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Grade 3 ESL teachers' (mis)conceptions about vocabulary acquisition, learning and instruction: A case study

Abstract

This paper reports on vocabulary development-related (mis)conceptions of ten purposively selected Grade 3 English Second Language teachers in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa, with a view to indexing their vocabulary pedagogical practices. The efficacy of teacher cognition on teaching practices is the theory upon which the present study, which considers vocabulary development as a proxy for literacy attainment, is based. The theory is buttressed by literature on the research-based best practices in literature development against which teachers' conceptions are measured. Semi-structured teacher interview findings showed that vocabulary instruction proceeded largely on the basis of intuitive pedagogical decisions which evince dissonance with research-based best practices. There was a

manifest disregard for both incidental and contextualised vocabulary development, and an apparent underestimation of learners' potential for independent vocabulary acquisition. Professed instructional strategies only drew learners' attention to the orthographic and phonological forms of the words at the expense of other crucial dimensions of word knowledge. The paper recommends a consideration of teachers' vocabulary development-related perceptions as a point of departure for teacher education and teacher professional development, among others.

Keywords: instructional strategies, literacy, teacher cognition, teacher (mis)conceptions, vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary development.

2.1 Introduction

Whether the currency vocabulary research has gained over the years has met with commensurate interest among teachers, merits investigation, seeing that the teacher is central to what gets implemented in the classroom. Because vocabulary development is a non-negotiable component of effective learning, due consideration should be accorded to teachers (mis)conceptions about its development. Research on the correlation between teacher cognition and teacher instructional practices is ambivalent and inconclusive, with some research showing no congruence (Sibanda 2010) and other research establishing much correlation (Li & Walsh 2011). Constraining intervening environmental variables largely explain the lack of congruence; and the present study proceeds on the premise that, given an enabling environment, teachers would teach in accordance with their beliefs and cognition. Gerami and Noordin (2013:1531) observe that teaching is gradually being conceived of within a "...wider and richer mental context than merely portraying it as proactive or interactive behaviors." The study of teacher observable behaviours oblivious of their cognition and beliefs, which prop those practices, can only be counterproductive, as teachers bring with them beliefs and cognitions into the teaching and learning space. Phipps & Borg's (2009: 388) distinction of teacher beliefs into core beliefs that are "experientially ingrained", and peripheral beliefs that are "theoretically embraced", where the former exert greater influence on behaviour than the latter, is noteworthy. It possibly explains instances where there is lack of congruence between beliefs and practices on account of the beliefs being largely peripheral, and not on account of beliefs not having the capacity to influence behaviour. The mutual interaction between teacher beliefs and pedagogical practices cannot be denied. Amiryousefi (2015) notes that teachers' investment into particular practices is largely commensurate with the belief they hold about the practice. He even posits that classroom decisions and practices can be inferred from teacher beliefs.

2.2 Theoretical Framing: Why teacher beliefs and conceptions?

Teachers' assumptions about language and language learning are the basis for a particular approach to language instruction (Kuzborska 2011). Teachers should therefore, develop theoretical orientations concomitant with, and reflective of, research-based best practices in language teaching. A correlation between teacher cognition, their pedagogical practices, and students' learning has long been established (Andrew 2003) despite manifest tensions between the two within some contexts (Philips & Borg 2009). Andersen and Krogh (2010) contend that research attests to strong or moderate relation between teachers' conceptions and their practices. According to Borg (2009:3), teacher cognitions are filters "...through which teachers interpret new information and experience" and "...may outweigh the effects of teacher education in influencing what teachers do in the classroom," exerting a persistent long-term influence on teachers' instructional practices. Borg, however, acknowledges the bi-directionality of the influence between cognition and practices.

The external behaviour of teaching is indexed by the internal behaviour of thinking. Richards (2000:66) sees teachers' maxims or philosophies of teaching as deriving from "information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions about teaching and learning over time." For Borg (2006), these maxims emanate from schooling, professional coursework, contextual factors, and classroom practice; and provide the basis for context sensitive teacher cognition on a particular subject. Andersen and Krogh (2010:62) assert that "curricular intentions (and reforms) are at risk whenever teachers' views are discordant with the underlying rationale of an innovation." Conceptions give teachers their professional identity. Dayal and Lingam (2015:3) view "...beliefs as a subset of conceptions" with the latter being an organising framework for one's understanding, and actions. Teacher cognition accounts, in part, for the differences in teachers' instructional practices even if they received similar or the same teacher education.

2.3 Problem Statement

The present study considers two important aspects of literacy development. One is teacher beliefs and cognition and their potential to influence teacher pedagogical practices, and the other is vocabulary development. Because learners' early years' language proficiency correlates with their vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary becomes a proxy for language proficiency. That the two are critical in all pedagogical practices necessitates their joint consideration. For this study, even more important than just the interrogation of teachers' conceptions, is their consciousness of the rationale for their conceptions and their ability to defend those conceptions. The disjuncture between teachers' conceptions and their practices, which some studies report, may, in part, emanate from teachers' ignorance of why they hold particular conceptions. Although conceptions and beliefs are often interchanged, for this study, being able to give reasons for one's belief is what graduates the belief into a conception, which to me, should be a conscious matter. The study therefore, sought to determine teachers' conceptions about vocabulary acquisition, learning and instruction, and the rationale for their conceptions.

2.4 Research Questions

The study is framed by two research questions namely:

- What conceptions do Grade 3 teachers hold about effective vocabulary acquisition, learning and instruction?
- How well do teachers articulate the rationale for the conceptions they hold about effective vocabulary acquisition, learning and instruction?

2.5 Justification of study

Niu and Andrews (2012: 134) observe that, despite the increase in research on second language teachers' beliefs and their pedagogical practices generally, "[R]elatively few studies, however, have examined teachers' beliefs and practices about vocabulary instruction, in spite of the central role that vocabulary acquisition plays in L2 learning, and the importance of instruction in fostering learners' vocabulary development." Rossiter, Abbott and Kushnir (2016: 2) note that "Teacher cognition studies have focused primarily on the teaching of grammar, reading, and writing" and "[l]ittle research to date, however, has been conducted on L2 vocabulary research and teacher cognition." Teacher beliefs and cognition in relation to vocabulary development has generally been under-researched and the neglect is worse within second language teaching and learning contexts. Rossiter, Abbott, & Kushnir (2016), however, note "...a revival of research interest in L2 vocabulary teaching and learning." Amiryousefi (2015) reviews the few studies that have explored teacher beliefs relating to vocabulary development and the foci for all of them has been quite diverse on account of the vocabulary field being multidimensional and extensive. Rossiter, Abbott, & Kushnir's (2016: 2) own study focused on "...adult English as a second language (ESL) teacher knowledge and beliefs, assessment of vocabulary knowledge, and L2 vocabulary teaching and learning techniques, strategies, and resources." Amiryousefi's (2015) study focused on both teachers and learners' vocabulary beliefs within an Iranian context. The present study focuses on third grade teachers' beliefs and cognitions regarding vocabulary development in a diverse context and level to those of the two studies and other available studies. There has been a conspicuous lack of research on teacher beliefs and cognitions within the South African context, particularly at the grade 3 to 4 transition, which is characterised by several challenges Sibanda (2017) aptly documents. The present study addresses that gap.

That some beliefs and cognitions are peripheral and alterable speaks to the need for their determination and where they are inconsistent with research-based best practices, teacher development can focus on their redress or reform. Those that are ingrained, persistent and defiant to redress need to be established as they are an index into teachers' pedagogical practices; knowledge of which is critical to curriculum planners and textbook and material producers. Cognisance of teachers' knowledge, beliefs and dispositions regarding vocabulary development can index their pedagogical practices and their (mis)conceptions can point to requisite remedial measures that need to be instituted within both pre-and in-service teacher education and professional development. The paper uses the term development to denote both vocabulary acquisition (incidental and unconscious) and vocabulary learning (explicit and conscious).

3.1 Literature Review

Literature for the present study seeks to present some research based best practices in vocabulary development against which teachers' beliefs and perceptions will be rated. It is important to appreciate from the onset that the field of vocabulary instruction

is riddled with dichotomies for which research evidence is ambivalent and inclusive. Examples that quickly come to mind are debates about the efficacy of implicit or explicit instruction as well as decontextualisation or contextualisation of instruction. While, for each dichotomy, the present study does not seek to impose either as 'the' right aspect, focus is on establishing the extent to which what teachers held principled positions about such dichotomous aspects.

A sound vocabulary development programme starts from the realisation of the massive vocabulary needs of learners. Nation's (2006) estimates of "8,000 to 9,000 word-family vocabulary...for comprehension of written text and a vocabulary of 6,000 to 7,000 for spoken text" within Home Language contexts is massive and as Sibanda and Baxen (2016) note, the vocabulary requirements can only be higher for second language learners. It is important to note that a single word family may comprise several lemmas which themselves contain several word tokens. The 8000 word families could easily translate to beyond 20000 word tokens, which speaks to the need for robust vocabulary instructional practices. Nation (2011) observes that despite the measurement of learner vocabulary knowledge prior to vocabulary instruction being requisite, it is a neglected practice in education systems. Without giving much context and conditions of the research, Sprenger (2013) identifies 2 to 8 words per day and 750 to 3,000 per year as the average vocabulary gains to be aimed for.

Sweeny and Mason (2011:1) led a committee that reviewed 2000 to 2010 research findings about vocabulary instruction where they established, among other things, that "... vocabulary instruction must be deliberate, include direct instruction, and in some instances involve small group interventional instruction..." seeing that struggling readers lack vocabulary to capacitate them to read enough to profit from vocabulary gains that accrue from extensive reading. Vocabulary development should necessarily be intentional. Vocabulary instruction propelled by teacher intuition and student questions will be done on a spur-of-the-moment without due consideration to the presentation, practice and reinforcement aspects.

Prior to vocabulary instruction, teachers should consider the nature of the students, the words being taught, instructional purposes, and strategies. Sweeny and Mason (2011) observe that research advocates language-rich environments in diverse contexts, forms and content areas. Vocabulary instruction should be multidimensional. In terms of word selection, Sweeny and Mason (2011) note two shifts revealed by research. First, is the shift in the use of long lists of decontextualised and disconnected words presented to, and tested on the learners, to focus on conceptual knowledge of fewer teacher and learner deliberately selected words which learners interact with in multiple and diverse ways to ensure durable learning. Word choice should focus on words most important for learners to know on the basis of some clear criteria.

Chung (2012) cites Biemiller and Boote's 2006 research as proving the superiority of contextual over non-contextual vocabulary instruction. Chung sees contextualised teaching of vocabulary even for beginners as buttressed by Carey's dated (1978) study which

...showed that children use syntactic information (i.e., sentence context or part of speech) in the mapping of word meaning. Additionally, children gain a fuller understanding of word meanings as further word exposures occur in other contexts. The mapping of new words has also been found to take place beyond concrete task contexts for children under age five (Chung 2012:109)

According to Amirian and Momeni (2012), contextualising vocabulary instruction allows word learning to transcend linguistic word knowledge to word use. Amirian and Momeni (2012) posit that decontextualising instruction is consistent with a parsimonious model of the mental lexicon where only a few words have to be learnt and where the words encode single or few meanings. That contextualisation of word meanings requires the time-consuming process of inference makes it inefficient. One may question the efficacy of contextualising vocabulary instruction to novice language users on the basis of their lack of the linguistic knowledge, world knowledge, and strategic knowledge requisite to unlock word meaning from context. The shorter the texts, the better it is to do a lexical study without overwhelming learners with novel vocabulary density and overtaxing their attention or memory (Zarei and Sepahian, 2015). Contextualisation of vocabulary instruction would suit contexts where novel words within the context are the target words, to avoid simultaneous encounter with several new words. Jordaan (2011:519) posits that “[T]he semantic processing skills that are developed during the foundation phase include: growth in conceptualization and knowledge of word formation processes as well as the increasing ability to learn new words from context, a skill known as fast-mapping (Hoff 2005).”

In terms of instructional practices, Sweeny and Mason (2011) note that current research favours cognitive skills instruction, multiple opportunities for learners to interact with words in diverse contexts, active learning strategies, frequent and repeated exposure to novel words, word walls which change with new content taught, visual representations of word meanings while avoiding rote memorisation, and limiting forced output particularly at the early stages. Multiple, purposeful word exposures in multiple modalities with spaced practice and opportunities to use newly learned words, would yield vocabulary gains. In terms of vocabulary instruction, Amirian and Momeni (2012:2305) posit an “... increasing advocacy for explicitly teaching words out of context at an early stage of language acquisition, with more context-based vocabulary learning taking place at later stages of language development.” Amirian and Momeni (2012) propose a fusion of both decontextualised and contextualised vocabulary instruction where, prior to the reading of a text, some words are isolated for individual instruction which then reduces the number of words that would need to be inferred from context in the text. The nature of the words should determine how their meanings are mediated to the learners. Zarei and Sepahian (2015:30) posit that “the traditional decontextualized memorization of vocabulary lists has now lost much of its credibility” as mastery of decontextualised word meanings may not engender communicative competence.

Zarei and Sepahian (2015) cite Hunt and Beglar (2005) who note that while phonetic features of words are best acquired (implicitly), their form and meaning is best learnt explicitly. A devotion to one at the expense of the other is not in the best interest of

vocabulary and language development. Teachers' preference for explicit vocabulary instruction is endorsed by research (Nation & Meara 2010) which confirms the greater efficacy of explicit instruction over implicit acquisition especially for the development of basic vocabulary repertoire requisite for learning. Incidental learning only plays a complementary role with implicit acquisition increasing as learners' vocabulary repertoire grows.

4.1 Methodology

4.1.1 Study sample

What was sampled were schools and all Grade 3 teachers in selected schools constituted the study sample subsequent to their informed consent. Quota sampling, a "...criterion-based selection procedure aimed at achieving representativeness but is limited to specific population subsets" (Hutchinson 2004:292), was used to segment the study population into mutually exclusive sub-groups thereby ensuring proportional representation of clusters in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Schools and districts were then purposively sampled on the basis of "...their typicality or possession of the particular characteristics being sought" (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2007: 114,115). Purposive sampling ensured district representativeness of provincial diversity and school representativeness of district diversity in quintile size (how well resourced a school was), location (rural and township). Schools selected were those:

- where the Language of Learning and Teaching in the Foundation Phase (FP) was isiXhosa (the Home Language for all teachers and most learners in the study context),
- which were functional (where learning was not hampered in a known significant way),
- without multi-grade classes, and
- that were not privileged ex-model C schools.

Although the schools used the same curriculum and the same workbooks distributed by the National Department of Education, the textbooks and other curricular materials differed as their choice was left to the schools' discretion. Within the study context, teachers were at liberty to adopt, adapt and develop own instructional approaches. Eight schools, yielding 10 Grade 3 teachers were selected, two in each of four selected Eastern Cape districts. All teachers were female, one had a Master's degree; one, a Bachelor's degree; two, Advanced Certificate in Education; and four, Teachers'

certificates; as highest qualifications. Their teaching experience in the FP ranged from twelve to twenty years which meant they had had sufficient experience to develop conceptions about vocabulary development. They are given pseudonyms for anonymity.

4.1.2 Research instrument and procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used in the investigation. These covered teachers' conceptions on a whole range of aspects ranging from vocabulary selection, vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary instruction, the language infrastructure supportive of vocabulary development, among others. The pre-determined items largely addressed the teacher conceptions part (Research question 1) with the follow-up questions emanating from the interviewee responses, largely addressing the rationale for the conceptions held (Research question 2). Items on the interview guide were followed-up on by topical trajectories. With respondents' consent, interviews were video-recorded to ensure complete and accurate data capturing. Semi-structuring interviews allowed respondents guided free expression, and standardisation of items which yielded comparable qualitative data amenable to replication.

4.1.3 Data analysis and study limitations

Interviews were transcribed and initially coded using words or short phrases before similar descriptors were assigned a code which enabled comparison across teacher interview transcripts. The interview guide itself was some form of data categorisation. After two cycles of meticulous coding to detect the salient and relevant features of the data, themes were organised on the basis of code similarity. Although coding was through individual words and phrases, significant respondents' quotes were highlighted and incorporated into results presentation as illustrative examples.

Seeing that the study sample was small, structured interviews were solely used implying no triangulation with data from other instruments like the questionnaire which could have taken on a much larger sample. Generalisation was therefore, to type of context than to the generality of the teaching population of the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

5.1. Results

Interview data are presented under the themes; *Teacher pedagogical choices, English vocabulary exposure and rate of acquisition, perceived pedagogical practices, and perceptions on the role of the outside world and the L1 in learner vocabulary development*, each with attendant sub-themes.

5.1.1 Teachers' Pedagogical Choices

This theme covered vocabulary-related instructional decisions teachers made and has its basis on interview items on whether vocabulary instruction should focus on decontextualised word lists or words in context, the source of vocabulary accorded explicit attention, the criteria for determining word novelty, and the dimension of word knowledge that merited privileged attention.

5.1.1.1 *Teaching isolated words in word lists or teaching words in context*

On their preference for isolated or contextualised vocabulary instruction, seven teachers (Alice, Betty, Christine, Esther, Florence, Dorothy and Kate) preferred teaching a list of words in isolation than teaching words in context. For Dorothy, her practice was to “... *write lists of words and teach them*” and Kate identified “...*the sight words and the phonic words*” as meriting prioritisation in vocabulary instruction. On the contrary, Henrietta, like Gladys, claimed to attend to novel English words “[A]s I meet them in the text.” Jane professed to employ both instructional practices with greater propensity towards teaching words in isolation when she said; “[I] *teach the new words when I encounter them in a text but most times I also teach word lists.*”

From follow-up questions, decontextualised word instruction was premised on the ease with which learners would match words with meanings without using inferences. Contextualisation was seen as confusing to beginner learners owing to the fluidity of word meanings accorded by context. Ironically, word meaning fluidity used to discredit vocabulary contextualisation was also used by Henrietta to argue for contextualisation. The contention was also on the extent to which Grade 3 ESL learners could be trusted with both denotative and connotative word meanings that word in context instruction required. Overall, there was greater preference for teaching words in isolation rather than in context among the teachers.

5.1.1.2 *Source of vocabulary taught*

All teachers identified learners' books as the source of vocabulary taught to learners. Textbook reliance was justified on the basis that the textbook encapsulated the curriculum to be taught which learners needed to understand and they had the word lists ready. Henrietta and Kate were specific about drawing novel vocabulary from stories in learners' books. While Henrietta focused on repeated words in the stories as meriting attention, Kate's focus was “*the list of sight words*” on the stories at the end of the books. Even Dorothy's identified classroom objects as the vocabulary source, was over and above the textbook. Florence initially appeared the exception to textbook reliance for novel vocabulary, viewing learners as the source of novel English vocabulary since they knew words whose meanings they were ignorant about. Further probing, however, indicated that she encouraged learners to identify novel words from their books.

5.1.1.3 Determination of word novelty

Determination of word novelty in order to accord instructional priority to unknown vocabulary, was largely intuitive as reflected in responses like:

“You look at how difficult the word is. You can tell easily that learners don’t know this word (Alice); “I know what is supposed to be taught in grade 2 because I was a grade 2 teacher” (Christine); “I look at how difficult the word is” (Betty); and “Sometimes as a teacher you know your children and their levels, so you can tell” (Gladys).

Alice’s determination was based on word form which, upon follow-up, she could not specify as word length, number of consecutive consonants, number of syllables or some other criteria, rendering her reason intuitive. Christine’s intuition derived from her teaching experience in the preceding grade which would give her the intuitive feel of what words learners would not have acquired in the previous grade. Betty’s intuition rested on a word’s orthographic make up which, she however, could also not explain. Gladys’ feel for word novelty was based on her familiarity with learners and their proficiency levels. Intuition took precedence over any objective criteria in word novelty determination.

The other teachers relegated the determination of word novelty to textbooks which, for Henrietta, *“... indicated that these are new words to be learnt.”* For Dorothy, *“[T]he books have the words stage by stage so the chapters, the units we have not done, the children do not know the new words listed there,”* and for Kate *“[N]ew words in their books are written in bold”*. The manifest reliance on textbooks was tantamount to teachers’ ceding pedagogical decisions to textbooks.

Florence and Jane devolved word novelty determination to learners as reflected in their responses; *“I ask them which words they don’t know if we are doing a passage and they tell me,”* and *“I ask them to identify some new words,”* respectively. Florence’s earlier identification of learners as sources of new vocabulary was consistent with her justification that only learners knew what they did not know. Esther’s response, *“[I]f I have not taught it then I can say it is a new word”* betrayed the assumption that the teacher was the repository of vocabulary knowledge.

Four teachers based word novelty on intuition, three on what textbooks dictated as novel, two on learners’ discretion, and one on not having taught the word.

5.1.1.4 Dimension of word knowledge most privileged by teachers

The multi-dimensionality of word knowledge necessitated determination of word knowledge aspects teachers regarded as meriting prominence and pre-eminence in instruction. Respondents were allowed to identify more than one aspect. For Alice it was word meaning; for Betty, word meaning, reading and spelling; for Christine, saying a word, reading and spelling a word; for Dorothy, word meaning and word writing; for Esther and Gladys, word spelling and word meaning; for Jane, word meaning, word

writing and word saying; and for Henrietta, word meaning, word writing and word saying. Florence and Kate refused to identify any word aspects as most critical, Florence claiming relativity to words concerned and Kate claiming relativity to learners.

The five word aspects identified as most critical by the eight respondents in order of frequency with which they were identified were; word meaning (7), word writing (4), word saying (3), word spelling (3), and word reading (2). Word meaning, accorded greatest prominence, was mentioned first in five of the seven times buttressing the priority accorded it.

5.1.1.5 Perceived learner competence on particular aspects of word

In response to the aspect of word knowledge learners did not find problematic and one they struggled with, only Kate and Christine argued that the response to the item was relative. Consistent with her view on the previous item, Kate indicated that *“it depends on the learner”* whereas for Christine, *“[S]ome words something is easy, other words another thing is easy.”* Of the other eight, all but Alice and Esther identified word writing as problematic for learners with Esther actually identifying writing and spelling as easy word knowledge aspects for learners to demonstrate. This, despite her acknowledgement of the orthographic challenges of writing when she said, *“...when I say ‘kick’ they can write ‘keak.’* Florence’s noted orthographic challenge was the writing of words like *“...‘book’ because in Grade 3 they are not yet ready to do that double o.”*

Word use was identified as the next most problematic aspect of word knowledge being identified by Jane, Gladys and Henrietta. That writing and word use were considered particularly problematic shows the greater complexity of productive (active) aspects of word knowledge over the receptive (passive) aspects. According to Gladys, *“Sometimes they know the word but they do not know how to write it or use it,”* a case of passive oral vocabulary not translating into productive written vocabulary. Only Alice identified pronunciation as a challenge which she attributed to L1 interference.

Least problematic aspects identified were; word meaning (Dorothy), word spelling (Esther), and word reading (Jane). For Dorothy meaning was easy because *“... they know the meaning of sleep (mimes sleeping), but it’s not easy to write correctly.”* This observation underscored the challenges of word testing where word meaning knowledge may be one thing and demonstrating that knowledge, quite another. With this background, respondents were asked to estimate the weekly English vocabulary exposure and acquisition in the Grade 3 EFAL classroom.

5.1.2 English words exposure and rate of acquisition

Estimations of novel English vocabulary exposure and acquisition was based on the EFAL lessons respondents taught.

5.1.1.1 Perceived rate of exposure to new English words

Word exposure determines word acquisition. Exposure to English vocabulary should by far surpass the requisite vocabulary seeing that not all words learners encounter become part of their repertoire. Estimates of new word exposure determines the extent to which Grade 3 EFAL lessons potentially contributed to learners' word acquisition from mere exposure.

Four teachers were reluctant to commit themselves to an actual word estimate despite the researcher's insistence on a mere estimate. Christine and Henrietta's excuses that they do not count the words, Jane's "[I] really don't know" and Kate's "a lot of words" were all non-committal strategies.

For the other six, weekly word estimates ranged from Dorothy's "not more than ten" to Esther's "50 words" with Alice and Florence's estimates being at least 20 words, and Betty and Gladys' ranging from 20 to 30. The general average estimate from the 6 teachers were in the twenties per week. For a 10 week learning term for four terms, a 20-30 words per week range would lead to new English word exposure of 800-1200 words in the Grade 3 EFAL class. The acquisition figure would still fall way below the exposure figure and hardly meet learners' vocabulary needs for Grade 4 reading challenges.

Esther attributed the 50-word weekly novel word exposure to capitalisation on teachable or opportunistic moments. She said, "[I] can say 50 words because even if they are talking on their own and I hear something wrong I will come up and deal with the word." The assumption was that learners used English in their interactions. Florence gave credit to her reading corner for the +20 new word exposures per week; an acknowledgement of the role of the literate classroom environment and that of extensive independent reading in incidental vocabulary exposure and acquisition.

In her refusal to commit to a word estimate, Jane betrayed her reservations about non-English teachers' capability to expose learners to much novel English vocabulary. She said, "[I] really don't know...now we have got Mrs Smith (a Rotary club volunteer. Not her real name). I think she will do a good job in teaching English because she is an English speaker. She speaks English right through." Scarce learner exposure to English was caused by teachers reverting much to the L1 in the EFAL. Jane's observation was corroborated by Dorothy's "[E]ven when we announce in the lines 'let us try to speak English', they don't always use it."

5.1.1.2 Perceived rate of acquisition of new English words

Respondents' approximations of average learners' weekly word acquisitions ranged from 5 to 50. Esther's 50 word estimate was unrealistic, having identified the same figure for the weekly vocabulary exposure as if input equalled intake for her average learners. Filtering occurs at each level from input (what learners are exposed to) to uptake (what they can attend to) and to intake (what they eventually master). Florence

also thought that all her learners except 5 would master the at least 20 new English words she estimated as the novel word exposures in the EFAL class. Alice and Dorothy thought their average learners could potentially acquire half the new words exposed to them with Betty putting the proportion at between 60% and 70% of her 20 to 30 words. Generally, respondents were confident of average learners' mastery of over half of the novel vocabulary exposed.

The Department of Basic Education's Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) (2011) stipulates the ideal of a learner understanding 700–1 000 words in context by the end of Grade 1; 1 000–2 000 words by end of Grade 2; and 1 500–2 500 words by end of Grade 3. Learners should add at least 1 000 words to their vocabulary repertoire in Grade 3, provided they came from Grade 2 with at least 1 000 words. The estimated weekly word acquisitions would not suffice to meet these minimum curriculum requirements.

Jane, Henrietta and Kate refused to commit to weekly word acquisition estimates noting that focus for them was on the learners' Home Language. There seemed to be no deliberate quantification of learners' word gains in relation to curriculum vocabulary targets.

5.2 The role of the outside world and that of the L1 in vocabulary development

5.2.1 Perceived role of the outside world in learners' English vocabulary acquisition

The 'outside world' was explained to respondents as anything outside the classroom, even within the school, which contributed to learners' vocabulary gains. On whether learners potentially acquired new English vocabulary outside the classroom environment, the answer was unanimously affirmative, differing only in the confidence with which the affirmations were made and the basis upon which the confidence, or lack of it, rested.

Gladys, Henrietta and Kate's affirmations were punctuated with reservations expressed thus; "[T]hey learn a few other words in the school with friends and older kids. At home, I doubt" (Gladys); "Maybe ... only a few words. Sometimes no one is assisting them. They (children) see a lot of TV. For Gladys, modest vocabulary gains were possible within the school environment but doubtful at home. For Kate, although parental help and support was lacking, the television was an important source of vocabulary exposure for learners. Henrietta could not qualify her 'not many words' reservation despite probing.

Dorothy's "Some learners have other sources, like some father is a police, mother is a nurse" is an acknowledgement of the home's influence being relative to parental occupational status (and their implied educational level). Florence's affirmation of the

outside world's contribution to vocabulary acquisition was based on learners coming up with novel words never encountered in EFAL lessons as in her learner who asked, "Miss what is a virgin?" For Catherine, the outside world merely reinforced classroom discourses because according to her "...when I teach ... and then they see stop signs, they know that in class we were taught about the road signs." Alice and Jane did not qualify their confirmation of vocabulary gains outside the classroom. Sources of vocabulary exposure external to the classroom were identified as *newspapers* (Betty and Dorothy, Betty added *magazines*), *road signs* (Christine), *televisions* (Kate), and *friends and older kids* (Gladys). Both print and electronic media, as well as environmental print, were considered major sources.

5.2.2 Perceived role of the L1 in learners' English vocabulary development

On isiXhosa's role in English vocabulary development, four respondents perceived it as facilitative; four, as constraining; and the other two, as ambivalent. For Alice, Dorothy, Esther and Henrietta, the L1 enhanced L2 vocabulary learning since:

- *You need to code switch so that children know a word in Xhosa and English* (Alice).
- *Our children are young and you have to use Xhosa for them to understand* (Dorothy).
- *Sometimes I translate the meanings of words and they understand* (Esther).
- *In grade 3 you have to tell children what the English words mean in Xhosa* (Henrietta).

The role of isiXhosa was seen as complementary to that of English and indispensable in the EFAL classroom at Grade 3 level. Those who perceived the role of isiXhosa as constraining the development of English vocabulary noted that:

- *... the two languages are different and you find children spelling words the Xhosa way* (Betty).
- *If we used English throughout our learners would learn English faster but because we don't they are behind* (Florence).
- *Teachers who use English only, their children speak English best* (Gladys).
- *IsiXhosa disturbs our children's English. They read English words as if they are reading isiXhosa words* (Jane).

For Florence and Gladys, the English only route expedites English vocabulary development. Betty saw the orthographic difference and distance between the languages causing interference which constrained target language vocabulary development; a view Jane shared. The ambivalent role of the L1 in L2 vocabulary acquisition was portrayed in Christine's and Kate's:

- *Sometimes it helps, sometimes it doesn't. It helps when you say the meaning of a word in Xhosa like elephant/indlovu. It doesn't help when learners confuse the pronunciation of English and Xhosa words (Christine).*
- *It depends. For meaning, it is good because you just give a word in Xhosa and they understand. For writing, it confuses them (Kate).*

The influence of the L1 was deemed positive in the word meaning aspect and negative in the phonological and orthographic aspects.

5.2.3 Teachers' perceptions of effective pedagogical practices related to vocabulary development.

This theme relates to whether vocabulary development needed explicit instruction or implicit acquisition, as well as the vocabulary pedagogical strategies teachers used and had faith in.

5.2.3.1 Explicit instruction or implicit acquisition

As for whether they believed Grade 3 ESL learners' vocabulary needs could best be served by explicit instruction or incidental exposure, seven respondents advocated explicit instruction, three preferred the employment of both, and none was exclusively for incidental acquisition. One can surmise that the respondents occasionally set aside time for direct word teaching from their unanimous acknowledgement of the role of explicit vocabulary instruction in learners' vocabulary development. They only differed in their perception of the role of incidental vocabulary acquisition. The following verbatim responses attest to the prominence given to explicit vocabulary teaching:

- *We have to teach the new words directly (Alice).*
- *We use direct teaching because they cannot read and learn other words from reading (Betty).*
- *You have to teach them the words directly for them to understand (Dorothy).*

- *Direct teaching is the way to go (Gladys).*
- *How can such young children be expected to learn words on their own? (Henrietta).*
- *We teach directly so they know (Jane).*
- *If you do not teach them directly, how will they know? They come to school to learn because they don't know (Kate).*

Justifications for explicit instruction preference were diverse and provided an index to teacher conceptions and attitudes. Alice, Henrietta and Kate doubted learners' potential to acquire new vocabulary independent from the teacher. Although for Kate and Henrietta, such perception of learners' capability was consistent with their earlier reservation about the potential of learners acquiring novel vocabulary beyond the classroom; for Alice, her earlier affirmation of learners' capacity to pick new English vocabulary outside the classroom (where there is no explicit teaching) contrasted with her dismissal of incidental vocabulary acquisition strategies in the classroom. Kate's response betrayed a misconception of learners as blank slates, the teacher as the repository of knowledge, and teaching as a telling process. Henrietta's response, was however, not wholly dismissive of incidental teaching strategies, but indicative of their impracticality at the learners' level (which implied their limited experience with the language not chronological maturity).

The three teachers who indicated the need for the deployment of both explicit and implicit vocabulary development strategies proffered the following arguments:

- *There are too many words to know and you can't teach them all. From reading a lot they can learn more words (Christine).*
- *You have to use both. Sometimes you teach the words, sometimes you let children read and get the meanings themselves (Esther).*
- *We can't teach all the words. Some words they have to learn on their own. Sometimes you give them a list of words to go and find out their meanings (Florence).*

Christine and Florence justified the need for both approaches on the extensive vocabulary repertoire learners should possess. Christine and Esther only identified reading as the source of incidental vocabulary acquisition. Florence betrayed a misconception of what indirect or implicit vocabulary acquisition entailed by equating learners' individual but deliberate focus on word meanings for given words with incidental vocabulary acquisition.

On whether the three teachers mediated incidental vocabulary acquisition, Christine and Esther did not see the need when they said: *[W]hy should I do anything? That will be direct teaching and for indirect learning, they should do it themselves.* Florence further

endorsed her earlier misconception by saying, [Y]es. *I give them the vocabulary and then they work on their own.* It was evident from these probes that the concept of incidental vocabulary acquisition was not well understood, with some seeing it as synonymous to individual work not mediated by the teacher and one seeing it as some form of vocabulary homework. Having established teachers' preference for explicit vocabulary instruction, teachers were asked about their preferred instructional practices.

5.2.3.2 Professed vocabulary instructional practices

Esther

Esther represented her typical vocabulary teaching strategies saying;

I write words on the chalkboard then I drill them...then I allow them (learners) to spell them. If it is English, they spell other words in Xhosa. It will be easy for them to catch up. For example, if we deal with the letter 'b' for 'bus' I can't say they must spell it using 'ba' in isiXhosa. The word 'bus' they are going to spell it using 'b' unlike the letter 'c' in the word 'car'. We also use flash cards. I start teaching them the word on the chalkboard, then using flashcards. Phonics is important to learn English vocabulary starting with how to pronounce the vowels, how to pronounce the consonants and also writing words for learners to see.

According to Esther, words have to be seen first to be known or learnt, that is why her point of departure is writing the words down. She also believes in the power of repeated practice (drill) for word acquisition. The orthographic and phonological identity of a word is prioritised hence the focus on spellings and phonics. She also believes words should be spelt in the way that would ease their verbalization be it the 'a, ba,' or a b c d way. This, for her, entails importing the isiXhosa sound system to the spelling of some English words. She also acknowledges exceptions to the practice. Representation of words in multiple formats (chalkboard, flash cards and charts) increases learners' encounter with them and makes them proficient in reading. Knowledge of words, taught in isolation, would translate to ability to read any passages.

Florence

In response to strategies she found effective with her class, Florence said,

I put a picture first so that they must first look at the picture and they understand the picture after that it's easy for them to know what is in the picture...I pick up the key words in the comprehension and I write the key words on the board and I drill them first before we read it."

Pictorial representation was prominent in her vocabulary development practices. The assumption was that oral picture discussion led to learning other word aspects. Because pictures were preferred, concrete vocabulary needed prioritisation since it lent itself to pictorial representation. She evidently preferred taking the most active

role from the selection of words, writing them on the board and drilling them. She also believed in having words first learnt in isolation before being encountered in context.

Alice

Alice's said of her own practice;

We start with sound. In fact I like to start from the known to the unknown. ... then come up with sounds then construct a word from the sounds and then the words get bigger, then the meaning, the spelling of that word, and how to start a sentence.

Alice posited a linear progression in vocabulary development from the phonological, orthographic, semantic and ultimately the discourse dimensions. Word constituted the basis of word learning and word use in sentences. There was also a manifest assumption that word length equaled word complexity and progression was supposed to be from smaller words to bigger words.

Dorothy

Dorothy's concise description of her strategies was;

"I use flash cards, writing on the board or even write on the ground using chalk, or close your eyes spell the word 'sleep'.

For her, vocabulary development revolved around learner word visualisation and reading, word writing, and word spelling. The idea of learners spelling words with eyes closed according to her allowed for total concentration and ensured that learners did not refer to the board if the word still appeared there.

Betty

Betty saw her vocabulary teaching strategies thus:

If we say 'girl', we write on the board so they can see how it is written. I try to use pictures for some things like aeroplane.

Betty viewed learners as highly visually oriented which explains her professed use of instructional media and her view of the role of pictures in vocabulary development.

Gladys

Gladys described her vocabulary teaching practices in one statement thus, *'They read the words and learn to spell then talk about their meanings.'* She claimed reliance on that pattern which she had seen working over the years; an indication of her conservatism. She assumed a one-size fits all approach where the same strategy suited all words

in all contexts for all learners. Although she did not identify the actual strategies, Gladys' claimed progression from word reading to spelling to word meaning. That her description of the three activities is from learners' perspective suggests learners' active role in vocabulary learning. Arriving at word meanings is considered a collaborative enterprise. That the three activities defining Gladys' practices are all oral suggests the prominence she gave to the oral dimension of word knowledge in relation to the written. This, notwithstanding her earlier identification of word writing, word meaning and word verbalisation as being key word knowledge dimensions learners need to develop proficiency in.

Jane

Jane described her vocabulary instructional practices thus;

I ask them to identify some new words and then we discuss and explain the meaning of words. I write those words on the board and we read those words together and I ask if there is anyone who knows their meanings and if no one knows the meaning I tell them myself. You have to do a lot of code switching.

From her description, one infers learners' active role in their vocabulary development from the initiative accorded them to provide word meanings with the teacher coming in as a last resort. The word learning process is viewed as collaborative involving negotiation, rather than mere exposition, of word meaning. Reference to the need for code switching affirms her assumptions about the complementary role of the L1 to L2 learning. The word-meaning and word-writing she identifies are consonant with her earlier identification of these as word aspects meriting prioritization.

Kate

Kate's typical vocabulary practices are captured in her response:

You must have flash cards for sight words. We must stress phonics. You must read the word for children, then they must read after you, then read alone, they must read individually.

Kate accords greater prominence to the phonic approach without undermining sight word reading. Although flash cards are acknowledged as indispensable to the mediation of sight words, reading is largely seen as a matter of decoding words. There is also recognition of the need for a gradual release of responsibility in word reading where the teacher initially reads for learners, then reads together with them before ceding full responsibility of word reading to the learners. Teacher modeling is seen as facilitative of learner reading.

Christine

Christine's professed vocabulary teaching strategies are,

When I teach, I start from the work they have done previous year so that they know how to adjust to the new... I use phonics so they know the words, the sound of the words and how to write the word so that they can form simple sentences. I write the words and put them on the wall so that they read the words. Every day, they must read so that they are familiar with the words. Learners are not the same so I have to put them in groups."

The phonic approach is prioritised, learner diversity acknowledged, as is the need for small group tutoring. Display of words and drawing attention to them as well as repeated reading are viewed as pivotal to word familiarity and word knowledge. Typical vocabulary instruction activities followed the pattern; word sound to word writing, word writing to word use in sentences, and then daily word reading, and word reading group activities.

Henrietta

Henrietta envisaged her own practice by saying;

I write words on the flash cards, put them on the wall so that they [learners] can read them over and over. I read them stories sometimes. They can take the flash cards and read on their own helping each other.

The efficacy of repeated word reading in word learning and the value of story reading is acknowledged as is peer collaboration. Flash cards are considered a key vocabulary teaching resource.

6.1 Discussion of findings

Intuition and the textbook played pivotal roles in teachers' choices and pedagogical practices related to vocabulary development. Choice of words to teach was largely intuitive and not guided by sound specific criteria like the words' utility, high frequency status, the extent to which their unfamiliarity compromised textual comprehension, their relation to what learners know or have covered, the likelihood of their appearance in future texts, their constitution of a semantic network or a word family, concreteness, depth of meaning, among other considerations (Sibanda and Baxen, 2016). Lack of conscious word choice negatively impacts institution of conscious instructional strategies. The nature of the words, of the subject matter, and of learners and their vocabulary needs, needed to be considered in vocabulary selection and instruction. Even decisions about how many words to teach in a particular lesson were not conscious ones.

Unanimous reliance on textbooks as the sole vocabulary source was symptomatic of respondents' ignorance of other available sources like high frequency word lists, whose knowledge would ease mastery of the less common words from context. Even the word list in the Grade 3 EFAL CAPS (2011) documents was not referred to.

Most of the identified instructional strategies drew learners' attention to word forms (orthographic or phonological) and to some extent, their referents. Word consciousness activities were prioritised and instruction in word learning strategies (Chung, 2012), which could have made the learners independent learners were conspicuously absent.

In terms of word exposure, teachers doubted learners' capacity to profit from incidental vocabulary acquisition and those who affirmed the place of incidental acquisition in vocabulary development restricted it to extensive reading. The preference for English only by some teachers was a call for subtractive bilingualism which is counter-productive. What needs advocacy is the judicious use of the L1 to complement the target language and not supplant it. By making a form-meaning linkage through translation, one allows cognitive resources to be focused on form which expedites both vocabulary and linguistic acquisition. The role of the L1 in L2 development should gradually diminish as learners develop more proficiency in the L2.

The reviewed literature, which is more in favour of contextualisation of instruction than decontextualisation (Amirian & Momeni 2012; Chung 2012; Jordaan 2011; Zarei & Sepahian 2015), was inconsistent with teachers' greater propensity for decontextualised word instruction. This is despite Jordaan's (2011) observation, reviewed earlier, showing that even Foundation Phase learners are capable of fast-mapping, which learning words from their contextual use. Both teachers and learners therefore, forfeited the chance to extend word knowledge beyond the linguistic dimension (Amirian & Momeni 2012). Zarei and Sepahian's (2015) assumption that decontextualised instruction had fallen out of favour was challenged by teachers' preference for it.

Current research in favour of explicit vocabulary instruction (Amirian & Momeni 2012, Nation & Meara 2010) was pleasantly in tandem with the teachers' general conception. Although in the literature review Zarei and Sepahian (2015) observe the consonance of implicit acquisition on phonetic features of word aspects and the efficacy of explicit instruction on word meanings, the teachers, who were largely pro-explicit instruction had their practices based, largely on the phonetic and formal aspects of words rather than on word meanings in their professed pedagogical practices.

7.1 Conclusion

Findings show an apparent preference for decontextualisation of vocabulary instruction over contextualised instruction. The role of the learners' books also came through as key in the EFAL vocabulary instruction with word meaning, word writing, word saying, word spelling, and word reading regarded as pivotal to the teaching of word lists derived from learners' books. Determination of word novelty was either intuitive or left to the textbook and teachers could hardly justify their determination of word novelty. The role of learners is peripherally acknowledged and is largely overshadowed by the teacher who decides new words, sources to consult and what is done with the words. While word meaning was

identified by the majority of teachers as meriting top priority, word writing was considered the most problematic by most teachers. Teachers' responses revealed the ambivalence of the role of the L1 in L2 acquisition as well as that of the world outside the classroom in that acquisition. Vocabulary development was perceived as proceeding through explicit instruction rather than implicit acquisition. Estimates of vocabulary acquisitions by the teachers fell short of the curriculum targets and the professed pedagogical practices of the teachers were both limited and limiting, being confined to strategies for drawing learners' attention to novel words, which only impacted the word recognition dimension. Research question 1 sought to establish teachers' conceptions and findings pointed to much divergence of conceptions in terms of source of vocabulary taught, determination of word novelty, learner competence on particular aspects of word, rate of exposure to, and acquisition of, new English words, role of the L1 in vocabulary development and professed instructional practices. There was, however, greater convergence in conceptions related to decontextualised instruction, role of the outside world in learners' vocabulary acquisition, and explicit instruction. The second research question sought to establish the extent to which teachers could justify their conceptions on these aspects related to vocabulary development and findings pointed to most decisions being either intuitive or based on textbook prescriptions. What was the greater challenge was not teachers' conceptions largely being inconsistent with research-based best practices, but that they could hardly justify their choices and professed practices.

8.1 Recommendations

Teachers' perceptions regarding learners' vocabulary development have far reaching effects on their pedagogical practices and as such should be considered as a basis for vocabulary and literacy-related professional development and teacher education programmes. There is need for commitment to vocabulary targets set by the curriculum and work systematically towards attaining them. A situation where teachers profess preference for explicit vocabulary instruction when they cannot estimate explicit weekly vocabulary exposure is itself, a contradiction. Seeing that the textbook plays a critical role in what words would be privileged for instruction, how they will be taught and the rate of exposure to new English words, there is need for research on how textbooks mediate vocabulary development. There is also need for textbook writers to be deliberate about vocabulary development since the pervading influence of the textbook on what happens in the classroom is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

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