

How EFL teachers teach vocabulary: do the beliefs and the actions match?

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1. Introduction

The vocabulary teaching practices of EFL teachers are guided by their beliefs, assumptions and knowledge about what they consider to be sound teaching and learning. These constitute a construct that Woods (1996, in Woods & Cakir, 2011) identified as the BAK systems. Considering these factors is of utmost importance because they have a strong impact on the decisions and actions taken when planning lessons (Woods & Cakir, 2011; Borg, 2006).

In vocabulary teaching, the BAK systems of foreign language educators define their plans, decisions and actions regarding the treatment given to lexical items, for example, the intensity and kind of explanations given, or the amount of new vocabulary felt to be amenable to presentation or recycling. The influence of BAK on vocabulary teaching is especially observable in the use made of teaching materials in class and in the resources deployed by the teachers. For example, the treatment given to the vocabulary contained in a reading text may be approached differently depending on the teacher's knowledge of reading processes as well as on their beliefs about the amount of vocabulary to be taught and the techniques of meaning familiarization used.

This paper reports partial findings of a research project under way (López Barrios & Boldrini, 2016) that focuses on the relationship between EFL teachers' practices

captured through class observations and their self-reported beliefs about vocabulary learning and teaching obtained through a questionnaire. The observed aspects include a) the amount of vocabulary presented and/or recycled, b) the kind of teaching (incidental / deliberate), as well as c), the techniques used to this end. Since the observations were carried out in two different contexts, secondary schools and adult education, the mentioned aspects will also be analyzed considering these contexts. After the description of the theoretical background and the data collection instruments, we report the results related to the three aspects (a, b and c) focusing on the consistency of the observation with the self-reported beliefs.

2. Theoretical framework

Given the multidisciplinary nature of foreign language teaching, this paper draws on insights from Teacher Education, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Foreign Language Methodology.

2.1. Teacher cognition

The concept of teacher cognition encompasses “what language teachers think, know and believe” (Borg, 2006, p. 1). Knowledge is viewed by Woods & Cakir (2011) as a continuum with pedagogical knowledge one end and beliefs at the other. Assumptions, “a non-demonstrable proposition ‘which we are taking as true for the time being [...]’” (Medgyes, 1997, p. 403), lie between the two poles of the continuum. In this view, pedagogical knowledge is not considered as opposed to beliefs, but rather as different degrees of knowledge that is based on theory or on intuition. Theory-based knowledge is shared by the scientific community and is validated by empirical proof until it can be refuted, whereas beliefs represent a personal dimension of teacher knowledge that are more individual and based on opinion (Woods & Cakir, 2011).

The three next sections deal with aspects of vocabulary teaching and learning that were the object of observation in EFL classes: the distinction between deliberate and incidental teaching, the vocabulary content of the lesson, and the techniques teachers use to convey lexical information.

2.2 Deliberate vs. incidental teaching

Vocabulary teaching is a part of planned classwork, but in virtually every class there are instances of spontaneous, unplanned teaching of lexical items. In explicit or deliberate teaching presenting new words is a part of the planned activities, whereas unplanned, incidental teaching refers to vocabulary items that are contingently presented, for example, when one learner asks the teacher for an L2 word needed to express an idea.

Vocabulary teaching involves dealing with one or several of the aspects of vocabulary knowledge - form, meaning and/or use - proposed by Nation (2013). *Form* entails both the spoken and written form of the lexical item, as well as its word parts (affixes), *meaning* involves mapping a meaning to a form, awareness of the referents, and sense relations (synonyms, antonyms, etc.), and *use* implies knowledge of the grammatical functions, collocations, and constraints on use imposed by register, frequency, context, etc.

In our research, we characterize vocabulary teaching as *deliberate* when a word's meaning is clarified, or a lexical item is provided at the request of a learner, and these actions are addressed to and perceived by the group of learners. In contrast, when either a clarification of meaning or the provision of a word are directed at one learner, a pair, or a small group, as opposed to the whole class, we consider the teaching to be *incidental*. Additionally, the distinction between deliberate and incidental teaching refers to the intensity of the treatment given to the lexical item by the teacher. This

implies that the more aspects of vocabulary knowledge mentioned above are involved in the instruction, the more deliberate the teaching will be.

2.3 Vocabulary input from class materials

There is not much research regarding the amount of vocabulary that coursebooks introduce and recycle in every lesson, and the overall results suggest an average of between four and twelve lexical items taught per class hour. Two of the sources of this information are general guidelines given by Gairns & Redman (1986), who suggest around 8 to 12 words for productive use as a reasonable amount to be presented in a 60-minute class, and Thornbury (2002) mentions a tendency for coursebooks to introduce about a dozen lexical items per lesson. The other source that allows an interpretation of the vocabulary content of foreign language classes is constituted by the results of empirical studies into different aspects of vocabulary learning and teaching. One such study is Milton & Meara's (1998) with British school learners of French having taken a standardized test of vocabulary breadth. The results allow an interpretation that an average between 3.8 and 4.3 words are learned per class hour, thus providing support for the lower figure mentioned above. The upper number of twelve vocabulary items per class can be deduced from a study of the vocabulary content of a French coursebook series for British school learners by Tschichold (2008) (as cited in Milton, 2009, p. 200). In the study, the vocabulary load of the four volumes of the series was calculated and an average of new types (every single vocabulary item counted once) introduced per contact hour was worked out. In contrast, a study of the vocabulary load of several EFL coursebooks by Scholfield (1993, as cited in Milton, 2009, p. 200) suggests the introduction of an average of 20 words per classroom hour, a much higher figure than that provided by Gairns & Redman (1986) and Thornbury (2002) and supported by the

empirical research of Milton & Meara (1998) and Tschichold (2008, as cited in Milton, 2009). Studies of the vocabulary content of foreign language coursebooks like those of Schichold and Scholfield (both cited by Milton, 2006) are scarce; nevertheless, their results provide some points of reference that can benefit both teachers in planning lessons and coursebook authors in the design of materials.

2.4 Meaning familiarization techniques

Teachers make use of different techniques to make learners familiar with the meaning of lexical items. The choice of technique is highly dependent on several contextual factors, among which Thornbury (2002) lists the learners' proficiency level, familiarity with the word (first encounter or recycling), difficulty of the word in terms of its concreteness or complexity in spelling, pronunciation or use, and purpose of learning (for production, for recognition). Regarding the third factor, the degree of concreteness or abstraction of the lexical item to be taught, many techniques exist that allow teachers to make learners familiar with the meaning aspect of vocabulary knowledge. Overall, the typologies included by different authors (Nation, 2013; Thornbury, 2002; Hedge, 2000; Ur, 1996) suggest roughly the same categories of meaning familiarization techniques. These include the use of visual means such as real objects, pictures or mimes, and verbal means such as translation, definition, examples, and recourse to sense relations such as synonyms, antonyms or hyponyms. In our study, we have resorted to the following labels to refer to the meaning familiarization techniques used by the teachers observed: pictures; real objects (realia); mimes, gestures, demonstration; translation, explanation; example; sense relations.

3. Methodology

For this study, the participants involved were teachers at four different institutions in the city of Córdoba: two secondary schools (a private one (S1) and a state-run (S2) one, and two university language centres, one offering extensive, 2-hour weekly courses (LC1), and the other, intensive, 6-hour weekly (LC2) courses. Classes observed at the secondary schools lasted forty minutes each, whereas those at the language schools lasted one hour. The LCs admit learners from 16 years old onwards. Both LCs and S2 are centrally located and S1 is in an upper middle-class area. Coursebooks are used in the adult classes and the private school, whereas S2 uses materials compiled by the teachers. Three of the teachers observed have between seventeen and twenty years of experience, whereas the teacher at LC2 had 4 years of expertise.

To collect data, two instruments were used: an online survey answered by each teacher observed and three class observations carried out in each institution. The survey consists of 27 Likert-type items and four multiple-choice items. In the survey, teachers express their degree of agreement with statements expressing different vocabulary teaching and learning beliefs, whereas the multiple-choice items require teachers to select the practices considered to match their own ones.

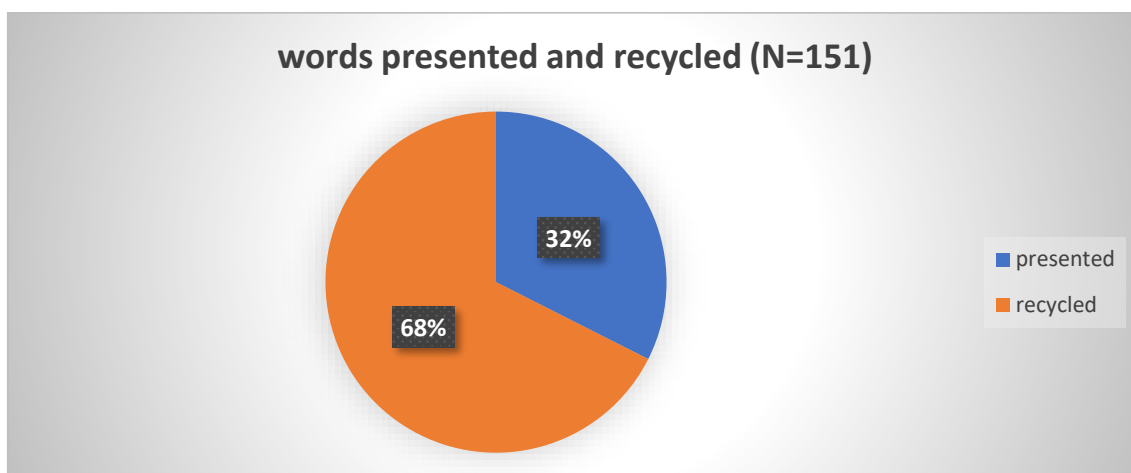
In the following section, selected answers from the questionnaire will be analysed and the findings will be later compared with data from the observations.

4. Results

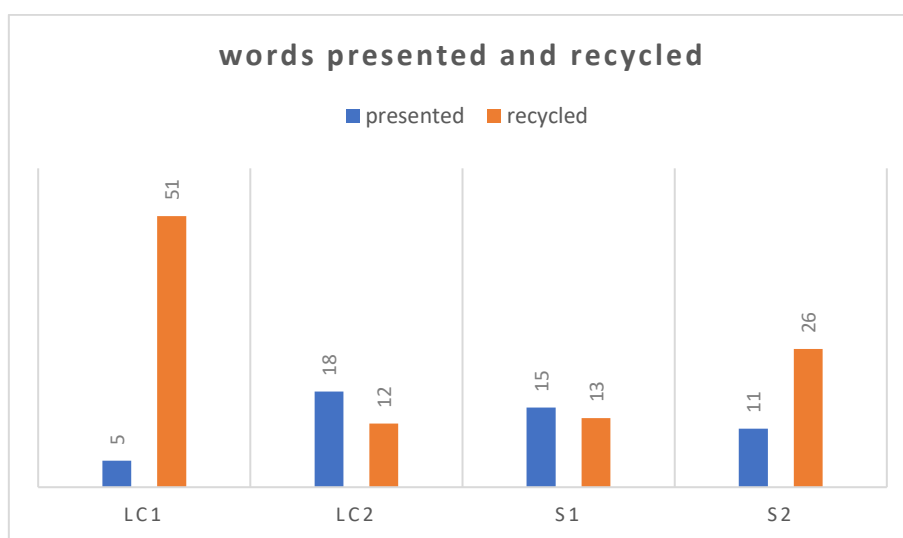
4.1 Observation data analysis

In this section, the data collected from the observations carried out in the different institutions will be analysed considering a) the amount of vocabulary presented and / or recycled, b) the kind of teaching (deliberate or incidental), and c) the kind of technique used by the teacher to convey the meaning of the words taught.

4.1.a. Vocabulary presented and recycled



The overall count indicates that many more words are recycled than presented in the lessons observed. However, notable differences emerge when the data is analysed in the context of each classroom.

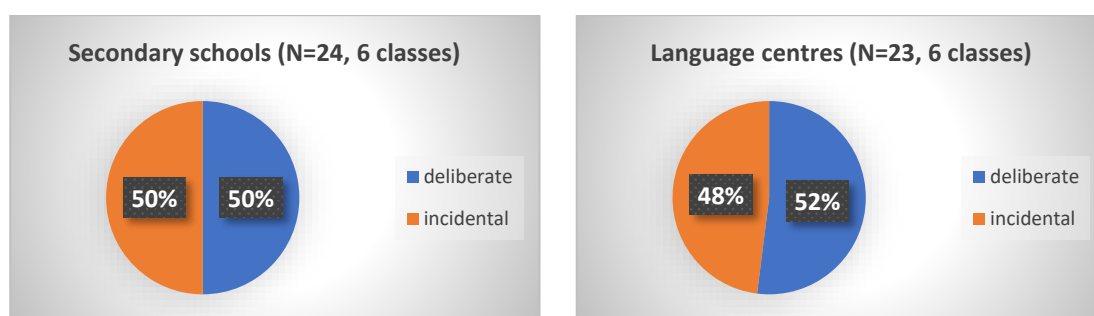


In general, a more even proportion of words presented can be appreciated in the four cases, with a greater discrepancy regarding the amount of words recycled, which accounts for exceptional circumstances arising in the classes observed. In LC1, two of the lessons observed took place before a term test, explaining the reason for the high number of recycled words. In LC2, the three lessons observed focused on reading tasks, which could account for the more similar numbers of words introduced and recycled. Likewise, in both secondary schools, the number of vocabulary items involved varied depending on the activities students solved. At S1 a predominance of speaking tasks in pairs could be the reason for the similar number of words presented and recycled, whereas at S2 these numbers changed according to the focus of the class taught. In the

first and second classes, there were eleven words presented, while in the third one there were no words presented and thirteen words recycled since the latter was a revision class.

The higher number of words noticed at the language centres (eighty-six words at the language schools vs. sixty-five at the secondary schools) could be related to class length as well as to the focus of the classes and the influence of the teachers' BAK.

4.1.b Kind of teaching (incidental / deliberate)



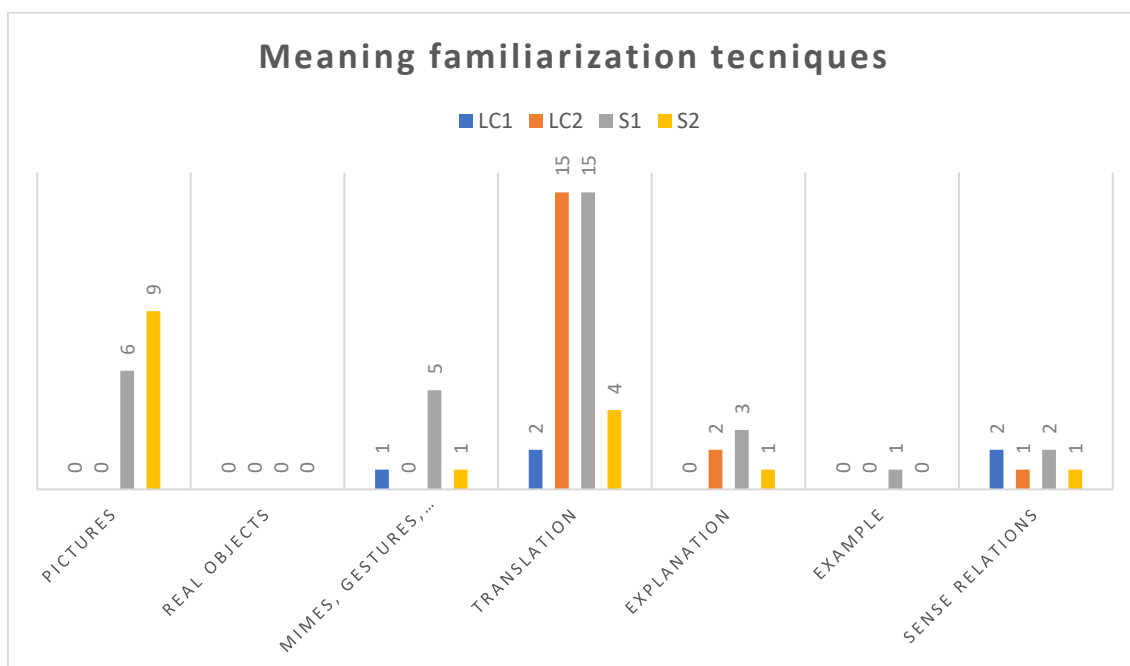
Again, when considering the total figures, a homogenous picture emerges regarding the proportion of words taught deliberately and incidentally, so that it is necessary to consider the contextual factors that account for the hidden differences.

In LC1, out of the total of five words presented, four were taught deliberately and one incidentally. Deliberate teaching occurred when the teacher exposed students to the meaning of the words and then had students carry out an activity using the word.

Incidental teaching took place as a result of a student's question. In LC2, the number of words presented incidentally and deliberately is more even, a fact which was sustained in all classes. At S1, the nine words presented incidentally emerged in the context of a speaking task in which students asked the teacher for specific vocabulary they needed.

The six words that were deliberately introduced belonged to the course material so that the explanation was targeted at the whole class. In S2, six words were explained deliberately in a class including several aspects of the words such as spelling, pronunciation, collocations and grammatical features. The words presented incidentally were provided at the request of individual learners in the context of production activities.

4.1.c Meaning familiarization techniques used



Teachers and researchers recommend using diverse techniques to present lexical items. However, in the classes observed the techniques employed differ in type and quantity. In general, translating was the most frequent technique followed by pictorial and verbal techniques such as pictures, explanations and establishing sense relations, as well as paralinguistic techniques like mimes, gestures and demonstration. No use of realia was observed, and only once an example was given.

When considering each institution individually, the techniques employed and their frequency of use differ even from one class to the other. In LC2, the most predominant technique was translation which was used fifteen times, whereas only two other techniques were used. On the other hand, the teachers in the two schools deployed the greatest diversity of meaning familiarization techniques, six in S1 and five in S2. Translation also ranked prominently in S1, with the same degree of use as in LC2. The use of this technique, often recommended as the last resort in order to favour L2 input, was in general suitable, save for a few occasions when it was used to explain “villain” or “discuss” (S1), two highly transparent words for Spanish-speaking learners. The lack of use of realia can be explained by examining the words presented and the availability of these items in the class. Lastly, in some cases more than one technique was employed, notably by the teachers in both schools. For example, to explain “cut” and “slice”, the teacher in S1 used gestures, explanation and translation. This use of multiple techniques was not very frequent in the sample of 151 words presented.

4.2 Survey analysis

In what follows, the BAK systems of teachers will be compared with the actions observed in class to estimate the consistency between both. For the present analysis, 15 out of the 31 items contained in the survey were considered since they relate directly to the three main aspects dealt with in this paper: a) presentation and recycling of vocabulary, b) incidental and deliberate teaching, and c) meaning familiarization techniques employed.

4.2.a Questions related to the presentation and recycling of vocabulary

Helping students build an extensive word stock is commonly associated to the belief that learning large amounts of vocabulary leads to an efficient learning of English. Surprisingly, all the teachers reacted differently to this belief so that there is no regular pattern in their answers, since one agrees (LC2) or totally agrees (S2) and two are either unsure (S1) or totally disagree (LC1). Related to this belief is the number of vocabulary items teachers introduce in each lesson. In the survey, the majority state they generally present between six and eleven words, and only one (S1) claims to introduce more than fifteen words. The answers largely coincide with the observations: the teacher at LC1 presented the fewest words whereas the rest of the teachers presented about three times as many. Regarding the recycling of words, all teachers either agree or totally agree, a tendency also mirrored in the classes, especially in LC1 and S2, where familiar vocabulary was intensively activated.

The beliefs selected show that lexical learning implies ample opportunities to recognize word meanings, to retrieve them and to actively use the words. In the classes observed, familiar words are retrieved and frequently used in sentences, but unfamiliar words tend to be introduced in response to an individual need, so that only the learner involved uses it, or, when taught in the context of a reading, these are not further consolidated through active use. A mismatch between the belief and the actual classroom practice is noticeable here.

4.2.b Questions related to deliberate and incidental vocabulary teaching

In 2.2 we characterize what is implied in deliberate vocabulary teaching. Most of the teachers (LC1, LC2, S1) express the belief that when teaching new vocabulary there

should be not only focus on meaning, but also on other aspects such as collocations (all teachers), synonyms and antonyms, pronunciation and spelling (3 of the teachers). There is less agreement on teaching other meanings of the word, grammatical aspects or register, mentioned by 2 and 1 subjects. These beliefs are largely consistent with the practices, as the mentioned aspects are frequently found in the observations, especially in the case of deliberate teaching. As regards the consolidation of vocabulary, there is disagreement with the belief of the effectiveness of written and oral repetition, as two subjects are in favour (LC1, S1), one is unsure (LC2) and one disagrees (S2). In any case, this belief could not be observed in the classes, since oral repetition is completely absent. The majority of the teachers (LC1, LC2, S2) also consider it is relevant to keep a record of words including at least some of the three aspects of word knowledge (meaning, form and use), which could be found to different degrees in the observations. A mismatch is noticed in the teacher of S1, who disagrees with this belief, but tends to write the L1 equivalents of the unfamiliar words on the board.

4.2.c Questions related to the meaning familiarization techniques

All teachers totally agree (LC1, S1, S2) or agree (LC2) with the importance of establishing semantic connections among the words students learn, and totally agree (LC1, S2) or agree (LC1, S1) with the belief that associating a word with a picture makes learning more memorable. These beliefs are partially correlated with the observed practices. In the first case, no attempts to connect words with others belonging to a common semantic field were found in the classes observed, whereas in the second, the teachers in the language centres did not make use of pictures or realia to clarify word meanings, but the teacher in LC2 resorted more to translation.

Two teachers (LC1, S1) consider translation to be convenient, while the other two (LC2, S2) are not sure about this belief. As said above, this belief is found in the practices of the teacher of S1, so that there is consistency, but this is less definite in the teacher of LC2.

5. Conclusions

In this paper we attempt to inquire into the vocabulary teaching practices of four teachers in different educational contexts and to establish a relationship with their beliefs. The results show partial coincidence between the beliefs and the practices, and

further validate the hypothesis. Making the teachers aware of these discrepancies could help them redirect their classroom practices, for example, familiarization with the value of the three areas of word knowledge could result in more aspects being involved when deliberately teaching new lexical items. Meanwhile, awareness regarding the role of repetition both orally as in writing could enable consolidation in the mental lexicon and foster stronger connections among related lexical items.

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