

## Reflection of Teacher Cognition in EFL Vocabulary Instructional Practices in Indonesia

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### Abstract

Teachers are highly influenced by their cognitions related to their ideas, to their views of the world, and to their values and conceptions of their environment. The study of teachers' cognitions forms a part of the process of understanding how teachers conceptualize their work (Hassankiadeh, 2012). Therefore, this study attempted to investigate the cognitions the Indonesian EFL teachers hold about vocabulary instruction along with analyzing reflected cognitions in their teaching practices in classroom context. This qualitative study used semi-structured interview and direct classroom observation to obtain the data from four Indonesian EFL teachers of senior high school. It was revealed that the teachers have well-developed cognitions about EFL vocabulary instruction. It is shown from their beliefs, understanding, and perceptions about the role of vocabulary, its importance in EFL teaching and learning including what words are taught and how words are taught. Moreover, some aspects of their cognitions about vocabulary teaching emerge to be in congruence with their vocabulary teaching practices although some inconsistencies have been identified as well.

**Keywords:** teacher cognition, vocabulary instruction, EFL vocabulary, teaching vocabulary

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background

In recent years, a great number of attempts on teachers' cognition have been made with the aim of understanding the complications reinforcing the teachers' cognitions and their classroom practices (Baker, 2014). Teachers are highly influenced by their cognitions which are related to their ideas, to their views of the world, and to their values and conceptions of their environment. It is certainly not new that prospective teachers bring with themselves many cognitions about the nature of teaching and learning and that these cognitions interact with the content and pedagogy of their teaching procedures and influence what and how they teach. The study of teachers' cognitions forms a part of the process of understanding how teachers conceptualize their work (Hassankiadeh, 2012). In last two decades, teacher education research has made significant advances in studying teacher cognitions, and the connection between their cognitions and educational practice has already been well established (Borg, 2003). In short, how teachers have seen and experienced learning and teaching can be an important problem in learning/teaching field because it shall affect their cognitions and subsequent actions in teaching situations.

Despite their role as language components, grammar is more focused than vocabulary in the classroom practice, which can be seen from a number of earlier studies. EFL teachers' cognitions related to the teaching of grammar have been well studied (Borg, 2001; Borg & Burns, 2008; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Phipps & Borg, 2009), EFL vocabulary teachers' cognition, however, has received considerably less attention. As a matter of fact, learning vocabulary or lexicon is one of the most important domains in the process of learning a language for the aim of communicating and should be considered as significant part of teaching and learning languages too. About its significance in learning a language it can be said that limited knowledge of English vocabulary may affect the performance of English language learners at school (Cummins, 1994). During the past decades, researchers have pointed to the importance of vocabulary acquisition for second language (L2) learners (Allen, 1983; Laufer, 1986; Nation, 1990; Richards, 1980). However, there has been little or no well-prepared research about how

### 1.3.2 Vocabulary Teaching Practice and research in Indonesia

Since English is regarded as a foreign language in Indonesia, lack of exposure to English vocabulary turns out to be the reason why vocabulary acquisition is problematic. It is not surprising, therefore, that Indonesian EFL learners' lack of vocabulary knowledge are revealed by several studies. It was Quinn (1968) who was interested in finding out the number of English words the students mastered after six years of study in secondary school. He assessed the students by using a translation vocabulary test and discovered that the students knew fewer words than one thousand of the most frequent English words after six years of study.

In addition, Kweldju (1997) carried out a vocabulary-size study to 15 Indonesian student teachers of English Department. She found those future English teachers only knew 4664 word forms or 2800 word families, a vocabulary size still below the threshold level for reading academic texts. It can be concluded that ELT teachers have failed in offering sufficient word knowledge that is a precondition for effective language use.

In addition, Kweldju (1999) conducted a research on collocation mastery. A list of 25 items of collocations was distributed to sixty English Department students to determine whether they were familiar with these items and given five possible options: *known*, *fairly known*, *little known*, *hardly known*, and *unknown*. The results of the study showed that in general the students were able to supply only a few expected collocations, whereas most of the students were familiar with several collocations. These findings suggest that many Indonesian learners of English were not aware of collocations and, therefore, it is recommended that teachers and learners focus on collocations in the classroom and they should be deliberately learned.

Furthermore, Nurweni's (1997) study revealed that on average, the 324 subjects knew 987 of the 2000 most frequent words, and 239 of the 808 university words, making up 1226 words in total. It was concluded that the students' mastery of small number of words was likely to result from forgetting in which they forgot most of the words already exposed, thus did not acquire them well. The loss of so many words already exposed pertains to the need for increasing the number of word repetitions.

What's more, most Indonesian EFL teachers do not know how to measure their students' vocabulary knowledge, what words to teach and how to teach the words since they still believe in vocabulary myths and are not aware of recent research findings (Folse, 2004). Moreover, the teachers often complain that their students do not have enough vocabulary knowledge, and the students themselves often admit that they do not know many of the words in a text.

### 1.3.3 Congruence and Incongruence between Teacher Cognition and Teaching Practice of Vocabulary

A number of studies have attempted to examine the extent to which teachers' cognitions influence their classroom practices. Findings from the mainstream research collectively suggest that language teachers' instructional practices are affected by a wide range of interacting and often conflicting factors. Even though teachers' cognitions are known to be influential on their instructional practices, they do not always reflect teachers' stated beliefs, personal theories, and pedagogical principles.

In a study on the relationship between thirty ESL teachers' beliefs and practices during literacy instruction, Johnson (1992) identified three different methodological positions among these teachers: a skills-based approach, which views language as being composed of four discrete language skills; a rules-based approach, which views language as a process of creative manipulation of grammar rules; and a function-based approach, which focuses on the communicative ability in real-life contexts. The majority of the teachers in the study were found to hold beliefs which consistently reflected one of these approaches and perform their instructional practices conforming to the corresponding theoretical orientation.

Moreover, a study on teacher cognition was carried out by Niu & Andrew (2012) who investigated L2 teachers' beliefs and practices about vocabulary pedagogy from a small culture perspective. This study was a qualitative study which employed semi-structures interviews, classroom observation and involved four EFL teachers in China. In the end, the study revealed two big themes with regard to teachers' beliefs about vocabulary teaching. Those themes entailed teachers' shared and discrepant beliefs. In terms of the consistency between teachers' beliefs and their pedagogical practices, it was shown that some beliefs were consistent with the teaching practices, while some others were not due to a number of factors, such as time constraint of classroom practice and China's classroom culture.

Additionally, Macalister (2012) conducted a mixed-method study which examined three groups of participants: (1) 60 Malaysian pre-service teachers whose teacher education programme consists of roughly equal time spent in Malaysia and New Zealand, (2) 16 Malaysia-based teacher educators, and (3) six New Zealand-based trainers. This study used a questionnaire and interview to gain data from the participants. It was revealed that the most

acquiring word meaning with synonyms, which entailed more students' active cognition than rote learning. This was in line with the teachers' beliefs about the ineffectiveness of word memorization in foreign language word acquisition.

#### Impeding Factors towards Vocabulary Instruction

The last aspect analyzed from the data pertained to some contextual factors which could impede vocabulary instruction in the classroom. The data exhibited several factors which could obstruct vocabulary teaching and learning process when the teachers were not aware of dealing with these in their instructional practices. Those factors included teachers' weakness in pronunciation, students' vocabulary deficiency, time constraint, exam-based syllabus, and lack of vocabulary teaching resources.

#### *3.2 Analysis of the Reflection of Teacher Cognition in Vocabulary Teaching Practices*

Some of the teachers' cognitions are reflected through their instructional practices in the classrooms; whereas, some are not. This section will deeply elaborate both correspondence and discrepancy between teachers' cognitions and their vocabulary teaching practices.

#### Correspondence between EFL teachers' cognitions and their vocabulary instructional practices

Overall, the four EFL teachers' shared cognitions were found to be congruent with their pedagogical practices in four main aspects, namely: (1) the involvement of vocabulary instruction in the teachers' pedagogical practices, (2) the incorporation of vocabulary teaching into the teaching of four skills of English through a number of vocabulary instructional strategies to diminish some barriers in students' language performance due to lack of vocabulary knowledge, (3) the teaching of all types of parts of speech in vocabulary instruction, and (4) the use of visual support to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge.

Despite the teachers' acknowledgement of the importance of vocabulary to support other English skills, their teaching preference style on implicit vocabulary instruction was reported in their interview results. Therefore, most of vocabulary teaching strategies they applied in the classroom were unplanned. This was consistent with their responses in the interview session that vocabulary was not the focus of their lessons in the classrooms, but when it happened to appear in their teaching process, they would not disregard it anyway.

Moreover, the congruence between cognition and practice was shown by one of the teacher participants who reported her weakness on English pronunciation. This self-perceived weakness was believed to restrain her from providing pronunciation practice to the students. Her instructional practice confirmed this. It showed that this lack of vocabulary knowledge in terms of word pronunciation had a negative impact on the teacher's performance in the classroom. This is aligned with some previous studies which have empirically proven this phenomenon (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016; MacDonald, 2002).

In addition, the technologically visual support (i.e., Power point (Ppt)) utilized by the EFL teacher participants looked very simple. The teachers' technological knowledge seemed to be limited on the use of Ppt as the supporting technological device used in their teaching practice. From the interview responses, the participants perceived Ppt as the regular technology-based teaching media in their classrooms. However, their responses revealed that some limitation on the use of Ppt fundamentally appeared. The limitation was shown due to the fact that, apart from the lesson using a video, the EFL teachers merely deployed Ppt which focused on simple pictures or written explanation with no movement or sounds on the slides during the observation. This is aligned with Asan (2003) who discovered that many teachers lacked a functional computer literacy foundation upon which to build new technology and skills, such as lack of knowledge and skills about using computers and insufficient training opportunities.

Most of the shared teaching strategies reported in the interviews were seen in the EFL teachers' pedagogical practices. One of the most frequently used vocabulary teaching strategies reported by the participants was direct translation from L1 to L2 or vice versa. The use of this strategy was congruent with the teachers' instructional practice in which direct translation was the most frequently selected strategy to infer word meanings. From the observation findings, all of the teachers employed translation strategy for all lessons they taught in each observed classroom practice. Another correspondence between teachers' cognition and teaching practice was the use of indirect pronunciation check strategy. It was the strategy used to provide feedback to the students' mispronunciation without telling them the mispronounced word directly; instead, the students were required to foster their awareness toward the mispronounced word. This reported strategy was found in the teachers' interview as the common strategy they applied, particularly in students' speaking performance. This interview results were confirmed in the pedagogical practices where some of the teachers implemented this strategy. However, the effectiveness of this strategy cannot be scrutinized further in this study. The next strategy that was

congruent between what the teachers thought and did in the classroom was the use of pictures as visual support to enhance students' vocabulary knowledge. The teachers mostly used pictures to begin a lesson in order to elicit some information about what the students have already known previously pertaining to the lesson. Moreover, they shared similar views on the students' vocabulary enhancement through this strategy. Last, one of the most popular vocabulary teaching strategies in the EFL classroom is the use of context. Context covers both written and spoken contexts. In other words, the students not only derive a word meaning from written context, such as a reading text, but also from spoken context through teachers' verbal explanation. This strategy was frequently observed when the EFL teachers put a word into some context by which the students could guess its meaning.

#### Discrepancy between EFL teachers' cognitions and their vocabulary instructional practices

The discrepancy between EFL teachers' cognition and their instructional practices was shown from their perceptions towards the role of EFL vocabulary. Vocabulary instruction mainly took place in several conditions as shown by the observation data, such as when the students had problem understanding a word meaning or when they mispronounced a word in reading aloud or speaking performance. The findings from the interview showed that most of the EFL teacher participants took into account the essential role of vocabulary in their classroom practices. However, most of vocabulary teaching strategies occurring during the classroom observations were carried out without being planned. In other words, the teachers applied some particular strategies mainly when there were some lexical problems going on in the classrooms.

In contrast, one of the EFL teachers argued that vocabulary was only a supporting element in learning a language so that she did not focus much on vocabulary in the classroom, which means that the students learned new words indirectly while they were involved in learning English skills, such as speaking and writing. However, her lesson plans showed the opposite result. In one of the lesson plans, vocabulary was the focus of her teaching, particularly in a reading lesson. In addition, her instructional practices exhibited that she was concerned about vocabulary instruction where a huge number of vocabulary teaching strategies were employed in her teaching practice.

Another discrepancy between EFL teacher's cognition and the teaching practice pertains to the teacher's past learning experience. One of the teachers affirmed that word memorization was not effective to enhance students' vocabulary, based on her prior language learning experience. It means that her personal language learning experiences made her think that word memorization should be avoided. However, based on the observation data, she employed a number of memory strategies, such as word class analysis, pronunciation practice through drilling words, phrases, or sentences, word part analysis, direct translation, and synonym/antonym, to present vocabulary knowledge to her students. This result was aligned with Hassankiadeh (2013).

In addition, the EFL teachers' self perceptions on student-centered approach as regards the new curriculum (K13), which has been an ideal approach to be used in the classroom, contradicted their vocabulary teaching in which the initiation of vocabulary instruction primarily came from the teachers. Moreover, the teachers' reliance on textbooks in the classroom confirmed that teacher-centered instruction had been the implemented approach without the teachers' being aware of it. These findings echoed some previous studies on the use of textbooks in the classroom practice (Chien & Young, 2006). Chien & Young (2006) found out that the EFL teachers perceived textbooks as a tool for saving time and enhancing their teaching practice in spite of incomprehensive content and insufficient varied supports the textbooks offered.

Additionally, most of the EFL teacher participants perceived time constraint in their instructional practices as a barrier so that vocabulary teaching was frequently excluded. However, the data from the document show a little contradiction. Some vocabulary instruction was clearly stated in the lesson plan. Furthermore, it could also be seen from the observation data in which there were a huge number of vocabulary instructional strategies performed by the teacher participants in their classrooms. In other words, the teachers could freely employ a large number of strategies to teach vocabulary even though they were not prepared beforehand. However, practicing taught vocabulary was the issue which needs to be solved. Faraj (2015) maintains that spending more time on introducing the vocabulary instead of practicing it makes a gap between learning the word theoretically and practically.

Last, an inconsistency between a reported vocabulary teaching strategy in the interview and the use of the strategy during observations also occurred in this study. Vocabulary game was reported by more than one teacher; however, only one teacher applied this strategy to increase students' vocabulary knowledge before the teacher began the main lesson. The teachers who did not employ this strategy in their teaching practices assumed that time was the main barrier to carry it out. In other words, due to time limitation in the classroom, it was difficult for the teachers to reflect this strategy into their pedagogical practices.

#### 4. Pedagogical Implications on EFL Teaching and Learning

The first implication concerns how to integrate the aspect of vocabulary teaching within Indonesian EFL teacher education. It appears that Indonesian EFL teacher educators need to improve curriculum design options for EFL teacher education programs, highlighting the role of vocabulary in EFL learning and teaching. As the participants reported, vocabulary occupied a significant position in both EFL learning and teaching. This is consistent with other researchers' findings (Knight, 1994; Schmitt, 2000). Despite this evidence, Indonesian EFL teacher education programs do not provide solemn attention to vocabulary teaching practice. Therefore, it seems to be essential that Indonesian EFL teacher education programs should revise and expand curriculum design in this area to meet EFL teachers' needs. For instance, a *TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language)* course may provide teacher candidates with practical suggestions on how to teach vocabulary along with introducing them to general teaching methodologies. Various vocabulary teaching techniques, as identified in this study, may also be introduced in this course. Moreover, a Vocabulary course should be provided as a compulsory course in this current curriculum used by the formal institutions.

The second implication goes to the EFL teacher educators who need to assist teacher candidates in developing teaching proficiency in the area of vocabulary instruction. It is necessary that EFL teachers be equipped with technological knowledge. Teachers' superficial knowledge on the use of technology for teaching was seen from their observed teaching practice where they merely applied very simple technology, such as Power point presentation, in delivering lessons. As a consequence, some training on the use of advanced technology for teachers should be taken into account by the teacher educators, the schools, and even the policy makers. These classroom challenges are aligned with Asan (2003) and Buabeng-Andoh (2012) who found out that teachers' lack of technological competence which involves lack of hardware, lack of knowledge and skills about using computers, lack of training or insufficient training opportunities, lack of teachers' confidence and crowded classrooms were determined as the most important problems faced by the teachers.

Third, the results of the study reported have implications for the teaching and learning of productive vocabulary knowledge for secondary school students in Indonesia. English teaching in secondary schools is used to being characterized by grammar and translation. Based on the findings, the EFL teacher participants concentrated more on students' receptive vocabulary development rather than to their productive vocabulary development. To make it balance, productive vocabulary knowledge should be integrated in the English curriculum by the development of communicative skills and the ability to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels. When reading a text, listening to a dialogue, or discussing a topic, students may incidentally learn some words or phrases. But the vocabulary is not learned in depth. In other words, students may acquire, through communicative tasks, a large number of words that they are able to recognize but could not use productively. In order to improve students' vocabulary knowledge in terms of both receptive and productive abilities, it is very important to combine learning vocabulary incidentally through communicative activities with explicit vocabulary learning. By explicitly learning different aspects of words (such as their meanings, forms, and use) and being exposed to these words in other areas of their course work, students will gradually be able to use them receptively and productively. Teachers may also include some vocabulary enhancement activities in language classes. For example, retelling stories, problem solving and information transfer activities are all very useful for students to learn to use words productively.

The last implication pertains to the nature of Indonesian school and national examination which focuses more on word meaning rather than the other vocabulary knowledge aspects, such as word form and word use. This is reflected through the content of the selected textbook which gives attention to the meanings of new words in a text or individual sentences. Based on the findings of this study, the used textbook taught to high school students does not have ample contexts for teaching vocabulary. Additionally, few sufficient sections are provided for students to practice vocabulary. This finding is in congruence with the findings of Jahangard (2007), Riazi & Mosalanejad (2011), and Riazi & Aryashokouh (2007) who suggest an immediate reformation with respect to the textbooks at high school level. Therefore, it is suitable and essentially needed for Indonesian EFL teaching programs to give a request to textbook designers to make required modifications or changes based on empirical research to remove this problem. Of course, teachers' cognitions and personal implications would definitely be constructive, if their theories are gathered through a comprehensive survey and contributed to the modifications. In addition, Indonesian EFL teaching programs also need to allocate more time to English course in high school as this is proven to be one of the major concerns of the participants. Based on the findings in this study, Indonesian EFL teaching programs additionally need to make a pleasing balance between the textbook objectives and the nature of final examinations they expect to be taken.

## 5. Conclusion

This present research expands studies of L2 teachers' cognitions by investigating EFL teachers' cognitions of vocabulary instruction in Indonesia, particularly in Samarinda, East Kalimantan. It focuses on four areas, namely: teachers' beliefs about vocabulary role, teachers' knowledge about vocabulary teaching and learning, prior language learning experience, and some factors impeding the flow of classroom instruction. In addition, the study revealed some correspondence and discrepancy between teachers' cognitions and their vocabulary instructional practices. These results imply that a large amount of work needs to be carried out by the whole elements of education, such as teachers, students, schools, and even government, in order that the ideal picture of classroom instructional practices, particularly in teaching EFL vocabulary, can be attained.

Considering that the current study is the first of its type focusing on the relationship between teachers' cognitions and practices in English language teaching in Indonesian context, this study may contribute to the field of SLA. However, it is important to reiterate that there are some limitations of this study. First, the investigation of each EFL teacher participants was not carried out in one semester teaching-term due to the requests from the participants. Second, all research participants were female teachers and were incidentally selected for this study. Therefore, the involvement of male teachers might provide new insights for picturing teachers' cognitions about vocabulary instruction or other language areas in Indonesian classrooms. Third, students' perspectives on vocabulary instruction in the classroom have not been explored in this study since the success of English Language Teaching (ELT) is believed to begin by understanding teachers' cognitions before dealing more comprehensively with the students. Consequently, it would be beneficial for future researchers to consider scrutinizing students' cognition about English Language Learning (ELL).

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