RESEARCH ARTICLE

VOCABULARY – LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA: EFAL HIGH SCHOOL SOUTH AFRICAN TEACHERS' BELIEFS

KUFAKUNESU ZANO[*1], Dr.ERASMOS CHARAMBA[2]
[1]Department of Education, South Africa
[2]University of Witwatersrand, South Africa
[1]kufazano@gmail.com [2]erasmuscharamba@live.com
*Corresponding author

ABSTRACT

Recent studies have suggested that teacher beliefs about second language instruction have a significant influence on language teaching and learning process and, consequently on students' achievements. Teachers' beliefs about different aspects of language teaching and learning affect their decisions, actions, teaching and learning and form their expectations and judgments about what works and what does not. However, in the South African educational context, we still do not have studies focusing on teacher beliefs about English language vocabulary proficiency, about teaching materials, about individual and cultural variations and beliefs about the learning process itself. Using a questionnaire, the present study aimed at exploring the South African high school English First Additional Language (EFAL) teachers beliefs about vocabulary learning and teaching. We looked at their beliefs and their influence on EFAL teaching and learning. The required data were elicited by the use of a five-point Likert scale questionnaire which was given to 25 EFAL high school teachers. The results show that teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, their teaching role, students' role and how they define their self is influential on their teaching practices. In other words, their beliefs are linked not only to how they perceive teaching and learning but also how they teach. The results also show that there is a need for creating an environment in which teachers' cultural background, beliefs and needs are considered so as to enable them to teach effectively, as well as enabling to achieve positive learning outcomes.

Keywords: Beliefs; Teachers' beliefs; Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory; Language learning beliefs; English Second Language; English First Additional Language

Introduction

For many years vocabulary has been looked down upon in the area of foreign language teaching and scholarship and change of attitude towards vocabulary is due to the spread of the aural lingual technique followed by the communicative approach (Schmitt, 2012). Grammar was often the favoured language aspect and the aspect that was taught primarily in school. According to this old-fashioned school, the necessary vocabulary should be acquired along the way when dealing with other language aspects in the language

classroom (Chacón-Beltrán, Christián and Maria, 2010; Laufer and Nation 2012). Perhaps, vocabulary is sometimes sidelined in the area of language teaching and learning due to a common shibboleth that an adequate knowledge of grammar along with some reading proficiency are the only elements needed by the students (Baleghizadeh and Golbin, 2010). Consequently, teachers of EFAL teachers in South Africa focus significantly on grammatical rules and structure disregard the role of vocabulary and turn it into a Cinderella element.

Milton (2009) believes that the neglect of vocabulary can be traced to the beliefs among teachers that it is even possible to become a proficient and sophisticated language user with limited number of words. Secondly, there is the widely held belief that explicit vocabulary teaching is a waste of time and most of vocabulary is learned incidentally by osmosis from the language which surrounds learners inside or outside the class. In other words, vocabulary is learnt implicitly, making it superfluous in teaching (Larsson, 2014).

There are, on the other hand, researchers who strongly believe that vocabulary is an important part of language which is central to the development of other language skills and language proficiency, and an inadequate knowledge of vocabulary will act as an obstacle in using that language (Schmitt, 2010; Alfaki, 2015). Wilkins, (1972: 111) writes that '…while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed'. Lewis (1993: 89) writes that 'lexis is the core or heart of language'. Schmitt (2010:4) reports that 'learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books', thus vocabulary is core to English language teaching. Schmitt (2010) goes on to say that meaningful communication in a foreign language depends mostly on words. If learners do not have the available words to express their ideas, mastering grammatical rules or pronunciation does not help.

Language Learning Beliefs

Rokeach (1968) defines belief as any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does, capable of being preceded by the phrase "I believe that…" (p.113). Although this definition may seem simple and dates from 50 years ago, there has been no general agreement on an improved definition in the years since then.

The notion belief can be subjective, so having a consensus definition of language learning beliefs is not likely (Lee, 2014). Horwitz, one of the pioneer researchers of the studies on beliefs about language learning, never gave a concrete definition of beliefs about language learning in her articles (1985, 1987, 1988). She synonymously uses beliefs as the terms such as preconceptions (1985), preconceived ideas (1987) and preconceived notions (1988).

Barcelos (2003) define beliefs as ideas that teachers have about language and language learning. Gardner (1985) also defines beliefs as the expectations in the minds of teachers, parents and students concerning the entire second language acquisition task. Clark and Peterson (1986) defines teachers' theories and beliefs as the rich store of knowledge that teachers have that affects their planning and their interactive thoughts and decisions. Richards and Lockhart (1996) define beliefs as the goals and values that serve as the background to much of the teachers' decision making and action. Borg (2003) also define beliefs as teacher cognitions or the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching – what teachers know, believe and think in relation to their work. The abundance of different definitions represented in the above reflects the fact that interest in beliefs about second language (L2) acquisition is fairly recent, and no conventional terms have been developed yet.

Defining Teachers' Beliefs

In educational contexts, based on the social cognitive theory, teachers' decisions, actions, functioning and teaching are shaped by the beliefs they bring with them (Kitsantas and Zimmerman, 2009; Bembenutty and White, 2013). Teachers usually act on what they believe is good and right. The effects of beliefs are even bigger than the effects of methodological instructions and what teachers do is governed by their beliefs (Li and Walsh, 2011). Brown (2014) also believes that teachers and educational administrators should try to raise their awareness about what works and what does not work in the classroom. Considering the importance of vocabulary in language learning and the role of teachers' beliefs, it would be a good idea to explore teachers' beliefs about different aspects of vocabulary learning and teaching.

Teachers are highly influenced by their beliefs, values and views of the world. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes are important concepts in understanding their thought processes, instructional practices, and change in learning to teach (Williams and Burden, 1997). Their beliefs, therefore, are important considerations in conducting teacher education designed to help teachers develop their thinking and practices (Zheng, 2009). Moreover, teachers' beliefs play a critical role in shaping instruction because there is a lack of consensus about the best practice based on objective evidence (Feiman-Nemser and Floden, 1983). Teachers' beliefs also influence their perception and judgment, their classroom practices, and their improvements in classroom teaching practices and educational programs (Ta'amneh, 2015).

The instructional decisions and the selection of teaching resources and practices as well as learning practices are mostly influenced by teachers' beliefs (Nhapulo, 2013). That is, second or foreign language teachers may hold strong beliefs about the nature of the language under study, its difficulty, the process of its acquisition, the success of certain teaching and learning strategies, the existence of aptitude and their own expectations about achievement and teaching methodologies (Bernat and Gvozdenko, 2005). It is a fact that understanding teachers' beliefs means understanding teachers' classroom practices, since their actions are highly affected by their beliefs about language teaching and learning, (Horwitz, 2008; Nhapulo, 2013).

The source of teachers' beliefs or the ways in which teachers actually develop their beliefs is another point to take into consideration. Kindsvatter, Willen, and Ishler (1988) and Abdi and Asadi (2015) suggest the following as the sources of teachers' beliefs. First, teachers' experiences as language learners shape their beliefs. All teachers have undergone a phase in which they were learners and reflection about how they were taught contribute to forming their beliefs about teaching. Second, teachers' beliefs are influenced by their experience from teaching. Teaching experience can be primary source of teachers" beliefs, by witnessing how a particular method works for a particular group of learners might lead to the beliefs about such a method. Third, teachers' own personalities determine their vocabulary beliefs. Some teachers have a preference for a particular teaching method or activity simply because it matches their personality. Fourth, teachers' beliefs are based on their experience from the school, parents, the government, and the local community. Within a school, an institution or a community, certain teaching styles or methods may be preferred. Furthermore, a method or an approach rooted in a community or a school system for quite some time might be taken for granted as the most effective. Lastly, education-based or research-based principles are also rich sources of teachers' beliefs. Teachers might derive their belief system for learning principles of second language acquisition research, education or even schools of thoughts such as psychology, sociology and philosophy.

The study conducted
Research question

What are the beliefs of English First Additional Language South African high school teachers concerning English Language vocabulary learning?

Methodology
Research Design

The present study employed a non-experimental quantitative design to collect data.

Participants

The research presented in this paper was carried out in South Africa. Only 25 EFAL high teachers were chosen to take part in this study. Of these 9 (36 %) were males and 16 (64%) were females.

Data Collection Instrument

This was a study within the normative approach. It also needs to be remembered that the normative approach is mainly characterized by the use of Likert-scale questionnaires to which teachers indicate their degree of agreement or disagreement with several statements. Thus, we adopted a quantitative perspective to collect data on high school EFAL teachers' beliefs through the use of a 5-point Likert-scale. This 34-statement questionnaire employs a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaires were administered on the teachers and analyzed them through descriptive statistics. We used

the questionnaire developed by Horwitz (1985) for English Second Language teachers. The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) is widely used in teacher cognition research. The adaptation of the BALLI survey for use in the present study presented 34 statements related to vocabulary learning and teaching that can be categorized as vocabulary learning aptitude, the nature of vocabulary learning, and the nature of best practices of teaching vocabulary.

Data Collection Procedure

The respondents participated voluntarily in the study. Before administering the questionnaires to the participants, we explained the purpose of the study to them. The questionnaire as a data collection instrument was administered to the participants. The participants were asked to rate the 34 statements on a 5-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to agree. The participants read through each statement and rated how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The teachers' individual responses to each item on the questionnaire were then entered into a database. Descriptive analysis in the form of percentages was computed.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This study employs the same approach to data analysis from Horwitz's (1985, 1987) studies for we used only descriptive statistics. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were only utilized for descriptive statistics to answer the aforementioned research question. The participants' responses representing each statement were captured in percentages and displayed with agreement percentages. The data shows that several statements from the participants generated extremely high levels of agreement – strongly agree and agree. In the interests of the scope of this study, only those statements which reported soaring levels of agreement above 90% were analysed below.

All the participants (100%) believed that, "An instructor should remind students to learn vocabulary regularly". This blended well with the participants (90.17%) who reported that, "Students really had to study hard for their vocabulary work". Similarly, 91.75% of the participants reported that, "It is important to explicitly study new words". It is for these reasons that some researchers believe that extensive reading can broaden the learners' vocabulary breadth (Kulikova, 2015; 2008; Schmitt, 2008). Although second language learners might not be masterly at deriving unfamiliar lexical meanings from extensive reading, reading might intensify and fortify the understanding of moderately recognized expression (Pigada and Schmitt, 2006; Schmitt, Jiang and Grabe, 2011). It becomes imperative for EFAL teachers and learners to choose the reading materials that arouses their enthusiasm and maintains the aroused interest.

It is a generally held belief that if you want to learn a foreign language, you should do so before a certain age in order to fully understand it. This supported the participants (100%) view that, "It is easier for children to learn vocabulary than it is for adults". It is universal understanding that human facility to learn a language shrinks regularly over our lives. Effortlessly, children quickly become good in a second language they hear spoken around them. This could be ascribed to the impression that rules of grammar of their home language are mildly rooted and thus easier to beat and children have a burning desire to fit in the new language community.

Many participants (92.47%) believed that it was necessary for the teacher to teach the learners practical vocabulary learning strategies as in, "I think students expect me to teach them vocabulary learning strategies". In the same vein, the participants (98.23%) reported that, "People often have their favourite vocabulary learning strategy". One of the strategies reported by the respondents (90.67%) was that, "It is important to write out the new words that you want to learn". Tanyer and Ozturk (2014) and Kalajahi and Pourshahian (2010) state that learners take specific actions to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations. It is those strategies which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning and use of a language, through the storage, retention, recall and application of information about that language (Lip, 2009; Aktekin and Guven, 2013).

All the participants (100%) reported that, "I teach a vocabulary learning strategy that I think works best for most of my students''. Similarly, the other participants (95.33%) indicated that, "I like to share

vocabulary learning strategies that have worked for me when I learned a foreign language". Similarly, some participants (95.29%) reported that, "Students have to find the vocabulary learning strategy that works best for them on their own". This is an incidental way of learning vocabulary and Nation's (2001) calls this a part of the process of finding information about words. The use of the dictionary is one of most popular ways of getting the meaning of a new word (Schmitt, 1997). In a dictionary, there is information about pronunciation, spelling word formation and metaphorical and idiomatic use- a whole profile of a practical word (Pan and Xu, 2011).

Majority of the respondents (97.91%) reported that, "Learning a foreign language is mostly a matter of learning many new vocabulary words". In as much as adequate mastery of syntax, morphology (including inflections) and sometimes also phonology and semantics is necessary, a foreign language learning is not only about grammar. In fact, vocabulary is reported to be of more importance than grammar when mastering a foreign language. Thus, Wilkins (1972: 111) writes that '…while without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed'. Consequently, Lewis (1993: 89) writes that 'lexis is the core or heart of language'. Also, Schmitt (2010:4) reports that 'learners carry around dictionaries and not grammar books', thus vocabulary is core to English language teaching.

First-hand experiences allow the learners to observe record, contribute or manipulate some object or event that is critical for enhancing content-specific vocabulary (Carrier, 2012; Prinsloo, 2015). It could be for this reason that the participants (95.99%) indicated that, "It helps students to learn vocabulary when they are tested on them". Providing opportunities for children to use newly learned words is a critical aspect of supporting word learning. Learners are more likely to solidify their understanding of words when teachers allow them to process the information through one or two activities or games (Marzano, 2004).

One has to consider the specific context as the other words and sentences that surround that word. For this reason, the participants (97.21%) reported that, "I think teaching vocabulary in context is more helpful than providing a translation". It follows that other words in the context of the unfamiliar word *often throw light* on its meaning (Cain, 2007). These other words can be found in the sentence containing the unknown word or other sentences beyond the sentence of the unknown item. New vocabulary knowledge is most efficiently absorbed when it is assimilated to the already known words by using it in a context; complex explanation of a vocabulary item will lead to a narrow scale understanding, for the case that a meaning can be shown with very simple sentences (Elyas and Alfaki 2014, Alqahtani, 2015). When students see how the word is used in context, they can connect to the appropriate meaning (Sunasi, 2009). The example sentences used to explain meaning should obviously teach the meaning of the new word.

There are four interrelated and interdependent language skills which contribute to competency which are: listening and speaking skills, reading and viewing skills, writing and presenting skills and language structures and conventions (DBE 2011). The DBE further explains that learner should develop proficiency in reading and viewing a wide range of literary and non-literary texts, including visual text and become critical and creative thinkers. When one reads and listens a lot, paying attention to useful vocabulary, one will soon start to use new words and phrases in one's speaking and writing. Consequently, all the participants (100%) reported that, "Reading a lot is the best way to pick up new vocabulary". Even in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) document, the whole reading and viewing process has been illustrated to guide the teacher on how to conduct the reading practice. In that case, teachers are advised to use the guided group reading and independent/pair reading methods and gradually get learners to do more and more independent reading (DBE, 2011).

Debaters need to master pronunciation of words and for this, all the respondents had this to say, "I think it is important that students know how to pronounce a word". Prinsloo (2015) points out that pronunciation is enhanced by multiple encounters with a word. Effective instruction should ensure that academic vocabulary is revisited and recycled in different activities, using different strategies each time. One of the strategies was repetition cited by the participants (92.87%) as in, "I often ask students to repeat a word after me". It is important for the EFL learners to practise pronunciation and that pronunciation should be modelled and corrected by the teacher. However, such pronunciation tasks should focus on promoting oral discourse in a meaningful context and should never become a chanting exercise.

One of the most common techniques is translation, that is, to translate the word in question into a learner's native language (Elyas and Alfaki, 2014). Although some experts do not recommend this technique, the participants (90.08%) reported that, "I think translations into the first language (L1) are an important part of vocabulary teaching". Even though translation does not create a need or motivation of the learners to think about word meaning, in some situations translation could be effective for teachers, such as when dealing with incidental vocabulary, checking learners' comprehension, and pointing out similarities or differences between first and second language, when these are likely to cause errors (Takač, 2008). There are always some words that need to be translated and this technique can save a lot of time (Elyas and Alfaki, 2014). If the student does not understand a word and the teachers cannot think how to explain it, they can quickly translate it.

Speech and gesture make up a single integrated system in studying use of gestures in L1 and L2 instruction. Gestures are an important aspect of foreign language teaching and learning for they serve as a stepping stone to further foreign language learning. Gestures-based approach allows the learners to learn new words via playful activities, thereby improving learners' vocabulary mastery. Where gestures are appropriately used, learners' motivation and concentration increase in the lessons; engagement is also enhanced when the teacher offers opportunities for physical participation during vocabulary lessons (Khamukaeva, 2014). For these reasons, the respondents (93.61%) reported that, "I frequently use nonverbal cues (e.g. gestures) to help students understand new words".

Conclusions

The literature supports the view that teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, their teaching role, students' role and how they define their self is influential on their teaching practices. In other words, their beliefs are linked not only to how they perceive teaching and learning but also how they teach. Based on the results of descriptive statistics, the present study revealed that participants had different degrees, an assortment of beliefs about EFL learning. A primary source of teachers' classroom practices is belief systems – the information, attitudes, values, expectations, theories, and assumptions about teaching and learning that teachers built up over time and bring with them to the classroom. This qualifies the notion that the EFL teaching and learning approaches the teachers are exposed to determine their beliefs and perceptions about EFL learning. The data showed that the teachers over-depend on the EFL teaching and learning methods which they view as enablers in understanding EFL and its related stuff.

The data has shown that teachers use various vocabulary learning strategies when teaching EFL learners. This can only be possible if teachers of EFL are aware of their learner's beliefs about English learning and how learner's incorporate different language learning strategies to improve their vocabulary learning. It is incumbent upon the teacher of EFL to prioritise learners' motivation for it has unquantifiable bearing on their (learners) learning. The data also captures the need for the teachers to have a fuller understanding of their learners' abilities, tastes and motivations and EFL learning beliefs when they are preparing for lessons to guarantee optimized learning. It is imperative for teachers of EFL to fully comprehend their learners' feelings, needs and expectations. Teachers need to make their lessons interesting so as to capture the EFL learners' attention. When the entire is met, learners are likely to develop immeasurable interest in learning EFL. It was for all the above reasons that an investigation of teachers' beliefs was necessary in order to gain a better understanding of what went on in the classroom.

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