroom synonym practice (M = 2.89). These findings align with the broader Southeast Asian EFL context, where Thai and Malaysian learners similarly demonstrate strong receptive vocabulary knowledge but struggle to deploy lexical variety actively in real-time speaking tasks (Kitjaroonchai & Sukman, 2025; Tong et al., 2022). These cross-contextual parallels confirm that the challenges faced by Vietnamese first-year students reflect a broader regional pattern, shaped by shared pedagogical traditions that prioritize passive over active vocabulary learning.

From a usage-based perspective (Tomasello, 2003), synonyms are best

acquired through repeated exposure in authentic communicative contexts rather than isolated definitional study, supporting the 72% of students who requested explanations of semantic differences and the 68% who needed concrete usage examples. Integrating systematic, context-driven synonym instruction into Speaking programs, as advocated by Albelihi (2022), would directly address the gap between awareness and productive use confirmed in this study (Zaytseva et al., 2021; Shinjae, 2023).

V. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Conclusion

This study investigated the use of synonyms among 100 first-year EFL students at the Faculty of English, Hanoi Open University. While students hold highly positive perceptions of synonyms' role in speaking ($M = 4.14$) and strongly desire to learn more (83%), their self-reported use remains moderate ($M = 3.28$) and difficulty levels are high ($M = 3.78$) - particularly in contextual word selection (67%) and real-time retrieval under time pressure (54%). These findings, consistent with regional EFL research (Kitjaroonchai & Sukman, 2025; Tong et al., 2022) and skill acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 2020), confirm that synonym awareness alone is insufficient; systematic, contextualized practice is essential to bridge the knowing-doing gap and develop productive lexical competence in oral communication.

5.2. Implications

Instructors should systematically integrate synonym teaching into speaking classes by explaining contextual and register differences, providing authentic usage examples, and organizing communicative practice activities, such as word substitution tasks, language games, and group discussions, that simulate

real-time speaking pressure. Students are encouraged to use thesauruses and vocabulary apps, and to record synonyms with their usage contexts for active retrieval practice. At the institutional level, the Faculty of English should consider incorporating topic-based synonym materials into speaking curricula and organizing vocabulary learning strategy workshops to support first-year students' productive lexical development.

5.3. Limitations and directions for future research

This study has three key limitations. First, convenience sampling at a single university restricts generalizability. Second, all quantitative measures, including the reported level of synonym use ($M = 3.28$), are based on students' self-reported perceptions rather than objectively observed performance; social desirability bias or limited metacognitive accuracy may affect these scores, warranting caution in their interpretation. Third, the absence of classroom observation or teacher interviews limits independent verification of the instructional findings. Future research should expand to multiple universities, incorporate objective performance measures, such as recorded speech analysis or synonym production tests, and examine the effectiveness of specific synonym-teaching interventions for Vietnamese EFL learners.

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SỬ DỤNG TỪ ĐỒNG NGHĨA TRONG VIỆC NÂNG CAO VỐN TỪ VỰNG CHO KỸ NĂNG NÓI CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT KHOA TIẾNG ANH, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC MỞ HÀ NỘI

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Tóm tắt: Bài báo khảo sát thực trạng sử dụng từ đồng nghĩa trong việc phát triển vốn từ vựng phục vụ kỹ năng nói của sinh viên năm thứ nhất Khoa Tiếng Anh, Trường Đại học Mở Hà Nội. Nghiên cứu sử dụng phương pháp hỗn hợp, thu thập dữ liệu từ 100 sinh viên qua bảng hỏi và câu hỏi mở. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên có nhận thức rất tích cực về vai trò của từ đồng nghĩa ($M = 4,14$) và mong muốn học thêm cao ($M = 4,05$), nhưng tần suất sử dụng được tự đánh giá chỉ ở mức trung bình ($M = 3,28$), với mức độ khó khăn cao ($M = 3,78$), đặc biệt trong lựa chọn từ phù hợp ngữ cảnh (67%) và áp lực thời gian giao tiếp (54%). Hoạt động luyện tập trên lớp còn hạn chế ($M = 2,89$). Nghiên cứu đề xuất giảng viên cần tích hợp giảng dạy từ đồng nghĩa có hệ thống, chú trọng giải thích ngữ cảnh, ví dụ cụ thể và tổ chức luyện tập phù hợp.

Từ khóa: độ đa dạng từ vựng, kỹ năng nói, sinh viên năm thứ nhất, từ đồng nghĩa, từ vựng

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