
THE IMPACT OF LIMITED LEXICAL KNOWLEDGE ON EFL STUDENTS' ORAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN ZINDER: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

HASSANE HAMIDOU Fati, MOUSSA MOULLOU Sani et TANKARI Moussa

Département d'Anglais/Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey, Niger

fatihassanehamidou@gmail.com

Département d'Anglais/Ecole Normal Supérieure, Université Abdou Moumouni de Niamey, Niger

mmoullousany77@gmail.com

Département d'Anglais/ Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université André Salifou de Zinder, Niger

mtankari@gmail.com

Abstract

Lexical knowledge plays a fundamental role in any language learning development and remains crucial to effective communication in particular. However, Nigerien EFL students display a very limited ability to communicate in English due to multiple factors, such as lack of enough vocabulary. Few studies address the influence of limited vocabulary on students' speaking skills. The present study addressed this issue by examining the impact of students' limited vocabulary knowledge on their communicative skills in secondary schools in Zinder. Building understanding from teachers' perspectives, the study also highlighted how teachers' address this problem in their classroom teaching practices and the contextual factors shaping their vocabulary teaching. It drew on the constructivist and qualitative research framework. English teachers were interviewed and observed to collect solid data addressing the research objective. Through thematic analysis, the findings unveiled numerous negative impacts of students' restricted lexical knowledge on their communication skills. The findings also pointed out that it leads to a significant pedagogical change in teachers' teaching practice; e.g., the predominance of translanguaging pedagogy, code-switching, and grammar translation method. Finally, the study revealed multiple contextual factors. These include large class size, lack of teaching materials, and teachers' restricted pedagogical content knowledge in vocabulary teaching. Insights generated in this study call for competent authorities to take urgent actions for the betterment of English language teaching in Niger. The study also contributes to knowledge by exhibiting the interconnectedness of lexical knowledge and oral communicative skills.

Keywords: *Lexical knowledge, oral communication, EFL teachers, perspectives*

L'impact des connaissances lexicales limitées sur les compétences de communication orale des apprenants d'anglais langue étrangère dans les établissements secondaires : perspectives des enseignants

Résumé

La compétence lexicale constitue un pilier fondamental de tout processus d'acquisition linguistique et s'avère essentielle à l'efficacité de la communication. Néanmoins, les apprenants nigériens d'Anglais langue étrangère (EFL) présentent des capacités communicatives fortement limitées en Anglais attribuable à divers facteurs, au premier rang desquels figure l'insuffisance du répertoire lexical. La littérature scientifique accorde encore peu d'attention à l'incidence d'un lexique restreint sur le développement des compétences d'expression orale. La présente recherche vise à combler cette lacune en analysant l'impact des lacunes lexicales des élèves sur leurs compétences communicatives dans les établissements d'enseignement secondaire de Zinder, au Niger. Fondée sur une approche constructiviste et qualitative, cette étude s'appuie sur les perceptions d'enseignants d'Anglais, recueillies par le biais d'entretiens semi-directifs et d'observations de classe, afin d'examiner les pratiques pédagogiques mises en œuvre et les déterminants contextuels influençant l'enseignement du vocabulaire. L'analyse thématique des données a mis en évidence les effets préjudiciables d'un capital lexical réduit sur la performance communicative des apprenants.

Elle révèle également une reconfiguration significative des pratiques enseignantes, marquée par le cours prédominant au translanguaging, à l'alternance codique et à la méthode grammaire-traduction. Enfin, l'étude identifie plusieurs contraintes contextuelles majeures, la pénurie de ressources didactiques et la maîtrise insuffisante, par les enseignants, des savoirs pédagogiques disciplinaires relatifs à l'enseignement du lexique.

Les résultats obtenus soulignent la nécessité pour les décideurs éducatifs de mettre en œuvre des mesures urgentes en faveur de l'amélioration de l'enseignement de l'Anglais au Niger. Sur le plan théorique, cette recherche contribue à une meilleure compréhension des liens étroits unissant la compétence lexicale et la compétence communicative orale.

Mots-clés : *compétence lexicale ; communication orale ; enseignants d'Anglais langue étrangère ; perceptives.*

Introduction

The effective command of English language requires a strong vocabulary repertoire, a fundamental component of a language system employed to communicate effectively. This repertoire remains central to any language effective learning; therefore, it plays a critical role in speaking fluently. Rohmatillah (2017) affirms that lexical knowledge is very important for people who learn English as, according to Afzal (2019), it serves as a basis for the four language learning skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. On the other hand, scholarly studies have showcased that vocabulary competence impacts learners' speaking skills significantly. It allows them to retrieve words quickly and express ideas with precision (Schmitt, 2000 as quoted in Afzal 2019:82). However, despite its essence in the language learning, mastering vocabulary successfully remains one of the most challenging tasks for English learners worldwide (Afnan, 2018). At educational level, lack of vocabulary affects students' academic performance, mainly in writing and interactive tasks. It further shapes teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, classroom decisions, and the perceptions of learners.

In the Nigerien EFL context, the English language serves a foreign language while being instructed from secondary school to the higher education level. In addition, the authorities promoted English language as the working language in Article 12 of the Charter of Refoundation 2025 (S. Moussa, 2026, p. 1). However, despite the extensive teaching and aforementioned promotion of English, the secondary school students continue to display a very restricted lexical knowledge in oral communication. In this context, some existing studies have already unveiled multiple contextual factors affecting the overall speaking competence of secondary students; but few, if any, studies specifically examine the impact of limited vocabulary on students' language practice. This area is worth researching to unravel the insightful negative impacts that lack of vocabulary may have on learners' English language practice. Undertaking such research would provide insightful understanding of the real sources of the insufficient vocabulary-related challenges that thwart the secondary school students' English language practice nationwide.

From these perspectives emerged the interest of the present study to examine, from teachers' perspectives, the negative impact of restricted lexical knowledge on secondary EFL students' oral communication skills in Zinder (Niger). The study further seeks to highlight how teachers address this problem in their classroom teaching practices. Finally, the study proposes to highlight the contextual factors that shape teachers' vocabulary teaching instructions. Building upon this, it seeks to generate insights based on the following research questions:

What are the EFL teachers' perceptions of the impact of limited lexical knowledge on secondary school students' oral communication skills in Zinder?

How do EFL teachers address students' limited lexical knowledge in their classroom teaching practices?

What are the contextual factors that shape EFL teachers' vocabulary teaching practices?

These questions allowed us build diverse fathomable perspectives from different teachers on the problem under investigation. Significantly, insights collected through these questions helped fill in the research gap in education. Particularly, this study's essence lies into its valuable contribution to

literature by providing insights from Niger, considered as an underrepresented context in global educational research (Wiens et al., 2018).

1. Methodology

To achieve its previously stated goal, this study took to constructivist stance and qualitative research framework. The constructivist philosophical worldview holds to the position that reality is pluralistic not static and that knowledge and truth are constructed rather than just discovered (Creswell, 2014). As Phipps and Borg (2009) argued, studies employing qualitative strategies to explore language teachers' perspectives and practices are more productive in advancing our understanding of the complex relationships between both. Accordingly, this research was set to construct comprehensive perspectives from teachers rather than just measuring or verifying them. In the process of knowledge construction, the study's participating teachers voices matter as they were considerably taken into account. Building upon this, it was grounded in qualitative approach. For J. Creswell (2014, p.294), qualitative study serves as "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem". In this perspective, data were collected through interviewing strategies and classroom observations in order to disclose teachers' own perspectives as well as their classroom practices that were indicative of their pedagogical strategies addressing the phenomenon under investigation.

Accordingly, data were gathered from ten (10) secondary school English teachers from Zinder. They all agreed to participate willingly from different schools; and their names were hidden for the sake of anonymity. The following table provides more details about the participants.

Table I: Research Participants

Participants	Gender	Highest Qualification	Teaching Experience
Teacher 1	male	B.A	3 years
Teacher 2	male	B.A	2 years
Teacher 3	male	B.A	29 years
Teacher 4	male	B.A	6 years
Teacher 5	male	B.A	10 years
Teacher 6	Female	M.A	5 years
Teacher 7	male	B.A	13 years
Teacher 8	male	B.A	15 years
Teacher 9	male	B.A	8 years
Teacher 10	male	B.A	4 years

All the participants were interviewed through semi-structured questions to collect their perspectives and experiences regarding the research problem. Particularly, the interview questions were generally designed to understand teachers' perceptions of the impacts of students' restricted lexical knowledge and the contextual factors shaping the effective lexical item teaching. The questions also permitted the researchers to generate insights into teachers' pedagogical strategies used to cope with their students' lack of lexical knowledge in practice. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed later on for the sake of data analysis. In addition, classroom observations were conducted with four (4) teachers, who voluntarily accepted to provide further data after interview phase. Eight observation sessions were undertaken, with each teacher being observed two (2) times, with each session lasting for approximately sixty (55) minutes. During these sessions, fieldnotes were taken to ensure a correct coding for data analysis. Classroom observations aimed to further understand the practical strategies teachers use to address their students' problems of vocabulary knowledge in practice.

For data analysis, while the recorded interviews were transcribed, the classroom observational notes were coded and some errors were also corrected to ensure thematic analysis. To ensure anonymity, numbers were used to replace the real names of the participating teachers. The latter were also ascertained that their identities would be confidentially maintained.

2. Findings and Discussion

2.1 Findings of the Research

This section presents the findings collected from both interviews and classroom observations as elaborated on previously. As a reminder, the study aims at understanding EFL secondary school teachers' perspectives of the impact of students' limited vocabulary knowledge on their communication skills. It also seeks to generate understanding on the practical strategies teachers use in addressing the problem. Finally, it explores the contextual factors that shape teachers' practice in vocabulary teaching. In line with this, the present section outlines the findings of the study as follow.

2.1.1 Impact of Limited Lexical Knowledge on Students

The study has generated multiple insights into teachers' perceptions of the problem being studied. The analysis of data revealed the negative influence of the limited vocabulary knowledge on secondary school students' performance and potential participation in oral activities. In this perspective, interviewed and observational data recurrently showed that it reduces learners' ability to practice English language fluently and accurately. Teachers perceive lexical repertoire as central and quintessential to any fluent and eloquent communication. As teacher 5 perceives, "*vocabulary is a foundation of effective communication, helping learners express their ideas and understand others' ideas, improving their listening skills, and building self-confidence in articulating any words*" (interview data). Thus, lacking appropriate vocabulary words significantly thwarts students' English practice and leads to the repetitions and prolongations of sounds (interview data). In his response, teacher 1 also confirms that "*lack of sufficient words can make a student pause frequently or struggle to find the right word*" (interview data); subsequently, they cannot speak the language fluently in class (teacher 3, interview data). Another noteworthy impact that causes poor lexical knowledge among these students is shyness and hesitation during interactive classroom activities. Teachers express that most students are silent in class due to their very restricted vocabulary; even those talkative and disturbing students become shy and silent when interrogated by teachers even if they wish to express themselves (teacher 3 and 6, interviews, 23/09/2025). Furthermore, teacher 2 expounds that:

Most of our students in Zinder are not even aware of the importance of vocabulary in English learning. In fact, it is important to know that we need to valorize English as a subject and as a global language. Our students' lack of sufficient vocabulary negatively affects their communication ability, self-expressions, and even self-confidence. (Interview data).

Similar perception was also uttered in teacher's 4 response, reporting that secondary students' speaking skill is hugely hindered due to a lack of vocabulary repertoire. She states that "*without the right words, students encounter various challenges to articulate their thoughts and their ideas clearly and comprehensively; consequently, they prefer to remain inactive in class.*" (Interview data).

2.1.2 Leading Pedagogical Shift

The analysis of data further demonstrated that the limited vocabulary repertoire leads to a significant pedagogical change in practice, with a particular reference to teachers' shift in teaching methods and strategies. Observational data showcased that the students tend to favorize traditional teaching methods during interactive activities. In this line, translanguaging pedagogy, code-switching, and grammar translation method tend to recurrently predominate in almost all the classroom lessons observed. The students rarely use English either to ask questions or to respond to teacher's questions. They tend to use either French language or Hausa (their mother tongue) in oral classroom activities. For instance, total silence was observed in Grade 7 when the teacher 3 asked a question in English language after warming his class up. The following excerpt exemplifies his students' L1 overuse, which drives changes in teacher's pedagogical practices.

- **Teacher:** where did we stop yesterday?
- **Classroom:** (*long silence in class*)
- **Teacher:** who can answer?

- **Classroom:** (*silence in class*)
- **One student:** “*teacher, pouvez-vous traduire en français s’il vous plait ?* (Teacher, could you translate in French please ?
- **Teacher:** “*come on, guys! Je vous demande là où on s’est arrêté la dernière fois*” (...., I asked where we stopped last time).
- **Class:** (*laughs*) *me sir, me sir, me sir.....* (Classroom observation data)

This excerpt shows how students’ restricted vocabulary not only impedes their communicative skills and understandability but also drives shifts in teachers’ instructional strategies and methods. In this perspective, teacher 5 confirms that she is aware of various effective teaching methods, such as direct method, but she uses grammar translation method just to achieve the goals set for her lessons. For teachers 9 and 3, students’ level of English language proficiency oftentimes causes major shift in teaching methods. They further elaborate on respectively:

In my classes, I codeswitch or use students’ first language to support their learning because of their low language proficiency. Particularly, the beginners lack enough vocabulary words that will permit them to understand and practice English accurately. So, students’ levels are the main reasons behind our translanguaging method use in class (interview data).

We are obliged to explain the lesson sometimes in French or by using the students’ mother tongue in order to achieve the objectives of the lesson as they don’t get what we are saying if we explain the whole lesson in English. We have to switch to another language that they understand” (interview data).

In addition, the majority of the teachers hold the position that achieving the objectives of the lessons remains essential in their teaching. Teacher 5 reiterates that she uses any language that permits her students to understand the core lessons. In this vein, teacher 4 states that the emphasis is not put on speaking and listening skills but grammar lessons. He further explains:

At certain level, teachers’ global objective is the success of their students in national exams, during which oral communication skills are not assessed. In this sense, students’ effective English language practice is not the priority but their ability to succeed in exams (interview data).

Overall, the limited lexical repertoire of students affects teachers’ instructional strategies and leads to students’ reliance on other languages to participate in classroom activities. This practice negatively affects students’ oral communication skills in particular and their English productive skills in general.

2.1.3 Contextual Factors Shaping Teachers’ Vocabulary Teaching

The analysis identified various contextual factors that impede English teachers’ practice of vocabulary instruction in secondary schools in Zinder. During the interviews, the teachers first point to the insufficient time allocation and lack of appropriate teaching materials as part of the most remarkable factors. It was reported that much time and appropriate materials should be allocated in order to teach vocabulary successfully. The following perspectives are excerpted from interview data

Teacher 5: *teachers face pedagogical problems in teaching vocabulary due to lack of technological devices, which help a lot in the contemporary English language teaching classes.*

Teacher 2: *while teaching vocabulary we encounter some pedagogical issues such as learners’ lack of motivation; difficulties of pronunciation, lack of materials and lack of enough time of teaching vocabulary.*

Regarding the students’ lack of motivation raised by teacher 2, it was reported to be a noteworthy challenge that teachers face daily. Furthermore, teachers reveal that large classes and students’ low language proficiency hinder the effectiveness of their vocabulary teaching. The latter leads to a dramatic shift in pedagogical instructions as reported in the previous section. Teachers make substantial changes notably by overusing translanguaging pedagogies in classes. Regarding the large class issues, teacher 2 explicates during the interview that:

With large classes, the course is very difficult and so is the classroom management. This because some students don't follow the lesson and some may not even participate into collective repetition. They cannot use the new items into practice as they are not even motivated to learn. (Interview data)

The last but not the least factor hindering the vocabulary instruction is linked to teacher practical knowledge of vocabulary teaching. Using appropriate methods of teaching vocabulary remains challenging to secondary English teachers. Classroom observations provide evidence that the participants struggle to teach lexical items. In fact, in three out of four observed classes, there is no clear evidence on explicit vocabulary teaching. In teacher 1 classes, students were asked to copy vocabulary words coupled with their French translation in the book called: *English for the Sabel* at home. The following perspectives are excerpted from interview data:

Teacher 4: *I have problems in selecting appropriate words, engaging passive or inattentive students, managing diverse students' abilities, reviewing learned vocabulary, presenting new words to the class, using different teaching techniques and ensuring students understand words from meaning to usage in context.*

Teacher 6: *My problem deals with the Abstract vocabulary items because they are difficult to be understood by the students; the active method is very difficult since it is not everything that you can do or explain concretely.*

In summary, the identified contextual factors involve the insufficient time allocation, lack of appropriate teaching materials, learners' lack of motivation, large class issues, and students' low language proficiency. Finally, the factors also include teachers' lack of practical knowledge about vocabulary teaching.

2.2 Discussion of the Findings

The present study explored EFL teachers' perspectives on the impact of students' restricted lexical knowledge on oral communication skills in secondary schools in Zinder. It pointed out that teachers perceive lexical knowledge as indispensable for oral communication and language learning in general. First, teachers believed that lacking lexis shapes secondary school students' performance and classroom participation, and leads to the repetitions and prolongations of sounds in oral activities. This may be due to the ineffectiveness of their teaching strategies or activities that support and enrich learners' vocabulary. Therefore, fostering and putting emphasis on lexical competence is pivotal in effectively forming interactive classroom. As the present study is probably the first of its kind in Niger, this finding is essential to have ideas on how to support teachers to impart lexical knowledge effectively on secondary school students. The teachers' recognition of vocabulary role is confirmed in the study of Alshumrani (2024), which took place in Saudi Arabia. The participants demonstrated a general understanding of the basic components of word knowledge; and they perceived vocabulary as fundamental as grammar and the four language learning skills. In Iran, a study by Amini *et al.*, (2020) also echoed that vocabulary words have great influence on students' fluency, accuracy, lexical complexity and grammatical complexity.

Moreover, the present study has revealed a poor lexical knowledge as the main cause of students' shyness and hesitation during interactive classroom activities. This corroborates with the existing literature (e.g., Muliad, 2018; Mustapha *et.al*, 2018; Shahid *et.al*, 2023). This finding delineates the need of empowerment of teachers' professionalism regarding positive reinforcement and motivating learners in language classes. In addition, the study has demonstrated that the limited lexical knowledge drives English teachers into a significant shift in their teaching methods. In fact, it binds teachers to the traditional teaching methods and this may affect their professional growth. However, this finding may justify English teachers' limited pedagogical content knowledge in practice. Perceiving students' lack of knowledge as a reason to maintain traditional teaching methods makes the teachers' professionalism questionable. Probably, their few years teaching experiences may justify their stated perceptions, particularly related to the usage of whichever language that helps achieve the objectives of the lesson. These perceptions lend support to Alou's (2025) study which took place in the context of the present study, Zinder. Alou raised the worrying situation of English language teaching in secondary schools. His results revealed that the majority

of English teachers in Zinder do not receive the necessary initial training in English language teaching and 31% of them reported that they embrace teaching due to a lack of alternative career opportunities.

This study further brought to light multiple contextual factors thwarting teachers' effective vocabulary teaching. Large class size, lack of teaching materials, and teachers' inappropriate vocabulary teaching knowledge are corroborated by the existing literature (e.g., Ayesha, 2016; Yola, 2024; Adeeb, 2025). However, the issues of limited resources underlined by teachers can be indicative of their lack of creativity to make changes or stand as material designers (Ousseini & Moussa, 2023). Furthermore, the contextual factors related to students, such as their lack of motivation and low language proficiency may be due to their lack of ongoing professional training, particularly on how to motivate learners of different levels to participate in the language classroom. However, these are also found in some studies taken place in Niger, reporting that they affect secondary teachers' cognitions and classroom practices (Ousseini, 2023). Finally, the study revealed teachers' lack of practical knowledge of how to teach vocabulary effectively. This is not also surprising as the majority of country's English language teachers have not received appropriate teacher training (Alou, 2025). A study from Moussa (2025) similarly demonstrated how lack of initial teacher training affect their pedagogical content knowledge in their classroom instructions. More specifically, it affects teacher lesson planning, classroom management, and pedagogical teaching strategies in transmitting their subject-matter knowledge into understandable ways.

Conclusion

This research has yielded fathomable insights into the impact of students' restricted vocabulary knowledge on their oral communication skills in secondary schools in Zinder. The study provided insights from English teachers' perspectives and their classroom practices. Even though those participants were selected based on some criteria, discussed in the methodology section, some of them appeared to ignore how to practically teach or impart vocabulary knowledge on learners. Most of the multiple issues related to pedagogy and practices revealed by the present study showed that the teachers contribute significantly to the secondary school students' insufficient vocabulary knowledge.

Revisiting our research questions, we can affirm that our study has provided substantial answers and essential insights into teachers' perceptions, teaching strategies, contextual factors that affect their practice of vocabulary teaching. By meticulously examining the phenomenon under study and presenting the findings into three parts with each addressing one research objective, we can affirm that the objectives set forth at the outset of this study have been met.

The implications of this study go far beyond the simple understanding of real problems that exist in the Nigerien EFL context. It urgently alarms the educators, decision-makers or educational authorities to take necessary actions in order to improve the Nigerien English language teaching. Further studies related to the studied issues could expand on the understanding by adding more participants and triangulate the data collection instruments to offer more solid data. For examples, adding tools such as follow up interviews and examining lesson plans would provide more strong insights. Extending this study nationwide would also offer more generalizable findings.

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