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Moroccan EFL Learners' Knowledge of Vocabulary and their Speaking Ability: A Correlational Study

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT
	The study seeks to investigate the correlation between students' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking ability. It is carried out in Idriss 1st high school in Kenitra, with the participation of 30 first-year baccalaureate students, including males and females. Vocabulary and speaking tests are used as two main instruments to collect data from the participants. Pearson correlation is used in order to determine the relationship between students' scores in vocabulary and their scores in the speaking test. Based on correlation analysis, the research's major findings revealed a significant positive correlation (r=, 744) between the vocabulary test scores of students and their speaking performance in the speaking test.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a major role in enabling learners to express themselves in various communicative situations. However, many researchers claim that despite the good mastery of vocabulary that many EFL students have, they may encounter many problems, especially when they want to use the knowledge they have regarding vocabulary in fluency oriented-activities. Without adequate and suitable knowledge of vocabulary, EFL students may not be able to learn a foreign language effectively. Most importantly, they may not be able to survive in real communicative situations. This incompetency that EFL learners have regarding the spoken aspects of language can be explained by a lack of exposure to activities requiring the learners to use their speaking abilities. It contributes to building passive learners, whose role is restricted to receiving knowledge, without further engagement in transmitting this receptive knowledge into a declarative one.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of the speaking skill

Speaking is defined as a productive skill. It involves the speaker's oral performance, which can be subject to observation. This skill requires speakers to construct messages through their active participation and creative use of language. Within this context, Brown (2003) says that "because most speaking is the product of creative construction of linguistic strings, the speaker makes choices of lexicon, structure, and discourse" (p.140). This means that speakers have to consider many aspects, including lexicon, structure, and discourse, to perform their speeches more effectively. Similarly, Harmer (2007) explains that "when speaking, we construct words and phrases with individual sounds, and we also use pitch change, intonation, and stress to convey different meanings" (p. 29). Harmer describes speaking as a communicative process, which involves speakers in a range of activities, including combining individual sounds to construct meaningful messages, varying pitch, using appropriate intonation and stress to convey meaningful messages that can be understood by people with whom the speakers interact.

Harmer (2007) considers skill integration important in defining speaking. In his opinion, language users should be proficient in a range of language skills. He points out that language users employ a combination of skills while speaking. In this regard, Harmer insists that a speaker should use both listening and speaking to survive in communicative situations. Harmer considers skill integration as a crucial step in developing learners' communicative competence.

As Rocio defines it, speaking is a real-life skill, which ordinary people in their everyday life use. Rocio claims that people can use speaking to express themselves in authentic situations. Besides, Rocio explains that speaking, which occurs without any prior preparation on the part of the learner, necessitates the speaker to take part and cooperate in such kinds of unplanned conversations and talks, which take place haphazardly. Rocio (2012) supports this claim by arguing that " there are numerous daily life situations where people need speaking, such as talking to someone face to face, communicating through the phone, answering questions, asking for directions, in shops, meeting or chatting with friends" (p.21). Rocio suggests some examples of communicative situations where language is used authentically, such as phone conversation, face to face communication etc. Such situations are known for their use of real-life language, spontaneous speech and expressions, which are picked up from everyday interaction.

2.2.1 Speaking sub-skills

Teaching the speaking skill in isolation without integrating its sub-skills will not lead EFL learners to effective mastery of this skill. Thus, many researchers, such as Harmer (2007), emphasize the importance of skill integration in improving EFL learners speaking skills. Many sub-skills are to be considered when talking about speaking. Pronunciation is an important sub-skill in speaking. Learners need to master the pronunciation of the sound system before producing their speeches. Thus, teaching pronunciation should be given priority in communicative language teaching. Students cannot achieve a high level of speaking proficiency if their pronunciation is not much emphasized. Classrooms, where grammar translation is used will not help learners to become proficient language speakers. This happens; because the goal of language educators in such language classes is not to teach pronunciation of sounds. However, concerning the communicative approach to teaching, pronunciation has become of great importance; since it allows learners to interact using appropriate rhythm, stress to convey meaningful speech. Additionally, teaching pronunciation draws students' attention to where to stress words and reach a high degree of mutual intelligibility. In his book "The practice of English Language", Harmer (2007) suggests several alternatives as to how and when to teach pronunciation. First, teachers can opt for teaching pronunciation during the whole lesson. The purpose of such a way of teaching is to introduce learners to pronunciation regularly (i.e. at various stages during the lesson) to focus their attention on sounds articulation, stress, intonation, rhythm and production of connected speech. Second, language educators can teach pronunciation using discrete slots. They can insert separate short bits of pronunciation work into lesson sequences. In this way, learners are taught pronunciation in a short time. Teachers can spend a few minutes teaching a particular aspect, such as intonation, and then move to another aspect. Teaching using discrete slots can be beneficial for learners to develop their pronunciation. Third, teachers can sometimes adopt opportunistic teaching to deal with grammatical mistakes as soon as they are committed. This way of teaching is done in accordance with the type of activity in which students are involved.

Listening is a sub-skill of speaking, without which the communication process would be a very challenging one. It involves two processes, namely: interaction and interpretation. Integrating both speaking and listening in an EFL classroom can benefit learners. EFL students can switch their roles during a speaking activity and act as speakers and listeners simultaneously. They have more opportunities to interact with one another.

Hughes (1989) insists that speaking and listening should go hand in hand during the communication process. In this regard, Hughes states that "The two skills are typically exercised together in oral interaction" (p. 134). This is true; because participants in a particular talk should receive information using listening as a receptive skill; before using their productive skill (i.e. speaking), which leads them to interact with one another more effectively.

2.2 Definition of vocabulary

Many authors have suggested a range of definitions concerning the concept of vocabulary. Ur (1996) defines vocabulary "as the words we teach in the foreign language. However, a new vocabulary item may be more than a single word: for example, post office and mother-in-law, which are made up of two or three words but express a single idea" (p. 60). In his definition of the term vocabulary, Ur refers to this concept as an item rather than a word. For him, a word cannot serve appropriately to describe exactly vocabulary since it does not always consist of a single word, but rather it involves two or three items that convey a single meaning. Likewise, Richards and Schmidt (2010) declare that vocabulary is "a set of LEXEMES, including single words, COMPOUND WORDS and IDIOMS" (p. 629). This definition specifies the nature of vocabulary, which includes single words, compound words or idiomatic expressions rather than a single word. On the other hand, some authors focus on other aspects when defining the term vocabulary. They come up to the conclusion that vocabulary entails knowledge of words and word meaning. In other words, knowledge of words and their meanings should occur simultaneously to make active use of the total of words that he/ she has accumulated. From this, one can assume an effective learning vocabulary necessitates words to appear in context to be understood easily and become part of one's mental lexicon so that they can retrieve them when needed in both oral and written contexts. Hubbard (1983, as cited in Ferreira, 2007) supports the need for using vocabulary and states that vocabulary is a powerful carrier of meaning. He adopts this view to show that vocabulary and meaning go together. This is not to say that vocabulary is the only aspect of language

which conveys meaning, but there are other elements such as grammar, stress, rhythm, intonation, tone of voice, pauses, hesitation or silence, which serve the same purpose. Learning a language cannot be restricted to learning vocabulary alone, but it is a key aspect for conveying meaningful messages and understanding them. Despite the importance of grammar in constructing well-structured sentences, vocabulary is considered a key element for communicating and understanding messages.

Based on the above definitions, it can be concluded that vocabulary is an important aspect of language. The importance of vocabulary lies in the fact that it helps one express himself/ herself meaningfully in a particular situation, even if he/she lacks grammar. Knowledge of vocabulary is more important than knowledge of grammar; it increases one's chance to survive in a given communicative situation.

2.2.1 Definition of vocabulary knowledge
Vocabulary knowledge does not only involve a superficial understanding of the meaning of words; it also includes a deep understanding of lexical phrases in reading and listening and how to go about using them in writing and speaking.

Knowledge of vocabulary cannot be fully mastered as it develops gradually. Learners expand and deepen their vocabulary knowledge over the course of a lifetime. Vocabulary acquisition occurs incidentally, in the sense that learners are always in touch with new words and vocabularies, which they pick up from the world around them.

Knowledge of vocabulary helps learners to do well in other subject areas. However, if learners fall behind acquiring vocabulary, they are unlikely to understand reading texts or listening materials. Additionally, lack of vocabulary knowledge will negatively affect students' writing and speaking so that they cannot survive in communication or use appropriate vocabulary to express themselves in a written form.

2.2.2 The relationship between knowledge of vocabulary and the speaking skill
Students' speaking proficiency is always measured by their ability to express themselves fluently in the spoken form. Learners need to have sufficient vocabulary knowledge to comprehend and understand the messages they receive and react upon them by using language fluently. Having a large amount of vocabulary is a prerequisite for good speaking.

The amount of vocabulary that one knows should be reflected in his/ her oral performance. Indeed, great knowledge of vocabulary increases the likelihood of students expressing themselves using the exact words and expressions that convey meaning more precisely. This is to say that knowledge of many word meanings is an essential element for effective communication.

To sum up, acquiring a large amount of vocabulary enables learners to become effective language producers and users. Because of the relevance of vocabulary knowledge to language acquisition and its centrality to language acquisition, teachers need to adopt some strategies to teach vocabulary better and help students use them effectively throughout their communication.

3. Methodology
3.1 Research design
The present study is correlational in its nature. It seeks to determine the association between two independent variables: vocabulary knowledge and students' speaking ability. This correlation is determined by using two tests as instruments to measure both the students' knowledge of vocabulary and their ability to speak. The total number of participants who took part in the present study is 30 students, including males and females. The participants in the present study were subject to a convenient sampling. The test is administered to two intact groups from which the 30 students have been selected purposefully. This research design fits this study appropriately because it is based on a convenient selection of the students, which gives an equal chance to a large number of students to participate. Students are tested on their vocabulary knowledge and speaking ability using both written vocabulary and speaking tests. The collected data are calculated and analyzed using SPSS 16.0 program.

3.2 Participants
The participants in the present study are 30 first-year baccalaureate students from Idriss 1st high school in Kenitra. They are majoring in science, and their ages are between 15 and 20 years old. The participants are selected purposefully regardless of their levels at English or gender. The participants took two tests, namely a vocabulary and speaking test. The vocabulary test tends to measure the extent to which students have learned the vocabulary being taught in relation to the first unit (education) from the student's book Ticket to English; whereas the speaking test seeks to measure the ability of students to perform orally using the knowledge of vocabulary they have accumulated.

3.3 Research instruments
Two instruments are used in the study to collect data: a vocabulary test and a speaking test. The vocabulary test is a written achievement test that seeks to measure the knowledge being accumulated by learners after a teaching period. This test is used to

elicit knowledge from students about their ability to acquire the vocabulary they were exposed to in class. The vocabulary test is divided into eight sections, and each section targets a particular level of understanding by asking students some questions. The speaking test is an oral test that seeks to measure students' ability concerning their oral production.

3.4 Objective of the study
The objective behind conducting this study is to find out the correlation between knowledge of vocabulary that students have learnt and their speaking ability. The study, particularly, seeks to determine the extent to which students can use their knowledge of vocabulary while performing oral tasks in the oral speaking test.

3.5 Research Question and Hypothesis
This research attempts to answer the following research question:

Research Question: is there any relationship between first-year baccalaureate EFL learners' knowledge of vocabulary and their speaking ability?

This study seeks to support the following hypothesis:
Research Hypothesis: There is a relationship between first-year baccalaureate EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and their speaking ability.

4. Results and Discussion
4.1 Statistical results
The table below reports the statistical results, using Pearson correlation, to highlight the fact that there is a correlation between students' scores in the vocabulary test and their scores in the speaking test.

Table 1. Pearson correlation between vocabulary test and speaking test

		Vocabulary test	Speaking test
Vocabulary test	**Pearson Correlation** **Sig. (2-tailed)** **N**	1 30	,744** ,000 30
Speaking test	**Pearson Correlation** **Sig.(2.tailed)** **N**	,744** ,000 30	1 30

The analysis of the results shows a relationship between vocabulary knowledge and students' speaking ability (r=, 744; p<0, 01). This means that there is significant evidence to reject the null hypothesis and conclude that there is a positive association between vocabulary knowledge and students' speaking ability. The results of this study show that there is a correlation between the two variables, but this correlation is not strong because r=, 744 <1. In the next chapter, namely discussion, we will explain the reasons why the correlation between the two variables is not strong.

The graph below represents the distribution of students' scores with regard to the vocabulary test as well as the speaking test. It shows how the two sets of scores (vocabulary and speaking) go together.

Figure 1. Knowledge of vocabulary and speaking ability
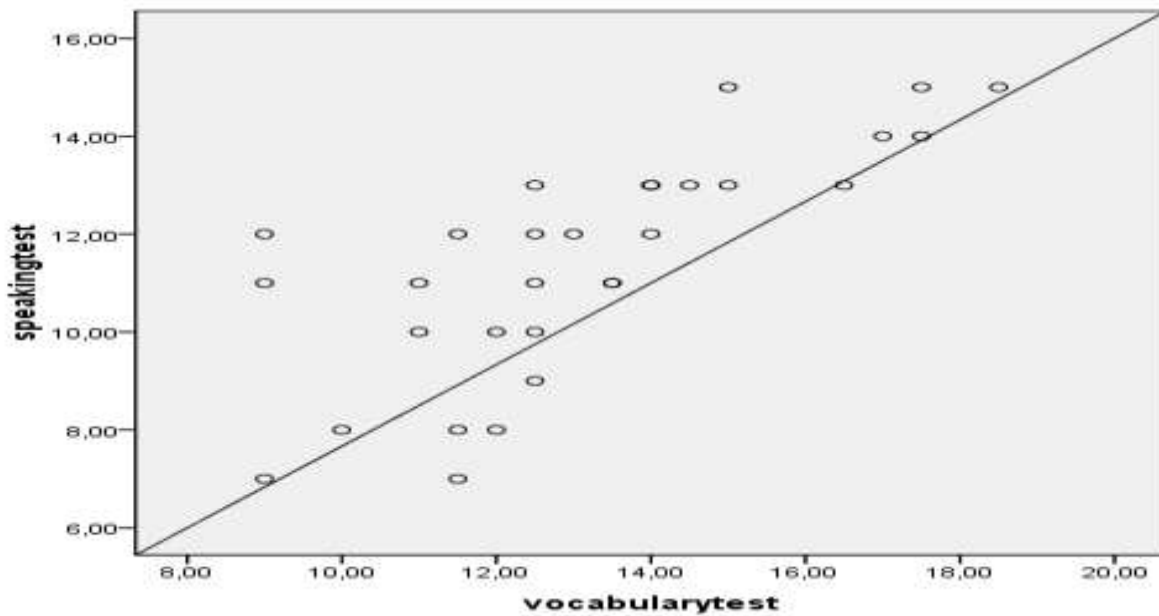
The correlation between the knowledge of vocabulary of first-year baccalaureate students and their speaking ability is positive because, as the graph indicates, there is a possibility to draw a straight line in the scatterplot to show that the direction of the relationship is upward.

Based on the present study results, we have rejected the null hypothesis and supported the alternative hypothesis. By calculating r2, we will find that r2=0, 55. This value indicates that 55% of the obtained findings are true. However, 45% needs to be investigated in future research.

4.2 Discussion
4.2.1 The correlation between participants' knowledge of vocabulary and their speaking ability
The study results show a correlation between students' knowledge of vocabulary and their speaking ability. Indeed, the participants' performance through the vocabulary and speaking test shows that most of the students, of course with some exceptions, who receive high scores in the vocabulary test also get high scores in the speaking test. Having good vocabulary knowledge helps learners speak fluently without spending much time looking for words that would appropriately fit a particular context. Lack of fluency appears once students have limited or poor knowledge of vocabulary. This lowers students' motivation in a way that they become unwilling to speak.

4.2.2 Comparison between the present study and the previous studies
These two previous studies have supported the presence of a correlation between vocabulary knowledge and speaking ability. A previous study entitled "The relationship between language proficiency and Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of vocabulary depth versus vocabulary breath" reports a correlation between knowledge of vocabulary and speaking. The results of the present study are in line with the findings of this study, which is conducted in an Iranian context. This previous study yields a significant correlation between vocabulary breadth, vocabulary depth, and learners' language proficiency. Tahmasebi, Ghaedrahmat, and Haqverdi (2013) explain the correlation between variables of the study as follows: the more words the learners know, the higher their proficiency level can be. This study tends to make a comparison between two different levels of students; it draws the following conclusion: students at the Upper-intermediate level have a greater depth of vocabulary than those at the lower-intermediate level. This supports the findings of the present study, which show that knowledge of vocabulary contributes significantly to first year baccalaureate students' performance in speaking ability.

"Vocabulary Knowledge and compare Second Language Learners from Novice to Intermediate Levels" (2013) is another research that supports the present study results. The findings of this previous study reveal that correlation is significant between the size, depth, and speed of L2 vocabulary and speaking proficiency. The first-year outcomes of the present study show an existing correlation between knowledge of vocabulary being achieved by students in the vocabulary test and their oral performance in the speaking test. Like the previous studies conducted in foreign contexts, this study, conducted in a Moroccan context, particularly in

Idriss 1st high school in the city of Kenitra, considers knowledge of vocabulary as a predictor for the speaking ability of first-year baccalaureate students.

The strength of correlation in the present study is 744. It varies from the coefficient r of the two previous studies being discussed. This difference can be explained by several factors, such as test format, age and level of the participants adopted in the present study in comparison with these previous studies. It is obvious that the correlation between variables increases as learners reach an advanced level. The strength of correlation may also differ with regard to the context where the present research has been conducted.

5. Conclusion

This study has focused on the correlation between knowledge of vocabulary and students' speaking ability. Several important findings have been obtained. They turned out to be in accordance with the results of previous researchers. Neglecting the speaking is one of the main findings of the present study. The second finding of this study has revealed that there is a correlation between knowledge of vocabulary and first-year baccalaureate students' speaking ability. Previous researchers and the present study emphasize the fact that knowledge of vocabulary, which is rich and wide, tends to help learners use the target language more effectively.

Despite the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and students' speaking ability, it is necessary to call for the incorporation of the speaking skill in Moroccan classrooms. Teaching and improving students' vocabulary is a crucial element in language learning. It facilitates the learning process for students. However, without incorporating communicative activities into the classroom, teachers will not effectively foster their learners' speaking ability. Thus, students should not memorize a list of vocabulary items with their meanings in order to communicate, but rather they have to be able to use it in communicative situations. Teachers should encourage active use of vocabulary by engaging learners in speaking activities, in which they can make use of the vocabulary items they have learned. Speaking activities, such as dialogue and role-play, will help teachers check their students' vocabulary knowledge. They will also provide students with the opportunity to practice their speaking.

Teachers should think of possible ways for incorporating the speaking skill. With regard to the sample of the present study, it can be seen that, regardless of the correlation found between first-year baccalaureate students and their speaking ability, students do not show a good performance in the speaking test. Although students have learned vocabulary, which they are supposed to use in the speaking test, they still face some challenges when expressing themselves. They have to be aware of the negative effect of excluding the speaking skill from their teaching practices on their students speaking ability.

There are some limitations to this research. The first limitation is that the present study's findings cannot be generalized to all EFL Moroccan students because the scope of the present study is limited to a specific EFL classroom at Idriss 1st high school in the city of Kenitra. The second limitation is that students' scores in vocabulary and speaking tests may not truly reflect their performance in the two tests. Many factors such as anxiety, fatigue, and lack of concentration may intervene while students were taking the two tests.

Like previous studies, the present research provides evidence about the correlation between knowledge of vocabulary and students' speaking ability. Further experimental research is recommended to investigate the effect of enhancing EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge on improving their speaking ability.

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