The Effect of Vocabulary Knowledge on EFL Oral Competence

Salma Seffar

Faculty of Education, Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco

Abstract: *Oral production in a foreign language is a very challenging task that requires certain linguistic skills as well as strategic competence. Vocabulary knowledge proves to play a crucial role in interactional situations. However, few studies have investigated how both EFL teachers and learners view and analyze situations in which learners are not producing enough spoken language in class, and the reasons behind them. The present study will pinpoint the significant role of lexis in Moroccan learners speaking production. To this end, forty EFL teachers and two hundred Moroccan high school students are surveyed and interviewed to reveal their perceptions of the speaking skill and the corresponding high significance of lexis in this instance. Results show that both teachers and learners identify vocabulary deficiency as the main factor behind students' inability to speak English. In the present article, among the many suggestions that could be proposed to deal with this situation, it is argued that one efficient way would be to assist the students during the process of L2 vocabulary learning through vocabulary learning strategy instruction. Pedagogical and research implication will be given in response to the difficulties encountered in this area as have been identified by the EFL teachers and learners surveyed.*

Key words: *EFL classes, the speaking skill, L2 vocabulary acquisition, learning strategies, strategy training instruction, FL fluency*

I.   Introduction

Numerous studies assert that effective communication is a function of adequate and appropriate vocabulary acquisition rather than the learning of grammar rules (Coady, 1993) [1]. However, one of the problems that most of the students complain about is that they easily forget the newly learned words. To solve this problem, researchers (Coady and Huckins, 1997) [2] suggest the implementation of strategy training into the EFL classroom as a way to boost vocabulary learning and oral communicative competence.

The focus of the present study is on the importance of lexis to EFL oral production. It seeks to investigate the reasons behind high school EFL students' inability to speak English fluently. Field work research suggests that the lack of vocabulary competence affects tremendously students' speaking skill which is essential for language proficiency. Also, there is a strong agreement among researchers, teachers and students that L2 vocabulary, important as it is, can be best learned by training students on the most effective strategies that can be used for learning vocabulary successfully.

This study is an attempt to find answers to the following questions:
1.   What are teachers' perceptions toward their students' speaking skill?
2.   What are the main reasons behind Moroccan EFL high school students' poor oral communicative competence?
3.   How can Moroccan students improve their speaking through vocabulary learning strategies?

This research article describes an exploratory study carried out in the Sale Zemmour Zaer area on the year 2011 with different secondary Moroccan learners and teachers. Its main purpose is to examine the reasons behind students' poor speaking skill and come out with a solution to the problem. In the first section, some findings related to already existing theories and other research studies on speaking skill and vocabulary learning strategies will be presented. Then, a model for vocabulary learning strategy instruction will be suggested. In the next part, the research method, the participants and context will be described. Finally, suggestions for further research and pedagogical implications will be given.

II.   Literature review

2.1. Speaking skill

During speaking production, both the many intervening processes and the nature of speaking itself (indeterminate and is in permanent flux) make of the learning/ teaching of speaking a very complex undertaking. From a psycholinguistic viewpoint, Levelt (1994:91) [3] demonstrates how speaking entails the interaction of several processing components and the difficulty is how to put them in motion to produce fluent speaking. From a pedagogical perspective, Bygate (1987:8) [4] stresses that handling reciprocity condition (the relation between

the speaker and listener in the process) is another difficulty affecting the speech quality in addition to time constraints and grammatical accuracy which also interfere during the production of good speaking.

Among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners therefore speaking is believed to be a demanding process (Levelt :1989) [5] where learners should ideally be engaged in producing both long and structured chunks of a foreign language without undue pauses or long hesitation. To this end, all four components of communicative competence as have been identified by major thinkers like Halliday (1976) [6], Hymes (1972) [7], Savignon (2008) [8], Canal and Swain (1980) [9] are at play. Simultaneously, learners have to exhibit (a) a socio pragmatic awareness (the ability to use English in social contexts in culturally appropriate ways), (b) a strategic competence (the ability to cope with break downs in speaking) as well as (c) a grammatical competence (grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary) and finally (d) a discourse one (the ability to interconnect utterances to form a meaningful text). This makes speaking a highly complex skill both cognitively, lexically and socially.

Moroccan EFL learners -like all foreign language learners- do exhibit non fluency in speaking situations based on an interview done with their teachers. Forty secondary teachers have been interviewed and a significant proportion have reported that their students do indeed experience non fluency during speech production. Some of the causes cited have been mentioned in table (1) in the method section below. Basing on this investigation done to find out the causes behind this situation however, both learners and teachers have identified vocabulary deficiency as one major obstacle impeding to learners fluency. Therefore, the necessity to make appeal to vocabulary learning strategies may be of great importance here. The following section will shed light on this issue.

2.2. Vocabulary learning strategies

Vocabulary learning strategy (VLS) is an approach which facilitates vocabulary learning and has attracted considerable attention. Vocabulary learning strategies constitute a subclass of language learning strategies, which in turn are a subclass of learning strategies (Nation, 2001) [10]. A learning strategy is a series of actions a learner takes to facilitate the completion of a learning task. Language learning strategies promote self-direction for learners. Self-directed learners are independent learners who can assume responsibility for their own learning and, hence, gain confidence, involvement and proficiency (Oxford, 1990) [11]. In a sense, language learning strategies make students "better learners". Taking this into consideration, second and foreign language researchers have made various attempts to know the types of vocabulary learning strategies. Accordingly, a number of taxonomies and classification systems have been developed including: Omalley's (1985) [12]. , Oxford (1990), Stern (1992) [13], Stoffer (1995) [14], Schmitt (1997) [15], and more recently Nation (2001). Although most of the taxonomies cited above "reflect more or less the same categories" (Al Kattan, 2003: 58-85) [16], it is Oxford's classification scheme (SILL)* that is mostly adopted by researchers. It has been checked for reliability and validated in multiple ways (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995) [17]. Besides, the SILL is valid in the sense that the six categories of the SILL measure the same construct, strategies.

2.3. Vocabulary learning strategy instruction framework

To ensure an effective use of vocabulary in different contexts, second language teachers struggle to find out the most effective strategies that can be used to enable their students learn a good stock of words. Up to date, in the area of second language acquisition, a number of methods, approaches, and strategies focusing on vocabulary instruction and/or acquisition have been presented. This section presents one of the most prominent frameworks of second language vocabulary instruction that might be implemented at Moroccan high schools within EFL courses.

Research on oral production skills strongly argues for explicit strategy instruction rather than providing a separate learning strategies course (Bygate, 1991[18], Chamot et al., 1999 [19]; Cohen, 1998 [20]; Nunan, 1997 [21]; Oxford and Leaver, 1996) [22]. In explicit learning strategy instruction, teachers should decide which strategies (e.g. semantic mapping, vocabulary notebook, keyword method, etc.) to give attention to and how much time they need to spend on training. In order to know about the strategies the learners need and the ones they are currently using, students should be asked to draw up a list of strategies they employ to learn English words in small groups. They report their lists to the class. The students and teacher can then, collaboratively construct a list of strategies the learners employ. After this brainstorming session, the teacher can decide what strategies learners lack and need most. The teacher should model the strategy for the learners. Then the steps in the strategy should be practiced separately. Leaners are asked to apply the strategy in pairs while helping each other. They report back on the application of the steps. The teacher monitors and provides feedback on learners' control of the strategies. Learners report on the difficulty and success in using the strategy outside classroom and they ask for teachers' help and advice on their use of strategy (Nation, 2001).

In general, recent models of vocabulary learning strategy instruction basically rely on promoting learners' knowledge about their own thinking and strategic processes and encouraging them to adopt strategies that will improve their language learning and proficiency.

III.   Method

3.1. Design:

In this article, a mixed design approach is implemented. It implies both quantitative and qualitative data. The choice of a mixed design is dictated by the nature of investigation itself which is based on data collected from teachers and students particularly questionnaires and interviews to identify the main difficulties or impediments to speaking among the target population. Structured teachers and learners questionnaires are based on a Likert -scale and have been used to direct investigation towards research aims. Therefore multiple hypotheses are advanced to spot the causes behind learners' non fluency. Besides, open interviews have been employed to leave teachers more freedom and collect corresponding data. Many visits to the target schools have been conducted and a series of subsequent questionnaires and interviews compiled in due time.

3.2. Participants:

The participants are from different high schools in the Sale Zemmour Zaer area and are constituted of:
- ❑   A total number of two hundred students who have contributed through the questionnaires
- ❑   Forty secondary teachers from different academies who have provided a detailed view about their experience
- ❑   Twenty secondary teachers from the area of Salé Zemmour Zaer who have been interviewed orally to allow more insightful data about the process of learning/teaching speaking in secondary classes

3.3. Instruments and statistical measures:

The instruments are composed of the following:
- ❑   Students' questionnaires
- ❑   Teachers' questionnaire
- ❑   Teachers' interviews

As to the statistical measures, the findings recorded are based on the SPSS (Statistical Packet on Social Sciences) application to the instruments employed. Since chi-square is a statistical test commonly used to compare observed and expected data , chi-square tests have been used here to test the multiple hypotheses posited through the questionnaire to the null hypothesis one (the state of having no significant difference). The chi-squares will also introduce the likelihood ratio, the degree of freedom and the p (probability) as well as the q (chi-squared) values. Besides, crosstabs have been compiled and are composed of the registered frequencies, percentages, p and q sorted out. These will be presented in the following section.

IV.   Results
Table (1) Interview Chart on teachers' perceptions of their students' fluency:

Thematic considered	Target population	Type of Inquiry (opinion)	Corresponding Tendency % & cited causes
Perceptions	**Teachers**	**Do your students speak fluently?**	1. No, not at all: **55%** 2. No, very few do: **30%** 3.Yes, they do: **15%** T=**100%** Few Causes as perceived by teachers: ✓ Lack of vocabulary ✓ Speaking is not afforded importance in Moroccan classes ✓ Speech Anxiety ✓ Error Anxiety

The above table is an explanatory estimation to teachers' perceptions regarding fluency and its causes. Teachers have reported speakers to be not fluent since nearly half of them have identified their students as not fluent at all (55%). Plus, a rather good proportion have also reported only very few are (30%) which gives us a rather very significant total proportion of students (85%) with a general tendency of students not being able to produce fluent talk.

4.1. Learners' Perceptions

The following tables have been sorted out as shown below. The two following chi-squared results have been chosen for the high significance they hold in this instance. They test the 'how to convey meaning problem' and the 'lexis deficiency' one.

Table (2): how to convey meaning problem

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	780,000[a]	16	,000
Likelihood Ratio	599,638	16	,000
N of Valid Cases	195		

a. 7 cells (28,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,66.

Table (3): Lexis Deficiency

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	792,000[a]	16	,000
Likelihood Ratio	589,742	16	,000
N of Valid Cases	198		

a. 10 cells (40,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1,29.

> **Crosstab(4): Speaking difficulties as identified by learners**

SS not speak because	A	U	S	R	N	M	T	Q	P
Afraid of making mistakes	54 27%	36 18%	60 30%	25 12.5%	22 11%	3 1.5%	200 100%	788	.000
Other students will laugh at your pronunciation	46 23%	33 16.5%	32 16%	32 16%	54 27%	3 1.5%	200 100%	591	.000
Cannot find the English words	56 28%	35 17.5%	67 33.5%	24 12%	16 8%	2 1%	200 100%	792	.000
Not know how to convey the meanings you have in mind	38 19%	35 17.5%	64 32%	40 20%	18 9%	5 2.5%	200 100%	780	.000
Have already had problems in speaking other foreign languages	32 16%	30 15%	29 14.5%	37 18.5%	64 32%	8 4%	200 100%	768	.000

*p<.05 (all cases) ; * q= 788; 591; 792; 780; 768 respectively

A noticeable high significant p value is recognized in the above table. But two of the above sorted out values should be given great consideration here (namely not knowing how meaning should be put into words [p= .000; q= 780], not being able to find the exact words [p= .000; q= 792] taking into account that both have also very significant corresponding q values and both are evolving around the same issue. Besides, the highest corresponding q value has been identified to be directly linked to vocabulary (q= 792). The coming results will shed light on teachers perceptions to see whether this identified item will be a recurrent one as well.

4.2. Teachers' Perceptions

Table (5): speech anxiety

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	114,000[a]	12	,000
Likelihood Ratio	87,062	12	,000
N of Valid Cases	38		

a. 19 cells (95,0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,05.

Table (6): Lack of vocabulary

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	117,000[a]	9	,000
Likelihood Ratio	79,024	9	,000
N of Valid Cases	39		

Table (6): Lack of vocabulary

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	117,000[a]	9	,000
Likelihood Ratio	79,024	9	,000
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 13 cells (81,3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is ,03.

➢ **Crosstab(7): Speaking difficulties as identified by teachers**

What are the elements that hinder students' speaking	A	U	S	R	N	M	T	Q	p
Speech anxiety	20 50%	9 22.5%	7 17.5%	1 2.5%	1 2.5%	2 5%	40 100%	114	,000
Lack of vocabulary	22 55%	12 30%	4 10%	1 2.5%		1 2.5%	40 100%	117	,000

What are the elements that hinder students' speaking	A	U	S	R	N	M	T		
Speech anxiety	0 0%	22.5%	7 1 7.5%	.5%	.5%	%	0 00%	14	000
Lack of vocabulary	2 5%	2 0%	4 1 0%	.5%		.5%	0 00%	17	000

*p<.05 (all cases); * q= 114; 117 respectively

Indeed, the above table testifies of the importance of vocabulary as it becomes a recurrent identified impediment to learners fluency in Moroccan classes and this with a highly significance value both from the learners as well as the teachers perspective. As the above chart shows, a highly significant p value is recognized here, and a higher corresponding q value has been reported with vocabulary.

V. Discussion

As singled out above, vocabulary deficiency and difficulty in articulating or conveying what learners have in mind are major problems learners have identified. The highly significant p (p<.05) and q values (q= 792; 780) demonstrate the significance that vocabulary holds from the viewpoint of learners. Similarly, teachers have also identified lack of vocabulary as a major obstacle and this at a highly significant p value (p<.05) too. The significant difference in comparison to the null hypothesis value (the state of having no significant difference: in this instance if the p was >.05 which is not the case) comes to prove that something else (not mere chance) interferes when learners experience withdrawal or non-fluency in speaking situations. These results come only to confirm and stress the urgent need for the application of a vocabulary learning strategy instruction framework and the importance it holds in improving the quality of Moroccan learners' oral production.

VI. Conclusion and pedagogical implications for EFL teachers

The present study has a number of implications for improving Moroccan EFL learners speaking skills. First, explicit vocabulary learning strategy instruction should be integrated into the existing EFL curriculum. After discovering the meaning of a word, learners should be oriented to recall it via different strategies. Secondly, rather than providing the learners with one or two strategies, the instruction should focus on the whole range of strategies, and students should be encouraged to opt for the most effective one(s) for themselves. EFL teachers should make their students aware of the need to be more independent learners, and therefore better speakers, by recognizing the strategies they possess and those they lack. Furthermore, teachers should urge learners to practice a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies so as to be able to acquire the vocabulary they need to deal with any conversational situation in and out of class context.

To sum up, speaking English fluently is a challenge to EFL students but they can overcome by having access to a wide array of vocabulary learning strategies. Learners should be trained in strategies they lack. To this end, teachers should consider the implementation of a vocabulary learning strategy instruction framework and think of the most appropriate way to introduce the strategies.

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