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Directeur de Publication: M. Pierre KRAMOKO, **Professeur titulaire**

Adresse postale: 01 BP V 18 Bouaké 01

Téléphone: (225) 01782284/(225)0789069439/ (225) 0101018143 :

Courriel: pkramokoub.edu@gmail.com

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CORRELATION BETWEEN EFL LEARNERS' VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE AND THEIR SPEAKING PROFICIENCY: A CASE STUDY

Ibrahima Derra

MA in Applied Linguistics, Centre Universitaire Polyvalent du Burkina
(CUPB)_Ouagadougou / Burkina Faso, Prospective PhD student in Applied Linguistics
ibrahimaderra757@gmail.com

Yacouba Bamogo

Université Norbert Zongo, Burkina Faso
bamogoy9@gmail.com

&

Moses Kwadwo Kambou

Centre Universitaire Polyvalent du Burkina (CUPB), Burkina Faso
mkkambumk@gmail.com

Abstract

The impact of vocabulary knowledge on speaking is not often investigated in EFL learning contexts. This study investigated the relationship between students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking ability. The study aimed at determining the extent to which there is a correlation between their vocabulary knowledge and their speaking proficiency. This correlational study used a mixed-method design to collect data from 31 1^{re} A students in Lycée Communal Rinvougré in Ouagadougou. A vocabulary test, a speaking test, and a semi-structured interview were the tools used to collect data. The findings from the vocabulary test and the speaking tests revealed a high positive correlation. The semi-structured interview contributed to explaining the nature of the correlation. It reveals that the participants perceived vocabulary as the main obstacle to their speaking proficiency. The study indicates that vocabulary knowledge accounts for more than half of the variance in their speaking proficiency, suggesting that increased vocabulary knowledge is associated with better speaking proficiency. Therefore, educators should help learners enhance their vocabulary knowledge and improve their speaking ability.

Keywords: Vocabulary knowledge, speaking proficiency, correlation, English as a foreign language

Résumé

L'impact de la connaissance du vocabulaire sur la compétence en expression orale n'est pas souvent exploré dans le contexte de l'apprentissage de l'anglais comme langue étrangère. Cette étude a examiné la relation entre la connaissance du vocabulaire des élèves et leur capacité en expression orale. L'objectif de cette étude était de déterminer s'il y a une corrélation entre leur connaissance du vocabulaire et leur compétence en expression orale. Cette étude corrélationnelle a utilisé une méthode mixte pour collecter des données venant de 31 élèves au Lycée Communal Rinvougré à Ouagadougou. Un devoir de vocabulaire, un devoir d'oral et un entretien semi-structuré ont servi à collecter les données. Les résultats des devoirs de vocabulaire et d'oral ont révélé une forte corrélation positive. L'entretien semi-structuré a servi à expliquer la nature de cette corrélation. Il révèle que les participants ont en grande majorité perçu le vocabulaire comme étant l'obstacle principal de leur compétence en expression orale de l'anglais. L'étude indique que la connaissance en vocabulaire explique plus de la moitié de la variance de leur compétence à l'expression orale, suggérant qu'une connaissance développée en vocabulaire est associée à une meilleure compétence de l'expression orale. Par conséquent, les éducateurs doivent aider les apprenants à développer leur vocabulaire et à améliorer leur expression orale.

Mots clés : connaissance du vocabulaire, la compétence de l'expression orale, corrélation, anglais langue étrangère

INTRODUCTION

English speaking has proved to be a key competence required for academic and professional success, and communication in the current context of globalization. The recent adoption of the Competency Based Approach (CBA) in the educational system of Burkina Faso aimed to improve learners' practical communication skills. However, despite these reforms, 1^{re} A students continue to struggle to handle basic oral communication. While, according to the English Inspectorate, these learners are expected to "hold basic oral communication" explaining and justifying their opinions, a significant gap remains between this expectation and the 1^{re} A students' actual oral proficiency. Despite their 6 years of English learning, many of them cannot hold simple conversations, indicating that vocabulary teaching and learning practices seem to have little effect on their oral skills.

Research suggests that vocabulary constitutes the major linguistic obstacle in learners' proficiency. Vocabulary is, according to Richards and Renandya (2002), "the core component of language proficiency", and Maji *et al.* (2022, p.8) revealed that "vocabulary stands for 88,8% of linguistic difficulties in learners' speaking skill". 1^{re} A students in Burkina Faso face this same challenge, worsened by a syllabus that does not specify any key vocabulary to teach and the absence of a textbook for this class. Additionally, Bonkougou (2023) argues that teachers rely on old teaching methods and give little time to speaking practice.

Despite the crucial role of vocabulary in speaking proficiency and the persistent speaking inability of 1^{re} A students, no study within the context of Burkina has empirically investigated the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency in 1^{re} A class, within the recent adoption of CBA, to determine the extent to which their vocabulary knowledge is related to their speaking ability, using a mixed-method design.

This study expects to provide valuable insight for improving teaching and helping learners increase their vocabulary knowledge, thereby enhancing their oral proficiency. Therefore, it raises the following research questions:

1. What is the level of 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge?
2. What is the level 1^{re} A students' speaking proficiency?
3. To what extent does 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge correlate with their speaking proficiency?

In light of these questions, the overarching aim of the current investigation is to examine the extent to which the 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge correlates with their speaking proficiency. To achieve this goal, the following specific objectives are articulated:

- To assess 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge
- To assess 1^{re} A students' speaking proficiency
- To determine the strength of the correlation between 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking proficiency.

Regarding the aim of this study, the following hypotheses are formulated:

- Null hypothesis: There is no significant correlation between vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency.
- Alternative hypothesis: There is a significant correlation between vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1. 1 Theoretical framework

The current section deals with two complementary theories: Communicative Competence, which is about communicative ability, and the Sociocultural Theory depicting the development of that ability.

- **Communicative Competence**

According to Hymes (1972) Communicative Competence goes beyond grammatical accuracy. Discourse, strategic competence, and sociolinguistic competence are also involved in Communicative Competence. Vocabulary is central to sociolinguistic competence since it is needed to interact effectively in different social and cultural contexts. Vocabulary mastery improves discourse competence as it contributes to learners' coherent, logical, and contextual speech. Paraphrasing to fill in gaps in vocabulary knowledge contributes to improving EFL learners' strategic competences.

- **Sociocultural Theory**

Sociocultural Theory views learning as a social process in which language plays the role of mediation and vocabulary is the primary tool for mediation (Vygotsky, 1978). For Sociocultural Theory, learning is possible in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), that is, the zone

between the learners' current knowledge and what they are able to learn through interaction with a knowledgeable peer. So, from the Sociocultural Theory perspective, vocabulary develops through social interaction or scaffolding from peers or teachers, aligning with CBLT (Competency Based Language Teaching), which demands learning of functional language skills through meaningful social interaction and scaffolding (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

1. 2 Clarification of key concepts

This section defines Competency Based Language Teaching and Lexical Approach in relation to vocabulary and speaking. It also sheds light on vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency.

1.2.1. Competency Based Language Teaching

Competency Based Language Teaching (CBLT) is based on Constructivism, which states that the learner constructs knowledge through reflection and experience. CBLT has a common view with Functionalism, which supports teaching language for functional use in real-life contexts. It also shares a common view with Behaviorism, focusing on learners' language output, but in terms of competency. For Richards and Rodgers (2001, p.144), "competencies consist of essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior needed for the completion of a real-world task or activity". CBLT substantiates Communicative Competence and Sociocultural Theory by operationalizing them in classrooms, explicitly integrating vocabulary as a crucial linguistic knowledge for social interaction, and highlighting vocabulary importance, linking its learning to real-world application. Speaking is a focus of language teaching, and vocabulary is viewed as a crucial language component that learners should learn to improve their speaking skills.

1.2.2. The Lexical Approach

The Lexical Approach finds that vocabulary is the core of language, and grammar emerges from how words are used. In the same vein, Lewis (1993) asserts that "language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar". This approach supports the teaching of prefabricated expressions and phrases, rather than isolated words. Lexical chunks, idioms, and collocations constitute these prefabricated expressions and phrases. They are multiword units working as single units and embed grammatical patterns. Therefore, mastering them contributes to filling lexical gaps, reducing cognitive loads, and keeping fluency in speaking.

1.2.3. Vocabulary knowledge

Vocabulary knowledge is multifaceted. It encompasses breadth or size, that is, how many words a person knows, and depth, which is how much a person knows about a word. Vocabulary knowledge can be defined according to the ways it is used: receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary. Also called passive vocabulary, receptive vocabulary concerns the receptive learning of words. That is, recognizing and remembering words we hear or see. Whereas, productive vocabulary or active vocabulary is about being able to retrieve one's vocabulary and use it to speak or write. Testing vocabulary knowledge is used to measure how well a particular word is known and how many words are known (Nation, 2001 p.354). So, vocabulary knowledge is effectively operationalized through a test that measures both size and productive knowledge.

1.2.4. Speaking proficiency

Speaking proficiency refers to the ability to communicate effectively through a spoken message, that is, orally. Speaking proficiency is a fundamental, if not the most fundamental proficiency in language. It includes skills in grammar, vocabulary use, pronunciation, and the ability to communicate ideas with clarity, appropriateness, and fluency. Having a developed vocabulary significantly impacts fluency in speaking since a large vocabulary size makes it possible to hold conversations in a variety of contexts, while a significant vocabulary depth allows speaking with accuracy and appropriateness. In CBLT, speaking activities include discussions, role-plays, and interviews. The international standard for language ability, Common European Framework (CEFR), is based on a six-level scale to estimate language proficiency levels, which are A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. B1 and B2 show independent users. At the B1 level, the intermediate level, learners can speak and understand English in daily routine matters. At this level, learners can discuss abstract topics. 1^{re} A students are expected to be at the B1 level.

1. 3. Literature review

Several investigations were made on EFL (English as a Foreign Language) Learners' vocabulary knowledge in correlation with their speaking abilities in Saudi, Moroccan, and Indonesian contexts, with participants from universities and secondary schools. Some of the investigations have associated vocabulary knowledge with speaking ability, revealing that poor vocabulary is the major cause of low speaking proficiency, without statistically estimating a

numerical correlation coefficient between vocabulary and speaking. (Normawati *et al.*, 2023; Raja *et al.* 2018; Afna & Sutriani, 2018)

Other studies have indicated moderate positive correlation coefficients ranging from 0.459 to 0.559. Al Ikzam & Siam (2020), Jambari *et al.* (2020), and Ardian *et al.* (2023) have respectively found 0.459, 0.54, and 0.559. These coefficients suggest that vocabulary knowledge is moderately associated with speaking proficiency, accounting for a limited variance in speaking ability.

In contrast, other research has found high positive correlation coefficients spanning from 0.744 to 0.873, indicating that vocabulary knowledge strongly explains variance in speaking proficiency. Sari (2021) obtained 0.873. Dano *et al.* (2022) revealed 0.79. Baihaqi (2010) reported 0.764. Zanoobia got 0.853. En-nada & Koumachi (2021) found 0.744 in the Moroccan context. Multiple previous studies in different contexts have consistently found a positive correlation between vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency. But some have indicated a moderate correlation, while others revealed a high correlation. These split findings may be due to differences in methods, instruments, and participants of studies.

2. Research METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research design

This research used a mixed-method approach: it used a quantitative and qualitative method to collect data. It is a correlational study which investigated the relationship between 1^{re} A learners' vocabulary mastery and their speaking performances. This study aims at investigating the extent to which 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge may predict changes in their speaking proficiency.

2.2. Research site, population, and sampling

The study site was Lycée Communal Rinvougré located in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, in the district of Yamtenga. The total target population of 1^{re} A was 58 students. Based on a simple random sampling technique, 31 students constituted the sample of the study. 1^{re} A students are from the pre-advanced level of the Secondary School, which corresponds to B1 level, the intermediate level in the CEFR system (Bonkougou 2023, p. 23). So, 1^{re} A students are expected to be able to speak and understand English in daily routine matters, and discuss abstract topics. A simple random sampling led to the selection of 31 participants.

2.3. Instruments and data collection

The tools used to collect data were a vocabulary knowledge test, a speaking test, and a semi-structured interview. The data were collected in May 2025.

2.3.1. Vocabulary knowledge test

The vocabulary test consisted of 140 items based on the New General Service List (NGSL), a list of 2,801 high-frequency words faced in 90% of daily English communication (Browne *et al.*). The test had two sections: the vocabulary size section and the productive vocabulary section. The vocabulary size section is Bennett and Stoeckel's (2015) New General Service List Test (NGSLT), a 100-item multiple-choice test, with a consistent reliability over 0.93. The productive vocabulary section was made of 40 items from the NGSL obtained by a randomization process, after discarding the 100 items of the NGSLT, using an online tool named Random.org. It was a cloze test. The two sections aim to measure both the participants' vocabulary size and their productive vocabulary, in the concern of an effective measurement of overall vocabulary knowledge. The vocabulary test lasted 120 minutes.

2.3.2. Speaking test

A speaking test was administered following the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) speaking test format. This test consisted of three phases. The first, an interview part, is the phase in which the participant is asked to introduce him/herself and answer questions on common topics. The second phase is the presentation part: the test holder is given a paper with a topic and key points to present. The last phase is the discussion part, in which the participants have to answer argumentative questions related to the topic of the second phase. The topic of this test was "Daily Routine", an everyday topic to elicit common words from participants. IELTS speaking is proven to be valid. As Uchihara & Clenton (2023, p.10) argue, it is widely recognized and commonly used for university admission and academic purposes. The speaking test lasted 11-15 minutes for each participant.

2.3.3. Interview

After the speaking test, a semi-structured interview was used in this study. This interview helped collect qualitative data from participants' perceptions on vocabulary importance in speaking and their vocabulary difficulties in speaking, the challenges they face while speaking, and how they cope with their vocabulary challenges. The interview was

conducted in French (the participants' second and official language) to prevent the misunderstanding of questions and to enable them to answer them. It lasted about 5 minutes per participant.

2. 4. Data analysis procedures

2. 4. 1. Scoring the tests

To reduce subjectivity bias in marking, three raters rated every vocabulary test paper out of 140 points. After, the three raters got the recorded speech of every participant to listen to and rate according to the IELTS speaking assessment grid. But for practicality and with regard to the current study context, the band scores 3 to 5. Since with 1^{re} A students are expected to have B1 level, which overlaps with the bands 4-4.5, the band score 5 was considered the maximum because some participants may overperform more than bands 4-4.5. Others may underperform. That is, with the band score 3 was chosen as the minimum. The following table indicates the CEFR system mapping to IELTS band scores.

Table 1: CEFR mapping to IELTS Band Scores

CEFR Level	Language Proficiency Level	Corresponding IELTS Band Score
C2	Expert User	9.0
		8.5
C1	Very Good User	8.0
	Good User	7.5
		7.0
B2	Competent User	6.5
		6.0
	Modest User	5.5
		5.0
B1	Limited User	4.5
		4.0
A2	Extremely Limited User	3.5
		3.0

A1	Intermittent User	2.5
		2.0

Source: Text Inspector, British Council, and Cambridge Assessment English

The speaking test was rated based on the four components of IELTS band descriptors: fluency and coherence, lexical resource (vocabulary richness and vocabulary precision in speaking), grammatical range and accuracy, and pronunciation.

2. 4. 2. Statistical analysis

Using the software IBM SPSS (International Business Machines Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 25, the Inter-Class Correlation (ICC) helped to check the three raters' inter-reliability, that is, if they consistently assessed the 31 participants' performances.

Then, to test the research hypotheses, this software was used to quantitatively analyze the data from the two tests and estimate the correlation between them. The correlation between vocabulary and speaking refers to the relationship between a person's vocabulary knowledge and their speaking ability. It shows whether a stronger vocabulary knowledge is associated with better speaking proficiency or not. The Pearson Product- Moment Correlation or Pearson's r helped determine this correlation. The following table displays the interpretation of Pearson's r coefficient.

Table 2: The Interpretation of Product-Moment Correlation

Product Moment (r)	Interpretation
0.00 - 0.20	Very weak
0.20 - 0.40	Weak
0.40 - 0.70	Medium
0.70 - 0.90	High
0.90 - 1.00	Very High

Source: Zanoobia (2022)

Microsoft Excel was used to generate a graph on the correlation between vocabulary scores and speaking scores.

2. 4. 3. Analyzing the interview

All the answers provided by the 31 participants were collected to get a global sense of the data. Their vocabulary scores were compared to their speaking performances, and their

verbal answers were orthographically transcribed. Then, the researchers proceeded with a purposive stratified sampling. That is, in the terms of Nyimbili and Nyimbili (2024, p.24), “to divide the sample into groups or categories according to the similarities or differences which they exhibit in a study”. This stratification aims to better understand the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and speaking ability, based on rich information. So, the qualitative analysis was conducted thematically, taking into account the participants’ responses in every stratum. The main themes were the students’ perception of vocabulary importance in speaking and their vocabulary difficulties in speaking.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It is necessary to present firstly the findings on the 1^{re} A students’ overall vocabulary scores and their speaking scores. The Inter-Class Correlation (ICC) of vocabulary scores indicated an interrater-reliability of 0.998, a high consistency in grading. While the ICC of the speaking test showed a moderate interrater-reliability of 0.553, due to the complexity of speaking, since it is composed of different criteria, which may be subjectively measured. But for more validity in scores, the average of the three raters’ scores contributed to having more robust scores for subsequent analyses.

3.1 The 1^{re} A students’ vocabulary knowledge and their speaking proficiency

The participants’ vocabulary scores resulted from the sum of the scores in the vocabulary size section and in the depth section. Table 3 displays the statistics on the 1^{re}A overall vocabulary knowledge.

Table 3: Overall vocabulary test mean score

	Average	Standard Deviation	n
Vocabulary	51.33	14.19	31

Source: Fieldwork (May 2025)

The average score displayed by the table is 51.33. But with an important standard deviation of 14.19, it is advisable to consider the median for an asymmetric score distribution. So, for the 31 participants, this median is the middle score, that is, the 16th score, which was 55.38. Regarding the total score of 140, it is a poor score. The score 55.38 out of 140 reveals a very limited vocabulary knowledge of the New General Several List high-frequency words. The following table shows the mean score of their speaking performances.

Table: 4: Speaking mean score

	Average	Standard Deviation	n
Speaking	3.65	.35	31

Source: Fieldwork (May 2025)

Table 4 indicates a mean score of 3.65 with a weak standard deviation of 0.35. So, the scores are homogeneous, showing that the mean score reveals the overall score of the participants' performances. A band score of 3.65 is rounded to 3.5 according to IELTS rounding conventions. Based on the CEFR mapping to IELTS band scores, 3.5 falls within A2, an extremely limited level. This extremely A2 limited level could reveal a gap between the 1^{re} A students' actual speaking proficiency and their expected intermediate B1 level.

3. 2. The correlation between the 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking proficiency

The overarching objective of this study is to quantitatively and qualitatively examine the correlation between the 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking proficiency. The statistical analysis of the correlation between 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking ability with SPSS 25 provided the results displayed in the table 5 below.

Table 5: Pearson's correlation between vocabulary and speaking

		Vocabulary Score	Speaking Score
Vocabulary Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.731**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	n	31	31
Speaking Score	Pearson Correlation	.731**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	n	31	31

Note: the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Source: Fieldwork (May 2025)

The result indicated sig = .000, a p-value of < 0.01, which is the significance threshold. A p-value below 0.01 indicates that the finding is unlikely to be due to chance. The table indicates a Pearson's correlation of 0.731. So, as indicated by the p-value, this correlation is a real high correlation based on Pearson's correlation standards. From 0.70 to 0.90, the

correlation is estimated to be high. Thus, this high coefficient reveals a strong correlation between the 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking proficiency. Therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming the alternative hypothesis. That is, there is a significant correlation between vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency.

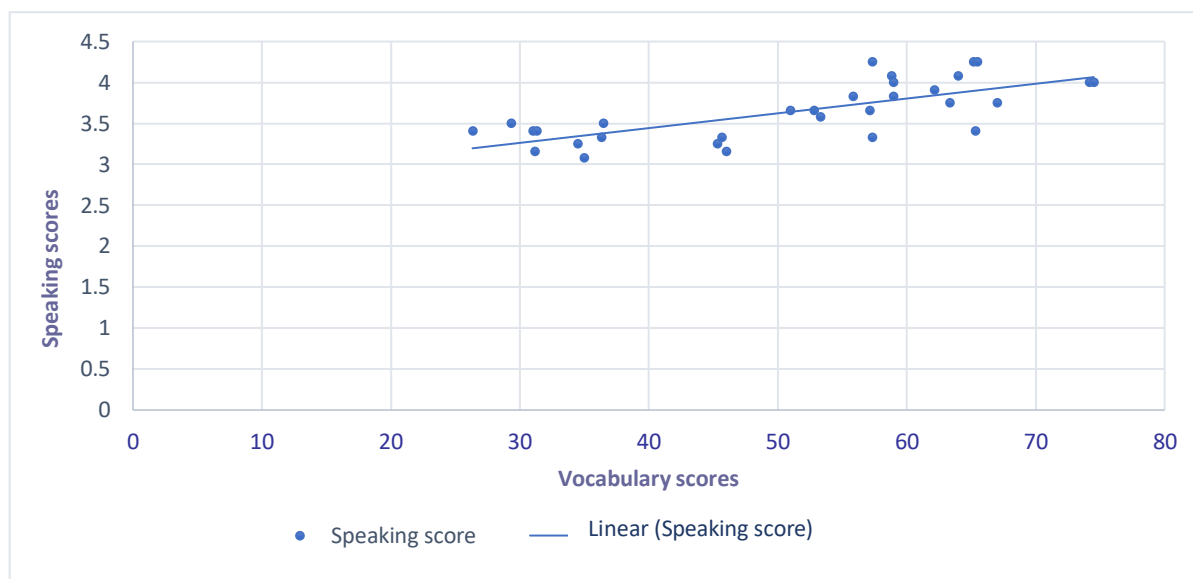
Consequently, the 1^{re} A students' weak vocabulary knowledge is highly associated with their low speaking proficiency, suggesting that speaking proficiency tends to improve when vocabulary knowledge improves. This high correlation is substantiated by the participants' responses from the interview, as they overwhelmingly recognized that vocabulary knowledge has a significant impact on their speaking performances. For example, S42 posited that vocabulary is “the base of every language”, while S32 exclaimed that “vocabulary affects your ability to speak”, S11 resorted that forgetting words caused them “to keep quiet”. The participants' silence due to limited vocabulary justifies Hymes' (1972) Communicative Competence perspective, according to which vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in the appropriate use of language in context and in paraphrasing to compensate for lexical gaps, and avoid silence and long pauses in speaking.

The 1^{re} A students' poor vocabulary and their extremely limited speaking proficiency may be explained by inappropriate teaching methods and the scarcity of speaking classes. As Bonkougou (2023) notes, teachers rely on old teaching methods and give little time to speaking practices. These findings align with the Sociocultural Theory, for which vocabulary is a crucial tool in interactions, and vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency improve through regular practices within ZPD.

The correlation found in this study is in line with En-nda & Koumachi (2021) with $r = 0.744$, Baihaqi (2010) with $r = 0.764$, and Sari (2021) with $r = 0.873$. They also found a significant positive correlation. So, it confirms that the high correlation between vocabulary knowledge and speaking proficiency is also true in the Burkinabe context. The correlation of the present investigation is closer to En-nda & Koumachi (2021). The participants of both studies are from Secondary Schools in which English has the same status as a foreign language. They may be approximately the same age. Thus, they are likely to have the same educational levels and may face the same challenges.

The following graph represents the correlation between the 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking ability.

Graph 1: The Scatter Plot of 1^{re} A students' vocabulary and speaking correlation



Source: Fieldwork (May 2025)

The trend line passing through the dots (participants' paired vocabulary and speaking scores) indicates the trend of the correlation. As the line goes upwards and the dots are globally aligned along it, a positive correlation is confirmed for most of the participants, which may suggest that good vocabulary knowledge leads to good speaking ability, and weak vocabulary knowledge causes a weak speaking ability. So, the upward-trending line reveals that speaking proficiency increases when vocabulary increases.

3. 2. 1. The effect size of vocabulary knowledge on speaking skill

The effect size of vocabulary is the variance of vocabulary scores in speaking scores. It is expressed by r^2 according to Cohen. The effect size found in this study was $(0.731)^2$, which gave 0.53,43, that is 53.43%. This effect size is strong according to Cohen's (1998) standards (0.10 for small, 0.30 for medium, and 0.50 for large effect size). Since the correlation is positive, this percentage confirms that the 1^{re} A students' vocabulary knowledge influences their speaking variance at 53.43%, leading to the conclusion that a deficit in vocabulary knowledge is the predominant cause of 1^{re} A students' speaking ability. This finding agrees with CBLT's emphasis on vocabulary as a core component of speaking. 53.43% is over half the variance, leading to highlights in the significant role of vocabulary in speaking. As Wilkins puts it, "without vocabulary nothing is conveyed", showing that vocabulary is the core subskill in oral communication.

3. 2. 2. The vocabulary-speaking profiles

To further understand the nature of the high correlation previously revealed by the statistical analysis, a stratification was made based on the vocabulary median and speaking median as thresholds. A purposive sampling of 6 participants provided rich insights for the qualitative analysis. Thus, the 6 participants were found to provide sufficient data. They were grouped into the four strata found in this study, as illustrated in the table 6.

Table 6: Vocabulary and speaking stratification

Stratum	Participants	Total number of students
High Vocabulary -High Speaking	S2, S3, S7, S12, S15, S17, S18, S21, S26, S31, S32, S35, S37, S43	14
Low Vocabulary- Low Speaking	S1, S4, S5, S8, S11, S13, S19, S23, S29, S33, S38, S39, S40,	13
High vocabulary- Low Speaking	S27, S28	2
Low Vocabulary- High Speaking	S6, S42	2

Source: Fieldwork (May 2025)

14 of the participants have high vocabulary and high speaking, and 13 have low vocabulary and low speaking. It gives 27 participants out of 31 whose vocabulary performances correlate with their speaking performances, confirming a positive trend of vocabulary correlation with speaking. The 14 participants with high vocabulary-high speaking profile are evidence that, by and large, the better your vocabulary knowledge, the better you speak. While the 13 with low vocabulary-low speaking profile confirm that a poor vocabulary knowledge

impedes speaking ability. These findings corroborate with CBLT in the sense that vocabulary knowledge is a crucial key to speaking ability.

The remaining 4 participants are outliers: their vocabulary performances mismatch with their speaking performances. That is, 2 participants with high vocabulary and low speaking, and 2 participants with low vocabulary and high speaking. The 2 outliers with high vocabulary and low speaking performances could have been influenced by other factors, such as anxiety or lack of confidence, which may impede word retrieval and hinder speaking ability. This suggests that having a good vocabulary knowledge does not guarantee a good speaking ability.

3. 2. 3. The 1^{re} A students' strategies to cope with vocabulary difficulties in speaking

Many respondents resorted to having vocabulary difficulties in speaking, affecting fluency significantly since they make long pauses, they hesitate, or they stop speaking when they do not find words.

As strategies to cope with their vocabulary difficulties, the outlier S42 (with low vocabulary and high speaking) resorted to using synonyms, and S23 asserted to employ secondary ideas and synonyms to speak when missing words. The 1^{re} A students' use of paraphrasing and circumlocution to cope with vocabulary deficiency in speaking aligns with Communicative Competence (Hymes, 1972). These strategies contribute to strategic competence and discourse competence, preventing communication breakdowns.

The respondent S28 reported to “use French words”, while the respondent S11 resorted to “keep quiet”. These respective uses of L1 transfer and silence by 1^{re} A students are evidence of their weak vocabulary knowledge and account for their poor speaking performances. The use of L2 is consistent with Bonkougou's research, which found that 1^{re} A students use L2 (French) as a compensation strategy. These unfruitful strategies show that they do not have the necessary vocabulary competencies to hold simple conversations, misaligning with CBLT perspective, which, according to Richards and Rodgers (2001, p.144), is framed on “competencies which consist of essential skills, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors needed for the completion of a real-world task or activity”.

4. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have significant implications. These implications are both theoretical and practical.

- Theoretical implications

The important positive correlation contributes to supporting the crucial role of vocabulary in Communicative Competence, since vocabulary knowledge helps to improve discourse competences and strategic competences through paraphrasing to fill in gaps in vocabulary knowledge, thereby maintaining speaking fluency.

Being able to hold conversations is part of social processes. The findings demonstrate that vocabulary knowledge is largely associated with the ability to hold oral conversations, aligning with the Sociocultural Theory perspective on language, with vocabulary as the primary tool in social processes.

The findings on the outliers do not align with this common view of the role of vocabulary in speaking. These findings suggest that possessing vocabulary knowledge does not guarantee effective speaking, revealing that other competencies are needed to communicate effectively. The students with low vocabulary and high speaking suggest compensatory competences such as the use of concept, superordinate term, or giving an example.

- Practical implications

The high positive correlation in this research highlights the crucial role of vocabulary knowledge in speaking. Therefore, CBLT classes should lay emphasis on vocabulary teaching for better speaking abilities. As advocated by the ZPD, teachers should help students learn vocabulary to endow them with the necessary vocabulary to hold the targeted speaking tasks. Additionally, in keeping with Lexical Approach perspectives, teaching lexical chunks, collocations, idioms will help students gain fluency in speaking, since they are multiword units working as single units and they contain grammatical patterns.

Interactive and contextual speaking activities contribute to developing learners' vocabulary knowledge and communicative competences. Teachers should multiply interactive and contextual speaking activities to help students use the needed words. They should also teach them paraphrasing and circumlocution strategies when necessary. Thus, learners will reinforce their vocabulary knowledge and develop their discourse competences and strategic competences consistently with Communicative Competence.

CONCLUSION

1^{re} A students are not able to hold basic oral conversation despite their 6 years of English in Secondary School. This correlational study using a mixed-method approach investigated the extent and the nature of the relationship between their vocabulary knowledge and their speaking proficiency.

The high positive correlation of 0.731 indicates that 1^{re} A students' weak speaking proficiency is highly impacted by their low vocabulary knowledge. The respondents' perceptions also back up this significant vocabulary impact, revealing that deficiency in vocabulary knowledge immensely causes long pauses, silence, and use of L2, which impede speaking fluency and lead to communication breakdown.

These findings align with Hyme's (1972) Communicative Competence, which supports that vocabulary knowledge contributes to sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competences. They also reveal, as Sociocultural Theories advocate, that vocabulary is the primary tool of interaction. These findings are also consistent with Competency Based Language Teaching perspective, for which vocabulary knowledge is key to communication.

Therefore, teachers should increase speaking classes to give learners more opportunities to communicate in English and develop their vocabulary knowledge. Teachers should also explicitly teach the needed words for targeted speaking tasks, and help students use them in meaningful and interactive speaking activities.

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