



The Alignment of Learning Objectives and the Teaching of Vocabulary

Wong Ming Har Ruth

The Education University of Hong Kong

Introduction

The role and importance of beliefs have been of great interest for many scholars from diverse disciplines. Beliefs are defined as “psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true” (Richardson, 1996, p. 103) and act as strong filters of reality (Arnold, 1999). In other words, it is what teachers believe will subsequently influence how they plan a lesson and execute it. If pedagogy is applied skillfully, it is a key part of a teacher’s toolkit and useful for stimulating student thinking, constructing knowledge, and connecting students’ prior knowledge and experience (Farrell & Lim, 2005). In this regard, teachers’ beliefs show their importance when practitioners bring their beliefs, information, attitudes, values, theories and assumptions, which they have built up over time, as classroom practices. Results opposite to the above claims, however, were found by Zacharias (2005). In his study of eight reading teachers, he found that only four out of eight put their beliefs into practice and that some TESL teachers in Singapore did not pay attention to the role of grammar in their classes, which they considered as significant. In other words, the connection and interaction between teachers’ beliefs and their classroom practice does not always develop. Because there has been little research performed on the relationship between teacher’s beliefs on vocabulary learning and its impact on language learning, there are still many questions yet to be answered. This report will serve the purpose of beginning to fill the research gap.

Vocabulary Teaching and Learning

The fundamental knowledge base of effective vocabulary teaching and learning includes the extensive body of research on vocabulary instruction methods and the process of language acquisition. This knowledge base also includes the current understanding of issues and constraints of literacy instruction in language classrooms (Arnott & Mady, 2013). Research in the past has increased the depth of understanding issues related to vocabulary, including the nature of word knowledge, pedagogy for developing vocabulary acquisition, and the complex issues between vocabulary and comprehension (Fernandes, Querido, Verhaeghe, Marques, & Araújo, 2017).

Research has also shed light upon effective instructional practices for teaching vocabulary. In older studies such as Krashen (1985) and Ellis (1994), Krashen claimed that “conscious learning” does not make any major contribution to competence and did not devalue direct teaching through involving learners in non-anxiety-provoking communication activities. On the other hand, Ellis (1994) reviewed



fifteen empirical studies which compared the effectiveness of instruction and exposure with the rate and success of L2 acquisition. The disparity of the results suggested, however, that there is no clear evidence to show the superiority of instruction over exposure or vice versa. He further alleged that explicit teaching can also contribute to incidental learning. Recent studies still hold arguments for and against the explicit teaching of vocabulary. Seyyed and Fatemeh (2017) suggested that EFL learners receiving explicit teaching-learning learnt much more vocabulary than the implicit teaching-learning of vocabulary. However, Al-Darayseh (2014) found that using a combination of explicit and implicit vocabulary strategies resulted in increasing students' vocabulary size, and hence improving their reading comprehension skills.

Research Questions

In exploring the issues between vocabulary teaching and learning, three research questions are to be examined.

1. Do English teachers teach vocabulary in English lessons? Is teaching vocabulary a necessary step for each English lesson?
2. Why do English teachers teach vocabulary?
3. If teachers include vocabulary as part of the lesson, to what extent do students understand the intended learning objectives of the lessons?

Method

Design

This study adopted qualitative paradigm principles which help to capture the fluidity of an English teacher's classroom style. The researcher conducted two lesson observations from each participating teacher. The total number of participant teachers was eight. Each teacher would submit a lesson plan before each lesson observation. All lesson observations were followed by a stimulated teacher recall interview (SRI) and post-lesson student interviews. The number of students interviewed after each lesson observation was three.

Participants

The researcher adopted convenience sampling in two secondary schools. She then sent an invitation email that explained the purpose of the study to all English teachers of the two secondary schools. Eight out of 29 addressees responded and expressed an interest in taking part in the study. The researcher then collaborated with these eight English teachers for the duration of the study and observed two lessons from each teacher in order to observe consistency in teaching style. Before each lesson observation, each teacher was asked to select students for the post-lesson interviews because of their familiarity with each student's English proficiency. Each student was interviewed only once. The number of students that were interviewed was 3, and their English proficiency varied (low, medium and high).

Procedures

Each researched lesson (40-minutes in length) was video-recorded, during which time the researcher took notes. Each teacher sent a lesson plan to the researcher in advance to understand the intended

learning objectives and for future analysis. The time between each observed lesson was approximately one month. The participating teacher was asked to reiterate the learning objectives in order to compare with the intended learning objectives of the lesson plans through SRIs, during which the researcher replayed the recorded lessons that the teacher had just finished. The teacher then took the initiative to pause the recording and recall what she was thinking at that point during the lesson. The researcher could also pause the video at any time and ask the teacher what she was thinking at that point. Simultaneously, a research assistant gave semi-structured interviews to the randomly chosen students, who were asked to recall the learning objectives of the lesson or itemize what was taught in the lesson.

Data Analysis

All SRIs and student interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue. All interviews were audio-recorded, and then transcribed and translated into English by a research assistant. All analyses followed the thematic approach in order to discover overarching themes that might emerge from the data.

Results

RQ 1: Do all English teachers teach vocabulary in English lessons?

Results showed that all teachers taught vocabulary in the 16 lesson observations. The amount of time spent on teaching vocabulary ranged from 9-28 minutes out of 40 minutes (22.5% - 70%) regardless of the lesson focus.

TABLE 1
Frequency and Time Teachers Spent on Teaching Vocabulary

<i>Teacher (lesson)</i>	<i>Lesson focus</i>	<i>Frequency of teaching vocabulary in lesson</i>	<i>Total time spent on teaching vocabulary</i>	<i>Percentage of total class time</i>
1(1)	Listening exercise	6	20 mins	50%
1(2)	Writing diary	12	10 mins	25%
2(1)	Designing an outfit	4	11 mins	27.5%
2(2)	Grammar	24	12 mins	30%
3(1)	Reading – photo caption	18	28 mins	70%
3(2)	Writing – photo caption	15	10 mins	25%
4(1)	Discussion on an itinerary	6	9 mins	22.5%
4(2)	Informal letter writing	10	9 mins	22.5%
5(1)	Group discussion	8	11 mins	27.5%
5(2)	Reading newspaper article	20	22 mins	55%
6(1)	Discussion on Chinese cuisine	12	11 mins	27.5%
6(2)	Reading comprehension	32	25 mins	62.5%
7(1)	Listening to news report	10	20 mins	50%
7(2)	Grammar	12	15 mins	37.5%
8(1)	Discussion on traveling tips	10	10 mins	25%
8(2)	Watching travel & living channel	4	11 mins	27.5%

RQ 2: Why do the English teachers teach vocabulary?

To look further into why teachers teach vocabulary, Table 2 summarizes the details of each lesson. Table 2 shows that the reasons for teaching vocabulary across different teachers were similar. For listening, the main reasons for teaching vocabulary were to activate student schemata on vocabulary about certain topics, to introduce vocabulary which would appear in the listening components and through incidental vocabulary teaching. The frequency of incidental vocabulary teaching was relatively high.

TABLE 2
Summary of Lesson Details

<i>Lesson focus- listening</i>	<i>Frequency of teaching vocabulary</i>	<i>Purposes of teaching vocabulary# (x times)</i>
textbook	6	a(1); b(3); c(2)
news reports	10	d(1); c(1); e(8)
watching travel & living channel	4	d(1); c(1); e(2)
<i>Lesson focus- writing</i>	<i>Frequency of teaching vocabulary</i>	<i>Purposes of teaching vocabulary</i>
diary	12	b(1); a(1); f(10)
designing an outfit	4	a(1); f(3)
photo caption	15	b(1); a(1); f(13)
informal letter	10	b(1); a(1); f(8)
<i>Lesson focus- speaking</i>	<i>Frequency of teaching vocabulary</i>	<i>Purposes of teaching vocabulary</i>
discussion on an itinerary	6	b(1); a(1); f(4)
group discussion on favourite movie	8	b(1); a(1); f(6)
discussion on Chinese cuisine	12	b(1); a(1); f(10)
discussion on traveling tips	10	b(1); a(1); f(8)
<i>Lesson focus- reading</i>	<i>Frequency of teaching vocabulary</i>	<i>Purposes of teaching vocabulary</i>
photo captions	18	f(18)
newspaper article	20	f(20)
reading comprehension exercise	32	f(32)
<i>Lesson focus- grammar</i>	<i>Frequency of teaching vocabulary</i>	<i>Purposes of teaching vocabulary</i>
conditional sentences	24	g(10) h(12)
passive voice	12	g(4) h(8)

- *a. giving language input for the task
 b. explaining key words in task instructions
 c. introducing vocabulary which would appear in the upcoming texts
 d. activating students' vocabulary schemata before tasks
 e. incidental vocabulary teaching
 f. direct translation of vocabulary from L1 to English
 g. explaining meta-language
 h. teacher self-explanation on vocabulary s/he used while teaching

Another finding is that the purposes of teaching vocabulary in speaking and writing lessons were similar among teachers. They explained key words in questions and instructions, gave language input for the tasks, and gave students direct translations of vocabulary items from L1 to English. Of these three reasons, giving direct translation from the L1 was the main reason for teaching vocabulary.

Another finding is that the frequency of teaching vocabulary in reading and grammar lessons was the highest. For the three teachers who taught vocabulary in their reading lessons, explaining the meaning of vocabulary items was their primary reason. Explaining meta-language and teachers' self-explaining some vocabulary items they used when teaching grammar were the main reasons for teaching vocabulary in grammar lessons.

RQ 3: To what extent do students understand the intended learning objectives of the lessons?

To answer this research question, Table 3 summarizes whether students of different abilities could perceive the learning objectives.

TABLE 3
Summary of Student Perception of Learning

Teacher & lesson	Students		
	Students with high ability	Students with medium ability	Students with low ability
Listening			
1 (1) Textbook listening exercises			
• Correctly identify information	✓	✓	✓
Additional learning objectives identified by students:	Do listening exercises Learn names of directions	Do listening exercises Learn country names	Do listening exercises Learn many words
7 (1) Listening to news reports			
• Understand the information	✓	✓	✓
• Understand the speakers' intention	×	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	--	Learn vocabulary	Learn country name
8 (2) Watching travel & living channel			
• Understand the information	✓	✓	✓
• Answer questions correctly	✓	✓	✓
Additional learning objectives identified:	Learn more about other country's culture	--	Learn more words about other country
Writing			
1 (2) Writing diary			
• Use past tense correctly	✓	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	Write diary	Write diary	Write what happened today
2 (1) Designing an outfit			
• describing an outfit	✓	✓	✓
Additional learning objectives identified:	Design an outfit	Design an outfit	Design an outfit
3 (2) Writing – photo caption			
• Learn what a caption is	✓	✓	✓
• Write a short caption	✓	✓	✓
Additional learning objectives identified:	--	--	tenses
4 (2) Informal letter writing			
• The format of an informal letter	✓	✓	×
• The use of past tense and present tense	✓	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	--	--	Write letter
Reading			
3 (1) photo captions			
• Understand how people and setting are described in news photo	×	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	The new words from the pictures	New words	Learn many new words
5 (2) Reading newspaper article			
• Comprehend the content	✓	✓	✓
• Scanning and skimming	×	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	vocabulary	vocabulary	vocabulary
6 (2) Reading comprehension			
• Comprehend the content	✓	✓	✓
• Scanning and skimming	×	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	vocabulary	vocabulary	vocabulary
Speaking			
4 (1) Discussion on an itinerary			
• Using connectives	×	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	Learn the names of different places in HK	How to tell time of the day	Learn many words
5 (1) Discussion on favourite movie			
• Justify their opinions by giving reasons	×	×	×

Additional learning objectives identified:	Talk about what movies I like	Learn Hollywood movie star names	Learn movie and movie star names
6 (1) Discussion on Chinese cuisine			
• Compare the difference between Chinese and Western food	×	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	Vocabulary about different food	English names for Chinese food	English names for Chinese dim sum
8 (1) Discussion on traveling tips			
• Use past tense to talk about past events	×	×	×
• Give advice	×	×	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	Talk about my trip to Thailand with my family	Talk about where I went last summer	Names of different countries
Grammar			
2 (2) Conditional sentences			
• The different types of conditional sentences	✓	✓	✓
Additional learning objectives identified:	--	--	New words
7 (2) Passive voice			
• The function and form of passive voice	✓	✓	×
Additional learning objectives identified:	--	--	Some words

RQ 3 found that students perceived vocabulary learning as most of the lessons' learning objectives, especially the students with low English proficiency. The only exceptions were the grammar lessons. Generally speaking, unless the lessons were task-based – it was difficult for students to identify the learning objective; for example, using past tense to talk about past events when writing a diary.

When the lesson objectives are related to higher levels of language skills, students also encountered difficulties. During listening lessons, most students could identify the intended learning objectives related to the listening tasks but those objectives that required a higher level of thinking skill, such as understanding the stance of the speakers, were not identified. Students also saw learning new words as one of the lessons' learning objectives though it was not mentioned by the teachers. During writing lessons, students with low English proficiency could not identify the objectives which were related to the use of language, such as the use of past tense to talk about past events in a diary and the format of an informal letter, but all students could recall what the tasks were. For reading lessons, students believed the learning focus was for learning vocabulary in order to understand the content of the reading passages, instead of practising language skills such as scanning and skimming, which were the learning objectives stated by the teachers. The results found in speaking lessons are similar to those of the reading lessons. Students saw learning vocabulary as the main objective of the lessons instead of those of higher level language skills such as compare and contrast, justify opinion, and give advice.

Discussion

RQ 1: Do all English teachers teach vocabulary in English lessons?

This study cannot conclude whether the amount of time spent on teaching vocabulary was appropriate or not, but the results of this study show that teaching vocabulary is a common practice in EFL classrooms. This could be due to teachers' own learning experiences. Before the 1990s, EFL teachers in Hong Kong adopted a grammar translation approach to teaching English and hence substantial numbers of dictations, quizzes, and exercises were given to students in those days.

Another reason which contributed to the practice of teaching vocabulary may be teachers' misconception of language acquisition. All teachers believed students would not be able to perform

without language input although teachers understand students should be given opportunities to use it for communicative purposes.

RQ 2: Why do English teachers teach vocabulary?

Table 2 shows that teachers believed vocabulary knowledge is essential to reading comprehension and some believed that vocabulary teaching is fundamental to reading comprehension. However, students' general flow of learning and understanding of the lessons might be hindered due to teachers' frequent pauses to explain vocabulary. As Carroll (2008) has noted, learners know a word's meaning certainly when they know a word, but there is more to word knowledge than meaning. A lot of scholars (Carroll, 2008; Nation, 2001) have considered the other variables involved in knowing a word. Nation (2001) also stated that what is involved in knowing a word will divide each item into either receptive or productive knowledge. Therefore, one should note that effective practices for promoting vocabulary acquisition are found in the importance of impacting comprehension, not word knowledge alone.

Explaining key words on questions and instructions, giving language input for the tasks and giving student direct translation of vocabulary items from L1 to English were the main reasons for teaching vocabulary in the teaching of writing and speaking. Of the three reasons, giving direct translation for L1 was the primary reason which inevitably gives students an impression that learning vocabulary is central to speaking and writing.

Although researchers have shown that providing an L1 explanation is thought to be the easiest and quickest way to give meaning to a word and to teach and/or learn a large amount of vocabulary (e.g., Sagarra & Alba, 2006), researchers including Webb (2007) have indicated that de-linking the word meaning from its context does not help with acquiring word knowledge if the teaching solely relies on L1 translation.

Another finding is that the frequency of teaching vocabulary in reading is the highest. Of the three teachers who taught vocabulary in reading lessons, explaining the meanings of vocabulary items was their main reason. Table 4 shows the percentage of time teachers spent on teaching vocabulary during reading lessons.

TABLE 4

Summary of Frequency and Time of Teaching Vocabulary During Reading Lessons

<i>Teacher (lesson)</i>	<i>Lesson focus</i>	<i>Frequency of teaching vocabulary in lesson</i>	<i>Total time spent on teaching vocabulary</i>	<i>Percentage of total class time</i>
3(1)	Reading: photo caption	18	28 mins	70%
5(2)	Reading newspaper article	20	22 mins	55%
6(2)	Reading comprehension	32	25 mins	62.5%

Many studies have shown that adequate vocabulary is important for fluent reading (e.g., Allington, 2011; Lee & Chen, 2018; Yildirim, Rasinski, Ates, Fitzgerald, Zimmerman, & Yildiz, 2014). However, one strategy for improving these students' reading comprehension skills was to teach essential academic vocabulary in a meaningful, engaging, and systematic way.

Here, several questions remain: Is teaching vocabulary equal to teaching reading? Have teachers forgotten that reading relies on reading competence which involves not only the literal meanings of words but also the ability to comprehend meanings between the lines and from the passage as a whole? Has the heavy emphasis on vocabulary learning misled students and made them overlook the importance of learning English as a whole by focusing on learning the meanings of words? A false conception may be projected to students; they may think that being able to understand the meaning of words in a passage means that they understand the passage.

Some older studies have indicated that most of the words that students learn are learned in context and relatively few are learned through direct instruction (e.g., Beck & McKeown, 1991; Hulstijn, 1992).

Explicit vocabulary instruction was also found only to be effective when teachers integrate new words with already known concepts and provide frequent opportunities for students to use and apply newly acquired words in meaningful ways. To build their comprehension, teachers must not only teach the meanings of specific words, but they also must equip students with the tools to be active word learners.

The importance of teaching students how to guess meaning from context, therefore, needs to be addressed and emphasized as teachers in this study were only addressing passive vocabulary - which refers to words that the learner can recognize and comprehend in the context of reading and writing - but not active vocabulary which refers to words which the learner can recall and use appropriately in speech and writing.

RQ 3: To what extent do students understand the intended learning objectives of the lessons?

It was found that students, especially the students of low English proficiency, perceived vocabulary learning as the learning objective of most lessons. One possible explanation is that teachers spent too much time and effort on explaining vocabulary; therefore, students' learning focus was turned only to vocabulary learning.

The only learning objective which could be recalled by the students was in grammar lessons. This could be explained by the clear learning objectives of grammar lessons, coupled with the fact that learning vocabulary and grammar are deemed important activities to most EFL students. Ping and Siraj (2012) found that Chinese students thought that language learning mainly consisted of learning vocabulary. Bernat and Gvozdenko (2005) also indicated that beliefs are a central construct in every discipline that deals with human behavior and learning. With daily dictations, weekly quizzes and monthly tests, as well as bi-annual examinations under the Hong Kong English language curriculum, it is not surprising to see students saying that vocabulary learning is important and identify it as the core component of learning English.

Results also found that low proficiency students could only recall and understand the tasks they were required to do but not the intended language learning objectives of the tasks. Meanwhile, students also perceive of doing tasks in class as being low in effectiveness, even when the students were required to do tasks such as designing an outfit or writing a caption. Thus, it would be difficult for students to identify the learning objectives of the tasks, such as using the past tense to talk about past events when writing a diary. The study has shown that students are better at learning through hands-on experiences and also through communicative tasks.

Conclusion

The implications found in this study are twofold: a) the study found that all teachers taught vocabulary in EFL classrooms regardless of the nature of the lesson. Of all the different types of lessons, reading lessons were the places where teachers spent the most time teaching vocabulary. Unfortunately, most students could not identify the learning objectives of the class – an activity which requires higher level language or thinking skills. In this case, students believed that acquiring vocabulary and understanding the meaning of words are the core components of English learning because of the substantial amount of time teachers spent in teaching vocabulary in class; b) The amount of vocabulary teaching might in turn lead to student ignorance of a more holistic language-learning process. If teachers are only concerned with transmitting subject knowledge at the word level to the students, it is very likely that students will miss the overall point of learning English as a communication medium. Learning English involves a communication process, which not only includes grammar and vocabulary, but also communicative competence.

The Author

Wong Ming Har Ruth is an assistant professor at the Department of English Language Education, The Education University of Hong Kong. Her research areas include student learning motivation, teaching pedagogy and cultural issues related to education. She has published textbooks, professional articles and research papers in various international journals.

Department of English Language Education
The Education University of Hong Kong
10 Lo Ping Road
Tai Po
Hong Kong
Tel: +852 29488347
Email: wongmh@eduhk.hk

References

- Al-Darayseh, A. A. (2014). The impact of using explicit/implicit vocabulary teaching strategies on improving students' vocabulary and reading comprehension. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 4(6), 1109-1118.
- Allington, R. L. (2011). *What really matters for struggling readers: Designing research-based programs* (3rd edition). New York: Longman.
- Arnold, J. (ed.). (1999). *Affect in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Arnott, S., & Mady, C. (2013). Obstacles and opportunities for literacy teaching: A case study of primary core French in Ontario. *Language & Literacy: A Canadian Educational E-Journal*, 15(2), 101-127.
- Beck, I. L., & McKeown, M. G. (1991). Conditions of vocabulary acquisition. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, & P. D. Pearson, (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Volume 2, pp. 789-814). New York, NY: Longman.
- Bernat, E., & Gvozdenko, I. (2005). Beliefs about language learning: Current knowledge, pedagogical implications, and new research directions. *TESL-EJ*, 9(1). Retrieved from <http://www.teslej.org/wordpress/issues/volume9/ej33/>
- Carroll, D. W. (2008). *Psychology of language*. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth Press.
- Ellis, R. (1994). Factors in the incidental acquisition of second language vocabulary from oral input: A review essay. *Applied Language Learning*, 5(1), 1-32.
- Farrell, T. S. C., & Lim, P. (2005). Conceptions of grammar teaching: A case study of teachers' beliefs and classroom practices. *TESL-EJ*, 9(2). Retrieved from <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume9/ej33/>
- Fernandes, S., Querido, L., Verhaeghe, A., Marques, C., & Araújo, L. (2017). Reading development in European Portuguese: Relationships between oral reading fluency, vocabulary and reading comprehension. *Reading & Writing*, 30(9), 1987-2007.
- Hulstijn, J. (1992). Retention of inferred and given meaning: Experiments in incidental vocabulary learning. In P. Arnaud & H. Bejoint (Eds.), *Vocabulary and applied linguistics* (pp. 113-125). London: Macmillan.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The input hypothesis*. London: Longman.
- Lee, K., & Chen, X. (2018). An emergent interaction between fluency and vocabulary in the prediction of reading comprehension among French immersion elementary students. *Reading and Writing*, 32, 1657-1679.
- Nation, P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ping, A., & Siraj, A. (2012). Exploring self-regulatory strategies for vocabulary learning among Chinese EFL learners. *Procedia*, 47, 1211-1215.

- Richardson, V. (1996). The role of attitudes and beliefs in learning to teach. In J. Sikula, T. J. Buttery, & E. Guyton (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teacher education* (pp. 102-109). New York: Macmillan.
- Sagarra, N., & Alba, M. (2006). The key is in the keyword: L2 vocabulary learning methods with beginning learners of Spanish. *The Modern Language Journal*, 90(2), 228-243.
- Seyyed, T. Y., & Fatemeh, S. (2017). The effect of explicit and implicit teaching vocabulary on Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 4(1), 15-25.
- Webb, S. (2007). Learning word pairs and glossed sentences: The effects of a single context on vocabulary knowledge. *Language Teaching Research*, 11(1), 63-81.
- Yildirim, K., Rasinski, T., Ates, S., Fitzgerald, S., Zimmerman, B., & Yildiz, M. (2014). The relationship between reading fluency and vocabulary in fifth grade Turkish students. *Literacy Research and Instruction*, 53(1), 72-89.
- Zacharias, N. T. (2005). A survey of tertiary teachers' beliefs about English language teaching in Indonesia with regard to the role of English as a global language. *RELC Journal*, 36(1), 23-37.

(Received January 06, 2021; Revised February 20, 2021; Accepted March 10, 2021)