

The Role of Vocabulary Development in Enhancing Speaking Skills at Primary School Level

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Abstract:

Developing vocabulary is an important aspect of promoting young learners' oral production of English in EFL situations. Primary learners struggle with speaking largely for the following reasons: a scarcity of vocabulary, a lack of confidence, and too few contexts in which to use language to communicate. The importance of vocabulary development in improving the speaking skills of primary school learners: A review. Based on a review of various international studies and theories related to the topic, this paper discusses the role that vocabulary knowledge has in young learners' speaking fluency, accuracy and communicative confidence. It also includes some of the cognitive/psychological traits of primary school learners that will affect vocabulary and oral language development. It also identifies and analyze specific problems that affect the integration of vocabulary teaching with speaking in primary English language contexts, followed by a review of research-based teaching practices that have potential to enhance vocabulary activation in the context of communicative task work. The results find that speaking through vocabulary integrated instruction significantly enhance young learners' oral production. Finally, the article addresses the necessity of coherent instructional practices that connect vocabulary learning with speaking competence in English language classes in primary school.

Keywords: Conference Paper Full-text available Vocabulary development; Speaking Skills; Young learners; Primary school; EFL context; English language teaching

Introduction

In the context of globalization and increasing international communication, English has become one of the most important languages worldwide. As a result, many countries have introduced English language instruction at increasingly earlier stages of formal education. Primary school has emerged as a critical period for foreign language learning, as young learners demonstrate high levels of motivation, cognitive flexibility, and receptiveness to new linguistic input. These characteristics make primary education a strategic stage for developing foundational English language skills, particularly vocabulary and speaking[1].

Speaking is one of the four fundamental language skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing); however, it is often seen as the most difficult language skill for young learners to acquire in EFL contexts. Although primary school learners might show some very limited skills in the receptive skills area – maybe they can follow a simple command or recognize a few words – they struggle to produce any output in the spoken form. Some of the common barriers are inadequate vocabulary size, low self-esteem, fear of committing errors, and few chances of purposeful oral communication in class. The answer is focused on vocabulary development, which is key to developing these skills. Vocabulary consists of the building blocks of language, which allow students to create messages and partake in communication exchanges. With an insufficient level of lexicon, even learners who possess the rudimentary knowledge of grammar may not speak with fluency or accuracy. In the area of second language acquisition research, it has been pointed out repeatedly that vocabulary knowledge is a powerful predictor of speaking outcomes [2].

At the primary school level, vocabulary acquisition is influenced by learners' cognitive, psychological, and social characteristics. Young learners tend to acquire vocabulary more effectively when words are presented in meaningful contexts, supported by visual input, repetition, and interaction. Unlike older learners, primary school students benefit less from explicit memorization of word lists and more from experiential and communicative learning activities. Therefore, vocabulary instruction that is integrated with speaking practice is particularly effective for this age group[3].

Although it is widely accepted that vocabulary plays a critical role in speaking development, in our experience many primary English classrooms still approach vocabulary and speaking as distinct strands of teaching. Vocabulary is naturally taught with single, isolated exercises and speaking (when included) is either non-existent or solely, rigidly controlled. By not incorporating vocabulary into oral communication action, the opportunity for the learners to use the vocabulary in context is also drastically reduced and the consequent development of speaking skill is hindered. This article aims to analyse vocabulary development in the attainment of speaking skills in primary school. To draw together findings from international research and theoretical perspectives, the study aims to: (1) describe and understand the theoretical underpinnings of vocabulary acquisition for young learners, (2) investigate the potential link between vocabulary knowledge and speaking performance, and (3) explore effective vocabulary instructional practices that blend vocabulary instruction with speaking practice in primary English classrooms. The aim of the article is to share practical ideas with teachers, the university system could contribute to English language teaching, curriculum designers, and higher educational policy planners[4].

Methodology

A research design of a qualitative review was used in this study in the sense of synthesizing and analyzing international literature of existing research to some extent related to vocabulary and speaking skills among primary school learners. Instead of doing new experimental research, the study

attempts to synthesize results from past studies to form a theory about the role of vocabulary knowledge in development of oral language for young children[5].

These comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and academic reports gleaned from data published in international journals and databases. The studies chosen dealt with English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts and learners in the primary school stage. Relevant sources were selected by inclusion criterium: (1) focusing on vocabulary acquisition or speaking skills, (2) focusing on children, and (3) indicating clearly methodological and theoretical grounding [6].

Results and Discussion

A thematic analysis approach was applied to analyze the selected literature. Key findings and arguments from each source were identified and grouped into recurring themes. These themes include the role of vocabulary knowledge in speaking performance, psychological factors influencing oral communication, instructional challenges in primary classrooms, and effective strategies for integrating vocabulary and speaking instruction. This method allows for the identification of common patterns and trends across studies while maintaining flexibility in interpreting diverse research contexts[7].

Table 1. Research Focus Areas in the Reviewed Studies

Focus area	Description	Educational context
Vocabulary development	Lexical acquisition and word knowledge	Primary EFL classrooms
Speaking skills	Fluency, accuracy, confidence	Young learners
Learning challenges	Anxiety, limited exposure, low confidence	Primary education
Instructional strategies	Communicative and task-based approaches	Classroom practice

Table 1 outlines the main research focus areas identified in the reviewed studies and links them to their educational contexts. It shows that vocabulary development is primarily examined through lexical acquisition and word knowledge in primary EFL classrooms, while speaking skills research emphasizes fluency, accuracy, and learner confidence, particularly among young learners. The table also highlights common learning challenges, such as anxiety and low confidence, frequently observed in primary education settings. In addition, it presents instructional strategies centered on communicative and task-based approaches, underscoring their relevance to classroom practice and effective language instruction at the primary level[8].

The analysis of the reviewed literature reveals a strong and consistent relationship between vocabulary development and speaking skills at the primary school level. Across different educational contexts, studies indicate that vocabulary knowledge functions as a foundational component of oral communication. Young learners with a broader lexical repertoire demonstrate higher levels of fluency, accuracy, and confidence when engaging in speaking activities. These findings suggest that vocabulary development is not merely a supportive element but a central factor in the development of speaking skills among primary school learners[9].

Another most commonly reported result is that vocabulary size is related to speaking fluency. The ability to retrieve words quickly during oral production will be less likely to cause hesitation and long pauses for those whose vocabulary items are greater (Hu&Nation 2000). In this context, fluency at primary school level does not mean that learners need to speak quickly or complexly as much as manage to keep talking, convey meaning, and take part in classroom interaction. Research has demonstrated that limited vocabulary will often result in speech that is disjointed, the use of gestures or switching into the first language (Hernandez, 2007). Another factor

that contributes to accuracy (in addition to fluency) is vocabulary knowledge. Young Learners have a few words in their vocabulary and so tend to overgeneralise or misspeak when it comes to word choice, which can lead to communication issues. In contrast, those with a richer knowledge of the lexicon are able to choose words that fit better contexts; create clearer utterances; and convey ideas more precisely. In addition to facilitating effective communication, the observed relationship between vocabulary development and grammatical accuracy at early stages of L2 acquisition also underscores the role of lexical knowledge in determining L2 development[10].

A second major finding from the literature has to do with the affective factor in speaking. A strong vocabulary has proven to have a positive influence on the confidence and willingness of learners to speak. When young learners feel that they are equipped having sufficient vocabulary resources they will be able to perform oral activities, set willing to present answers and interact to their peers. Confidence, in this regard, is the mediator between vocabulary knowledge and speaking performance. Without vocabulary, learners become anxious or afraid of making mistakes and avoid oral participation even more[11].

Additionally, the scrutinized studies highlighted the need for teaching vocabulary in the speaking to be contextualized. Vocabulary learned in context—stories, dialogues, songs, and task-based activities—seems more easily available for oral use. In contrast, vocabulary content that is memorized in isolation or practiced in decontextualized exercises is unlikely to be transferred to speaking contexts. This result reinforces the notion that vocabulary learning is most successfully accomplished when vocabulary instruction is embedded in communicative activities that require the use of the words to be acquired in spoken interaction (p.

Table 2. How Vocabulary Development Affect Speaking Skills

Vocabulary dimension	Observed impact on speaking
Vocabulary size	Increased fluency and sustained speech
Word retrieval speed	Reduced hesitation and pauses
Lexical accuracy	Clearer and more precise oral expression
Vocabulary confidence	Greater willingness to participate
Contextualized learning	Improved transfer to speaking tasks

Table 2 presents the key effects of vocabulary development on speaking skills among primary school learners. It demonstrates how various vocabulary constructs affect oral production and that larger vocabulary size results in more instances of fluency and prolonged speech. Quick access to words decreases hesitation and pauses during oral production, and better lexical control leads to clearer and more accurate production. This blog breaks down and other ways vocabulary confidence (the table above) can serve to improve learners propensity to participate in speaking tasks. Second, in vocabulary learning, there is a body of research indicates that learning in context allows learners to transfer lexical knowledge more effectively to speaking tasks and thus to achieve more successful oral performance[12].

A vast body of literature also relates to struggles in speaking for the primary school learner. A big challenge is the small amount of instructional time available for speaking practice. Speaking activities in many primary classrooms are limited to short drills or controlled practice activities. Even if the above activities may aid in pronunciation practice, they lack sufficient opportunities to create meaningful oral communication. In turn, this may promote the growth of passive vocabulary knowledge, where learners know words and phrases that are never translated into active speech. Another influential factor in learners speaking development are those that pertain to teachers. Literature also indicates that primary school teachers may not feel fully confident using communicative speaking activities, especially in EFL contexts [25, 26]. Some teachers do not do these speaking

tasks, because their curriculum does not allow it, or the class is too big. They complete the textbook instead and cover all the vocabulary. Such a mismatch in instruction may restrict learners' opportunities for real language speaking and lessen the impact of vocabulary instruction[13].

Additionally, aspects related to the learners such as age, cognitive development and attention span play a role in how vocabulary correlates to speaking abilities. The cognitive traits of young learners require a repetitive and multisensory exposure to vocabulary. With other words, vocabulary can be only learned well if there are activities that involve movement, visuals and interaction which also pull students into the speaking part. Failure to consider these characteristics in instructional strategies may contribute to the superficiality of vocabulary learning and the lack of generalisation into speaking practice[14].

The literature also highlights the effectiveness of integrated instructional strategies that combine vocabulary development with speaking activities. Approaches such as storytelling, role-play, picture-based discussions, and task-based learning provide learners with opportunities to use vocabulary in meaningful communicative contexts. These strategies allow learners to practice speaking while simultaneously reinforcing vocabulary knowledge, thereby creating a mutually supportive relationship between the two skills.

Table 3. Instructional Strategies Integrating Vocabulary and Speaking

Instructional strategy	Role of vocabulary	Speaking outcome
Storytelling	Vocabulary in narrative context	Extended oral production
Role-play	Functional vocabulary use	Improved interaction skills
Picture-based tasks	Visual support for word recall	Increased speaking confidence
Task-based learning	Vocabulary for problem-solving	Meaningful communication

Table 3 illustrates instructional strategies that integrate vocabulary development with speaking practice in primary language classrooms. It highlights how storytelling supports vocabulary use within narrative contexts, leading to extended oral production. Role-play activities encourage functional vocabulary use and contribute to improved interaction skills. Picture-based tasks provide visual support that enhances word recall and increases learners' speaking confidence. Task-based learning emphasizes problem-solving vocabulary, resulting in more meaningful communication. Overall, the table demonstrates that integrating vocabulary instruction with communicative activities creates supportive learning environments that simultaneously strengthen lexical knowledge and speaking performance among primary learners[15].

Overall, the findings from the reviewed literature underscore the need for a coherent instructional approach that explicitly links vocabulary development with speaking practice at the primary school level. Treating vocabulary and speaking as interconnected components rather than separate instructional targets can significantly enhance learners' oral communication outcomes. This integrated perspective aligns with contemporary views of communicative language teaching and supports the development of functional speaking skills in young learners.

Conclusion

The current article is a review of the literature on the relationship between vocabulary and spoken language in primary years from an international perspective. The results suggest that vocabulary is a vital base of oral communication in young foreign language learners. One way to improve the speaking competence is by enriching the vocabulary since strong relationship exist between words in oral skill performance and fluency. The review also shows that vocabulary teaching has a significantly higher success rate when it is combined with speaking. The context-bound and communicative methods for vocabulary learning well help young Ls to actively practice new words through meaningful spoken interaction, with the result of strengthening lexical

preservation and speaking ability. By contrast, unrelated vocabulary teaching restrains learners' transfer of scripts into speaking contexts.

Pedagogically, the study underscores the need to develop primary English instruction that aligns with learners' cognitive and psychological natures. Teachers are also recommended to follow interactive and learner-centered methods that stimulate the use of vocabulary through speaking activities. Curriculum developers and policymakers should also consider the importance of adequate instructional time and teacher preparation for integrated vocabulary/speaking instruction.

In sum, EFL speaking instruction in primary schools should focus on vocabulary development systemically and foster communicative teaching behavior. English programs in primary schools can develop young English speakers who are confident, fluent and effective users of English. The intertwined learning of content and language is an approach that encourages further opportunities for the study of foreign.

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