

Exploring Vocabulary Use During English Writing Among First-Year EFL Students: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract:

Vocabulary use is essential in English writing because learners must make continuous lexical decisions to express ideas accurately and appropriately. Previous studies have primarily examined vocabulary mastery, lexical diversity, and writing quality as measurable outcomes, providing limited insight into how learners use vocabulary during the writing process. This study explored how first-year EFL students used vocabulary while composing English descriptive texts. A qualitative case study was conducted with 30 first-year English Education students at Universitas Islam Lamongan, Indonesia. Data were collected through descriptive writing tasks, think-aloud protocols, and stimulated recall interviews, and analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Following preliminary coding of all writing products, six information-rich cases were purposively selected for in-depth analysis. The findings revealed that vocabulary use was a dynamic and recursive process involving five interconnected stages: lexical retrieval, lexical search, lexical selection, lexical evaluation, and lexical revision. The integration of multiple data sources showed that students continuously negotiated between their lexical knowledge, cultural meanings, communicative intentions, and contextual demands while composing texts. These findings reconceptualize vocabulary as a strategic process rather than merely a linguistic product. The study suggests that vocabulary instruction should emphasize process-oriented lexical strategies, including searching, evaluating, and revising vocabulary, to foster more effective writing development in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Vocabulary use; EFL writing; lexical decision-making; Think-Aloud Protocol; qualitative case study

Introduction

Writing is a cognitively demanding process that requires learners not only to generate and organize ideas but also to make continuous lexical decisions to communicate meaning accurately and effectively. In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, the quality of students' writing is influenced not merely by the number of words they know but, more importantly, by how they use vocabulary during the writing process. Vocabulary use involves selecting appropriate lexical items, adapting word meanings to the writing context, employing varied expressions, and revising lexical choices to enhance clarity and coherence. These processes enable writers to construct meaningful texts, maintain logical connections between ideas, and convey intended messages with greater precision. Conversely, difficulties in vocabulary use often lead to repetitive word choices, inappropriate lexical selection, and overreliance on literal translation, which ultimately reduce the quality of written compositions. Recent studies have consistently highlighted that effective vocabulary use contributes significantly to students' writing development by supporting lexical diversity, contextual appropriateness, and overall writing performance in EFL settings (Puspitasari dkk., 2024; Setyorini dkk., 2026). Furthermore, emerging evidence from Indonesian EFL contexts suggests that vocabulary should be viewed not merely as linguistic knowledge to be mastered but as a dynamic resource that learners actively mobilize while planning, drafting, and revising their texts, indicating the importance of investigating vocabulary use as a process rather than solely as an outcome of language learning.

Although vocabulary is fundamental to successful writing, the process of using vocabulary during text composition is considerably more complex than simply recalling individual words from memory. While writing, EFL learners continuously engage in a series of lexical decision-making processes, including retrieving appropriate words, evaluating semantic and contextual suitability, selecting among alternative lexical items, modifying expressions to fit communicative purposes, and revising word choices to improve textual coherence and accuracy (Raufi dkk., 2024a). These recursive processes require the integration of linguistic knowledge, cognitive resources, and strategic thinking, making vocabulary use a dynamic component of writing rather than a static indicator of language proficiency. Consequently, students often encounter lexical difficulties such as limited word retrieval, inappropriate word selection, excessive repetition, dependence on literal translation from their first language, and avoidance of unfamiliar vocabulary, all of which may constrain the development of coherent and academically appropriate texts. Recent research has

demonstrated that writing competence is closely associated with learners' lexical diversity, indicating that effective writing depends not only on the amount of vocabulary learners possess but also on their ability to select and employ varied lexical resources appropriately throughout the composing process (Naji & Rawshdeh, 2024). Likewise, evidence from Indonesian EFL contexts suggests that lexical diversity and academic vocabulary use are integral components of successful academic writing, highlighting the importance of investigating vocabulary use as a dynamic process rather than merely assessing vocabulary knowledge or mastery.

Recent studies have increasingly acknowledged that vocabulary plays a multidimensional role in second language (L2) writing beyond merely determining learners' vocabulary size or mastery. Rather than functioning as isolated linguistic knowledge, vocabulary is now understood as a dynamic resource that writers actively retrieve, evaluate, and manipulate throughout the composing process (Min & Li, 2025; Teng & Xu, 2025). Research has shown that productive vocabulary knowledge contributes more substantially to writing development than receptive vocabulary because writers continuously activate lexical knowledge and adapt lexical items to suit communicative intentions during text production, while productive learning activities such as sentence writing and translation facilitate the transition from receptive knowledge to productive lexical use. Similarly, investigations into Indonesian and other EFL contexts have demonstrated that academic vocabulary use and lexical diversity are associated with writing quality, although lexical variation alone does not necessarily guarantee successful written performance (Raufi dkk., 2024a; Suhandoko dkk., 2024). Instead, effective writing depends on learners' ability to make contextually appropriate lexical choices while maintaining coherence and rhetorical effectiveness throughout the writing process (Raufi dkk., 2024a). In addition, recent pedagogical research suggests that instructional approaches encouraging learners to employ vocabulary in meaningful writing tasks facilitate the transition from receptive word knowledge to productive vocabulary use, enabling learners to retrieve, select, and integrate lexical items more effectively during composition (Teng & Xu, 2025). Collectively, these findings indicate a growing shift in L2 writing research from viewing vocabulary as a measurable linguistic product toward conceptualizing it as a cognitive and strategic process involving lexical retrieval, lexical choice, and continual revision during writing (Kang, 2024).

Despite the growing body of literature highlighting the importance of vocabulary in L2 writing, a critical gap remains in understanding how learners actually use vocabulary during the composing process. Most previous studies have predominantly employed quantitative and correlational designs to examine the contribution of vocabulary mastery, vocabulary knowledge, or lexical diversity to writing achievement, consistently reporting positive relationships between these variables and writing performance (Hartini & Suri Ardini, 2024; Naji & Rawshdeh, 2024; Puspitasari dkk., 2024).

Although these findings have enriched our understanding of the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and writing outcomes, they provide limited explanations of the cognitive and strategic processes that occur while learners are composing texts. Likewise, recent studies investigating lexical diversity and academic vocabulary have primarily focused on measuring lexical features and their correlation with writing quality rather than exploring how learners retrieve, select, evaluate, and revise lexical items throughout the writing process. Consequently, the dynamic process of vocabulary use—including lexical retrieval, contextual word selection, lexical substitution, and revision strategies—remains underexplored, particularly among first-year EFL university students who are transitioning from general English learning to academic writing. Addressing this gap is essential because understanding learners' vocabulary use during writing can provide richer pedagogical insights into the cognitive mechanisms underlying text production, thereby extending current perspectives that largely conceptualize vocabulary as a measurable linguistic resource rather than a strategic process of meaning construction.

The novelty of this study lies in three major contributions. First, it shifts the focus of vocabulary research from vocabulary mastery and writing outcomes toward vocabulary use as a dynamic cognitive process during text composition. Second, it provides empirical evidence of learners' lexical decision-making by examining how first-year EFL students retrieve, search for, select, evaluate, substitute, and revise vocabulary while writing, an aspect that has received limited attention in previous studies. Third, the findings are expected to contribute to process-oriented vocabulary pedagogy by proposing instructional insights that support strategic vocabulary use rather than merely increasing vocabulary knowledge. Consequently, this study extends the current understanding of vocabulary in L2 writing from a product-oriented perspective to a process-oriented perspective, offering both theoretical and pedagogical contributions to EFL writing research.

Based on the identified research gap, this study aims to explore how first-year EFL students use vocabulary throughout the English writing process. Specifically, the study seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of how learners retrieve, search for, select, evaluate, and revise lexical items while composing English texts, as well as the challenges they encounter in making lexical decisions during writing. By examining vocabulary use as a dynamic cognitive and strategic process rather than merely as a linguistic product, this study extends current perspectives on L2 writing beyond vocabulary mastery and writing outcomes.

The findings are expected to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on vocabulary use in EFL writing by providing empirical insights into learners' lexical decision-making processes. Furthermore, the study is anticipated to offer practical pedagogical implications for English language teachers in designing process-oriented vocabulary instruction that supports students in developing more strategic, contextually appropriate, and effective writing practices.

Review of Literature

Vocabulary use has increasingly been recognized as a fundamental component of second language (L2) writing, as effective written communication depends not only on learners' vocabulary knowledge but also on their ability to retrieve, select, evaluate, and revise lexical items throughout the writing process. Unlike vocabulary mastery, which emphasizes the breadth and depth of lexical knowledge, vocabulary use refers to the strategic application of lexical resources to convey meaning appropriately in specific communicative contexts. This process involves continuous lexical decision-making, where writers integrate linguistic knowledge with cognitive processes during planning, drafting, and revising to produce coherent and meaningful texts. Recent studies have therefore shifted from viewing vocabulary as a measurable linguistic product toward conceptualizing it as a dynamic cognitive resource that supports effective writing development and communicative competence in EFL contexts (Min & Li, 2025; Qian, 2023; Teng & Xu, 2025).

From this perspective the concept of vocabulary use as a dynamic component of L2 writing, the cognitive processes underlying lexical use deserve particular attention because writing requires learners to coordinate multiple mental operations simultaneously. During text composition, writers continuously retrieve lexical items from long-term memory, evaluate semantic and contextual appropriateness, compare alternative word choices, and revise lexical selections to achieve communicative goals. Rather than occurring in a linear sequence, these

processes interact recursively throughout planning, drafting, and revising, requiring the integration of vocabulary knowledge, working memory, metacognitive regulation, and rhetorical awareness.

Recent research has further demonstrated that effective vocabulary use depends not only on lexical knowledge but also on writers' ability to regulate lexical complexity, lexical sophistication, and contextual appropriateness while responding to different writing tasks and genres (Granados dkk., 2022; Kang, 2024; M. Zhang, 2025). Consequently, vocabulary use should be understood as a dynamic cognitive process in which lexical retrieval, lexical selection, monitoring, and revision jointly contribute to the development of coherent and meaningful written texts (Kwanghyun Park & Colin Walker, 2022).

Extending this argument, the cognitive processes involved in vocabulary use, lexical decision-making constitutes a critical mechanism through which writers transform lexical knowledge into meaningful written discourse. During text composition, learners do not simply retrieve words from memory; instead, they engage in an iterative process of comparing alternative lexical items, evaluating semantic precision, grammatical compatibility, collocational appropriateness, and rhetorical effectiveness before selecting the most suitable expressions. These decisions are continuously monitored and often revised as writers refine their ideas, reorganize sentence structures, and adapt their language to communicative goals. Such recursive lexical processing becomes particularly challenging for EFL learners because limited lexical resources, uncertainty about word usage, and cognitive demands frequently influence the quality and fluency of writing. Recent studies have therefore emphasized that lexical decision-making is closely associated with lexical sophistication, lexical richness, and contextual appropriateness, suggesting that effective writing depends on writers' ability to strategically regulate lexical choices throughout the composing process rather than merely possessing extensive vocabulary knowledge (Ait Hammou dkk., 2023; Albelihi, 2022; Spring & Johnson, 2022; C. Zhang & Kang, 2022).

Building on the understanding that lexical decision-making is an integral component of the writing process, recent studies have increasingly examined how vocabulary is utilized in EFL writing from various linguistic perspectives. Existing research has primarily focused on lexical richness, lexical diversity, lexical sophistication, and academic vocabulary use as indicators of writing quality rather than investigating the processes through which learners employ vocabulary during text composition. For instance, studies have demonstrated that lexical and phraseological proficiency significantly predicts the quality of EFL students'

writing, highlighting the importance of productive vocabulary in developing coherent academic texts (Ait Hammou dkk., 2023).

Likewise, investigations comparing lexical richness in academic writing have revealed that lexical diversity and sophistication distinguish writing proficiency across different EFL contexts (Choemue & Bram, 2021). More recent research involving Indonesian university students has reported that academic vocabulary use and lexical diversity are associated with writing performance, although lexical diversity alone does not fully explain writing quality (Raufi dkk., 2024b). Furthermore, discourse-oriented studies have suggested that the effective use of academic vocabulary contributes to the organization and rhetorical quality of students' written texts by supporting critical thinking and coherent argumentation (Setyorini dkk., 2026). Collectively, these studies have considerably advanced the understanding of vocabulary as a determinant of writing quality; however, they continue to emphasize lexical outcomes and textual products, leaving the dynamic processes of vocabulary retrieval, lexical selection, and revision during writing relatively underexplored. This limitation reinforces the need for qualitative investigations that examine how EFL learners actually use vocabulary throughout the writing process.

The study's synthesis and conceptual framework consistently suggest that vocabulary use in EFL writing extends beyond the possession of lexical knowledge and should be understood as a dynamic cognitive process embedded within the broader writing process. Previous studies have established that vocabulary knowledge, lexical richness, lexical sophistication, and academic vocabulary contribute significantly to writing quality; however, they have largely conceptualized vocabulary as a measurable linguistic outcome or predictor of writing performance. In contrast, the present study synthesizes these perspectives by adopting a process-oriented view of vocabulary use, in which learners continuously make lexical decisions as they compose texts.

Drawing upon theories of L2 writing, cognitive writing processes, and lexical decision-making, this study conceptualizes vocabulary use as a recursive process consisting of five interconnected stages: lexical retrieval, where learners activate lexical knowledge from long-term memory; lexical search, in which they seek unfamiliar or more appropriate words through internal knowledge or external resources; lexical selection, where alternative lexical items are compared and the most suitable expressions are chosen; lexical evaluation, during which learners assess semantic accuracy, grammatical compatibility, contextual appropriateness, and rhetorical effectiveness; and lexical revision, in which lexical choices are

refined or modified to improve the clarity and communicative quality of the text.

These stages do not occur sequentially but interact continuously throughout planning, drafting, and revising, reflecting the recursive nature of writing. Therefore, this conceptual framework serves as the theoretical lens of the present study for exploring how first-year EFL students use vocabulary throughout the English writing process, while also providing an analytical framework for interpreting learners' lexical decision-making during text composition.



Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Vocabulary Use During the English Writing Process

Method

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore how first-year EFL students used vocabulary during the English writing process. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the purpose of the study was to understand the cognitive and strategic processes underlying students' vocabulary use during authentic writing activities rather than to measure vocabulary knowledge or examine statistical relationships between variables (Mishra, 2025). Specifically, a case study design was selected because the research focused on a bounded system,

namely a group of first-year students in an English Education program who shared similar learning experiences within the same instructional context.

Investigating this particular case enabled the researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of how vocabulary use was shaped by students' writing experiences, classroom practices, and contextual factors during English composition (Yin, 2018). Unlike phenomenology, which seeks to reveal the essence of lived experiences, or grounded theory, which aims to generate a new theory, this study sought to provide an in-depth description and interpretation of vocabulary use as it naturally occurred within a specific educational setting? Therefore, the qualitative case study design was considered the most appropriate methodological approach for answering the research question: *How do first-year EFL students use vocabulary throughout the English writing process?* The study was further informed by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that learners construct meanings through their experiences and interactions during writing. Accordingly, the research focused on understanding participants' perspectives regarding how they retrieved, searched for, selected, evaluated, and revised vocabulary while composing English texts.

Research Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 30 first-year students enrolled in the English Education Study Program at Universitas Islam Lamongan (UNISLA), Indonesia, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The class comprised 10 male and 20 female students, all of whom voluntarily agreed to participate in the study after providing informed consent. Participants were selected using purposive sampling because they met the inclusion criteria established for the study: they had completed an introductory English writing course, regularly participated in paragraph and essay writing activities, and were enrolled in the same writing class taught under similar instructional conditions. The entire class was included to provide a comprehensive representation of vocabulary use within a single bounded educational context, which is consistent with the principles of qualitative case study research. First-year students were intentionally chosen because they were at the initial stage of developing academic writing competence and were still actively constructing their lexical resources and writing strategies. At this stage, learners frequently encounter difficulties in retrieving, selecting, evaluating, and revising vocabulary while composing English texts, making their writing processes particularly relevant to the objectives of this study. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, the study aimed to obtain an in-depth

understanding of how first-year EFL students used vocabulary during the English writing process within a specific ed

Data Collection

Data were collected through three complementary techniques: *an English writing task, think-aloud protocols, and stimulated recall interviews*. The combination of these techniques enabled methodological triangulation by capturing learners' vocabulary use from multiple perspectives, including observable writing performance, real-time cognitive processes, and retrospective reflections. Such triangulation enhanced the credibility and richness of the data by allowing the researchers to compare evidence obtained from different sources. Data collection was conducted over two weeks during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year in participants' regular writing classes. Before data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the faculty, and all participants provided informed consent to participate voluntarily in the study.

The integration of these three data collection techniques enabled the researchers to examine vocabulary use from complementary perspectives. The writing task provided evidence of learners' written products, the think-aloud protocols revealed their real-time cognitive processes during vocabulary use, and the stimulated recall interviews offered deeper explanations of the reasons underlying their lexical decisions. Together, these data sources facilitated a comprehensive understanding of how first-year EFL students retrieved, searched for, selected, evaluated, and revised vocabulary throughout the English writing process while strengthening the credibility of the findings through methodological triangulation (Naeem dkk., 2023).

Research Instruments

Three research instruments were employed in this study: an English writing task, a think-aloud protocol guide, and a stimulated recall interview protocol. The English writing task was designed to elicit authentic vocabulary use during text composition by encouraging participants to express ideas in meaningful communicative contexts. The think-aloud protocol guide was developed to capture learners' real-time cognitive processes while composing texts, particularly those related to lexical retrieval, lexical search, lexical selection, lexical evaluation, and lexical revision. In addition, the stimulated recall interview protocol was designed to explore participants' reflections on their lexical decision-making immediately after completing the writing task, enabling the researchers to clarify

cognitive processes that could not be fully observed through concurrent verbalization alone.

The interview questions were developed based on the study's conceptual framework and relevant literature on vocabulary use and second language writing to ensure alignment between the research objectives and the data collection procedures. Before data collection, all instruments were evaluated by two experts in English language education and qualitative research to examine their content relevance, clarity, and suitability for addressing the research objectives. Their feedback informed minor revisions to the wording, sequencing, and probing questions. Subsequently, the interview protocol was piloted with students who shared characteristics similar to those of the target participants to ensure the comprehensibility and practicality of the interview questions before the main study was conducted (Buschle dkk., 2022; McKim, 2023).

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) following the six recursive phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). This analytical approach was selected because it enables researchers to identify, interpret, and construct meaningful patterns across qualitative data while acknowledging the active role of the researcher in the interpretive process. It was considered particularly appropriate for this study because the research sought to explore the cognitive processes underlying vocabulary use during English writing rather than quantify linguistic features or test predetermined hypotheses (Byrne, 2022).

The analysis began with the familiarization phase, during which the researchers repeatedly read the participants' written texts, think-aloud transcripts, and stimulated recall interview transcripts while listening to the audio recordings to gain a comprehensive understanding of each participant's writing process. During this stage, initial analytical notes were recorded to capture recurring patterns related to vocabulary use.

The second phase involved generating initial codes by systematically identifying meaningful segments of data associated with learners' vocabulary use during writing. Coding was conducted across all three data sources, allowing evidence from the written texts, think-aloud protocols, and stimulated recall interviews to complement and verify one another through data triangulation (Naeem dkk., 2023).

In the third and fourth phases, similar codes were grouped into potential themes and subsequently reviewed to ensure internal coherence within each theme and clear distinctions between themes. Although the analysis was primarily inductive, it was informed by the study's conceptual framework, which conceptualized vocabulary use as a recursive process consisting of lexical retrieval, lexical search, lexical selection, lexical evaluation, and lexical revision. These concepts served as sensitizing theoretical lenses rather than predetermined coding categories, allowing additional themes to emerge whenever participants' experiences extended beyond the initial framework (V. Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The fifth phase involved refining and defining each theme by examining its conceptual boundaries, underlying meanings, and relationships with other themes. Throughout this process, representative excerpts from participants' writing, think-aloud verbalizations, and stimulated recall interviews were continuously compared to ensure that each theme accurately reflected the participants' experiences and was supported by multiple sources of evidence.

Finally, the themes were synthesized and reported to provide a comprehensive explanation of how first-year EFL students used vocabulary throughout the English writing process. The interpretation focused on describing the recursive processes through which learners retrieved, searched for, selected, evaluated, and revised vocabulary while composing English texts, thereby addressing the research question and contributing to a process-oriented understanding of vocabulary use in EFL (V. Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed several strategies based on the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation by integrating data from writing tasks, think-aloud protocols, and semi-structured interviews. Member checking was conducted by inviting participants to review the accuracy of the interview transcripts and the researchers' interpretations.

Dependability was supported by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting the research procedures and analytical decisions. Confirmability was strengthened through researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing with colleagues experienced in qualitative research. Furthermore, rich descriptions of the research context and participants were provided to facilitate transferability to similar EFL learning environments.

Results and Discussions

The writing products of all 30 first-year EFL students were initially analyzed through preliminary coding to identify patterns of vocabulary use during the writing process. Based on the emerging lexical processing patterns, six information-rich writing samples were purposively selected for in-depth analysis. The selected cases represented recurring patterns related to lexical retrieval, lexical search, lexical selection, lexical evaluation, and lexical revision.

The findings revealed that students' vocabulary use during descriptive writing was not a linear process of recalling known words but a dynamic process involving continuous lexical decision-making. Across six writing tasks on East Javanese local wisdom (Reog Ponorogo, Sedekah Bumi, Tumpengan, Upacara Kasada, Petik Laut, and Rewang), students demonstrated five interconnected processes: retrieving available vocabulary, searching for appropriate expressions, selecting lexical items, evaluating their suitability, and revising choices to improve clarity and precision.

Theme 1: Reliance on Familiar Vocabulary during Initial Writing

The first theme indicated that students initially relied on familiar vocabulary retrieved from their existing lexical knowledge. Words related to culture, tradition, community, heritage, and values frequently appeared in the early stages of writing. The think-aloud data showed that students preferred familiar words because they were easier to access and considered safer to use.

For example, students explained:

"I use the word tradition because I already know this word and it is suitable for cultural topics"

The stimulated recall interviews confirmed this pattern. Several students explained that they intentionally began writing with vocabulary they could easily remember before attempting to use less familiar expressions. One participant stated:

"I always start with words that I already know because it helps me continue writing. If I use difficult words from the beginning, I usually stop and think for too long."

Another participant explained:

"Using familiar vocabulary makes me feel more confident. After finishing the paragraph, I sometimes replace simple words with better ones."

These interview responses indicate that lexical retrieval was not merely automatic memory activation but also a deliberate strategy to maintain writing fluency during the initial drafting stage. This pattern reflects the lexical retrieval process, in which learners activate available vocabulary from their mental lexicon before exploring alternative expressions. However, dependence on familiar vocabulary also limited lexical variation when students attempted to express more complex cultural meanings.

Theme 2: Searching for Vocabulary to Represent Cultural Meanings

The second theme concerned students' efforts to search for appropriate vocabulary when describing culturally specific concepts. Students experienced difficulties translating local cultural terms such as *gotong royong*, *Petik Laut*, and *rasa syukur* because direct translation could not fully represent their meanings.

The think-aloud data revealed:

"I cannot translate Petik Laut directly, so I try to explain the meaning"

Students therefore searched for meaning-based alternatives, such as *gotong royong* into *cooperation* and *rasa Syukur* into *gratitude*. This finding demonstrates that lexical search involved negotiating linguistic resources and cultural meanings rather than simply finding word equivalents. The stimulated recall interviews further revealed that students searched for vocabulary not because they completely lacked lexical knowledge, but because they were uncertain whether literal translations accurately represented Indonesian cultural concepts in English. One student commented:

"Sometimes Google Translate gives a word, but I am not sure whether English readers will understand the cultural meaning, so I try to explain it instead."

Another participant stated:

"I looked for another expression because I wanted the reader to understand the tradition, not only the translation."

These interview findings demonstrate that lexical search involved negotiating meaning rather than simply finding dictionary equivalents.

Theme 3: Selecting Familiar and Safe Vocabulary Choices

The third theme showed that students tended to select vocabulary based on familiarity, confidence, and perceived correctness. Although students attempted to use more academic expressions, they often preferred accessible vocabulary such as *important tradition*, *good values*, and *cultural heritage*.

One student stated:

"I choose this word because I know how to use it"

This indicates that lexical selection was influenced by risk management. Students prioritized accurate and reliable vocabulary rather than more sophisticated but uncertain expressions. During the interviews, students explained that vocabulary selection was strongly influenced by their confidence in using particular words. One participant remarked:

"I know some difficult words, but I am afraid of using them incorrectly, so I choose simpler vocabulary."

Another student added:

"I prefer words that I have used before because I know the grammar and meaning."

These responses suggest that lexical selection was shaped not only by vocabulary knowledge but also by learners' perceptions of linguistic risk.

Theme 4: Evaluating Vocabulary for Meaning and Context

The fourth theme revealed that students evaluated their vocabulary choices by considering semantic accuracy and contextual appropriateness. Students revised initial expressions when they considered them too general or unable to represent the intended cultural meaning.

Table 1. Example of Evaluating Vocabulary for Meaning and Context

Initial Expression	Revised Expression
Good relationship with nature	Harmony with nature
Helping tradition	Voluntary support system

These changes demonstrate that students actively monitored whether vocabulary choices effectively conveyed their intended meanings. The interview data showed that students consciously reconsidered whether their vocabulary accurately represented the intended cultural message.

One participant explained:

"When I reread my writing, I asked myself whether this word really described our tradition. If not, I changed it."

Another student stated:

"Sometimes the word is grammatically correct, but it does not sound suitable for the context."

These reflections indicate that lexical evaluation involved semantic and contextual monitoring throughout the writing process.

Theme 5: Revising Vocabulary for Precision and Academic Expression

The final theme involved lexical revision. Students modified vocabulary choices to improve precision, reduce repetition, and create more appropriate academic expressions.

Table 2. Example of Revising Vocabulary

Initial Expression	Revised Expression
Good tradition	Important cultural heritage
Help people	Social solidarity
Very important	Culturally significant

The think-aloud data indicated that students viewed vocabulary as flexible and improvable rather than fixed. Revision enabled them to refine lexical choices according to communicative purposes. The stimulated recall interviews also demonstrated that students regarded revision as an opportunity to improve the quality of their writing rather than simply correct mistakes.

One participant explained:

"After finishing my paragraph, I reread every sentence and changed words that sounded too simple."

Another student commented:

"I wanted my writing to sound more academic, so I replaced general words with more specific ones."

These interview findings reinforce that lexical revision functioned as a strategic process for improving precision, clarity, and rhetorical effectiveness.

Overall Pattern of Students' Vocabulary Use

Overall, the findings demonstrate that first-year EFL students' vocabulary use developed through five interconnected processes:

Table 3. Five Interconnected Processes

Process	Students' Behavior
Lexical retrieval	Accessing familiar vocabulary from existing knowledge
Lexical search	Exploring alternative expressions for unfamiliar concepts
Lexical selection	Choosing vocabulary based on confidence and suitability
Lexical evaluation	Assessing meaning and contextual appropriateness
Lexical revision	Modifying vocabulary to improve precision

These findings indicate that vocabulary use in EFL writing involves strategic decision-making rather than merely applying previously learned words.

Across the three data sources, namely the writing tasks, think-aloud protocols, and stimulated recall interviews, consistent patterns of vocabulary use emerged. While the writing products demonstrated the outcomes of students' lexical choices, the think-aloud protocols captured their real-time cognitive processes, and the interviews provided reflective explanations for those decisions.

The convergence of evidence across these sources strengthened the credibility of the five identified lexical processes and confirmed that vocabulary use in EFL writing is both cognitive and strategic.

Discussion

The present study explored how first-year EFL students used vocabulary during English writing through a qualitative case study employing descriptive writing tasks, think-aloud protocols, and stimulated recall interviews. The

integration of these three data sources provided complementary evidence of students' lexical decision-making, allowing both observable writing behaviors and learners' reflections to be examined. The findings demonstrate that vocabulary use operates as a dynamic cognitive process involving lexical retrieval, search, selection, evaluation, and revision. This finding extends previous research that has mainly examined vocabulary knowledge, lexical diversity, and academic vocabulary as measurable outcomes (Ait Hammou dkk., 2023; Naji & Rawshdeh, 2024; Raufi dkk., 2024b).

The students' reliance on familiar vocabulary during initial writing supports the view that vocabulary accessibility plays an important role in L2 composition. Min and Li (2025) and Teng and Xu (2025) argue that vocabulary development requires learners to transform lexical knowledge into productive use during meaningful writing activities. However, the present findings further show that accessible vocabulary can both support fluency and constrain lexical variety when students rely excessively on familiar expressions.

The lexical search process revealed that writing culturally specific topics requires learners to negotiate between linguistic resources and cultural meanings. This finding supports Kang's (2024) argument that lexical use involves strategic regulation according to communicative purposes. Unlike previous studies focusing primarily on lexical features in written products (Choemue & Bram, 2021; Raufi dkk., 2024b), this study demonstrates how learners arrive at those lexical choices through active searching and meaning negotiation.

The preference for safe vocabulary choices indicates that lexical selection is influenced by learners' confidence and perceived risk. This finding supports Zhang and Kang (2022) and Spring and Johnson (2022), who emphasize that lexical richness reflects not only vocabulary knowledge but also learners' ability to manage lexical complexity. The findings suggest that effective vocabulary use does not necessarily involve choosing the most sophisticated words but selecting expressions that are accurate and contextually appropriate.

Furthermore, lexical evaluation and revision demonstrate learners' metacognitive awareness during writing. Students actively monitored their lexical choices and modified expressions to improve precision and clarity. This supports Kang (2024), who highlights the importance of revision in L2 writing development, and Teng and Xu (2025), who argue that productive vocabulary knowledge develops through repeated meaningful use.

Overall, this study contributes to L2 writing research by reconceptualizing vocabulary from a product-oriented perspective toward a process-oriented perspective. While previous studies have emphasized what vocabulary learners possess, this study reveals how learners use vocabulary while composing texts. The findings suggest that vocabulary instruction should move beyond vocabulary memorization and incorporate strategies for lexical searching, evaluation, and revision to support more effective writing development.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that vocabulary use in EFL writing is best understood as a dynamic cognitive and strategic process rather than as a simple reflection of vocabulary knowledge or lexical size. By integrating evidence from students' writing products, think-aloud protocols, and stimulated recall interviews, the findings reveal that first-year EFL students continuously moved through five interconnected processes—lexical retrieval, lexical search, lexical selection, lexical evaluation, and lexical revision—while composing descriptive texts. These processes illustrate how learners actively negotiated between their existing lexical resources, cultural meanings, communicative intentions, and contextual demands. The study therefore extends the current literature by shifting the focus from vocabulary as a measurable product to vocabulary use as an evolving process of lexical decision-making during writing.

The findings also suggest that effective vocabulary instruction should move beyond vocabulary memorization toward process-oriented pedagogies that explicitly develop learners' lexical strategies, including searching for appropriate words, evaluating contextual suitability, and revising vocabulary to improve meaning and precision. Such an approach may better support students in producing contextually appropriate and academically effective writing. Future research may investigate vocabulary use across different genres of writing, proficiency levels, and educational contexts, or examine how digital tools and artificial intelligence influence learners' lexical decision-making during the writing process. These directions would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of vocabulary use as a central component of L2 writing development.

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