

Teacher language awareness: Insights from vocabulary knowledge profiles and individual teaching philosophies

Arthur McNeill

Language Center, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

lcamcneill@ust.hk

Abstract

Two factors that have an obvious influence upon English teachers' performance are their command of the language and their preferred teaching approaches. The paper reports an experimental study that investigates the relationship between teachers' sensitivity to lexical difficulty in pedagogical texts and (a) different vocabulary knowledge profiles on the part of teachers, and (b) individual teaching beliefs and practices. 20 experienced non-native speaker (NNS) English teachers took part in a series of vocabulary tests designed to shed light on their knowledge of aspects of a set of English words. Sensitivity to lexical difficulty in reading texts was measured by asking the teachers to study a pedagogical text and identify items which L2 learners had found difficult. Approaches to handling language material in the classroom and beliefs about language teaching were investigated by means of a questionnaire. Correlation and cluster analysis were used to identify separate clusters of teacher types. The results suggest that teachers who are sensitive to lexical difficulty tend to have good semantic knowledge and prefer to use L2 to explain word meaning.

Keywords

Language awareness; non-native speaker teachers

Introduction

The characteristics of successful language teachers have been a topic of interest in applied linguistics for decades. In recent years, scholars of language awareness have examined aspects of teachers' knowledge about language and how language knowledge can influence teachers' classroom performance (e.g. Andrews 2007). The present study examines possible relationships between teacher's L2 competence, their awareness of their students' language learning and their preferred teaching approach. For the purpose of the study, these relationships were operationalized as shown in Figure 1.

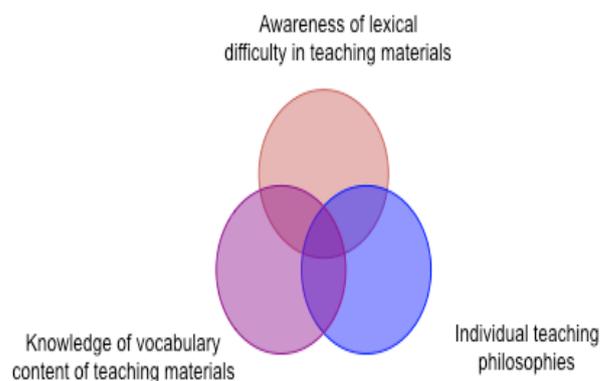


Figure 1: Relationships explored in the study

The study asked a group of 20 experienced Cantonese-speaking teachers of English to take part in three tasks: (a) some tests of vocabulary knowledge, based on words that occur in their teaching materials, (b) identification of “difficult” lexis (from a learner’s perspective), and (c) a questionnaire about aspects of their teaching approach and beliefs.

There were two research questions:

1. To what extent is teachers’ ability to make judgements about lexical difficulty related to their own knowledge of vocabulary?
2. Is the ability to make sound judgements about lexical difficulty related to particular beliefs and practices in language teaching?

1 Details of the three tasks

1.1 Vocabulary knowledge tests (VKT)

Four vocabulary tests were constructed based on 30 words selected from a text used in upper secondary schools in Hong Kong. The tests addressed the following dimensions of word knowledge:

- (a) Explaining meaning in L2 (English)
- (b) Explaining meaning in L1 (Chinese)
- (c) Morphology (production of a different form of the word)
- (d) Phonology (phonemic transcription)

1.2 Lexical difficulty awareness (LDA)

From a previous study (McNeill 2005) using the same pedagogical text, it had been found that eight of the items had been unknown to the majority (90%) of the upper secondary students (n=200), while eight words were known by the majority of the students. These sixteen items (eight “difficult” words and eight “easy” words) were used as test items in a lexical difficulty awareness task. The teachers in the present study were asked to read through the text and try to identify the eight most difficult and eight easiest words from a student’s perspective. All of the teachers were familiar with the upper secondary curriculum and its students.

1.3 Individual teaching philosophy (ITP)

Teaching philosophy was investigated by means of a questionnaire arranged in three sections:

- (a) General orientation in L2 teaching (6 items)
- (b) Aspects of teaching vocabulary (6 items)
- (c) Aspects of teaching reading (8 items).

The questions were formulated based on key issues in teaching vocabulary and reading, as well as the basic constructs of communicative language teaching (CLT), which was the recommended approach for Hong Kong schools at the time. A number of the questions asked teachers about their preferences for using English and/or Chinese in the classroom. The questionnaire items asked teachers to indicate the extent to which they agreed with 20 statements.

2 Data analysis

Scores were calculated for the four VKT tests, the LDA task and the IDP responses. Correlations were calculated between VKT and LDA and a cluster analysis was undertaken using the entire data set in order to find out whether a number of characteristics were shared by particular groupings of teacher types.

3 Results

3.1 VKT and LDA

The mean scores are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: VKT and LDA summarized scores

Task	Mean	Range	S.D.
Explain meaning (L2)	22.05	6-30	6.25
Explain meaning (L1)	21.60	9-28	4.43
Morphology	20.55	12-24	2.96
Phonology	20.30	0-28	8.26
LDA	7.17	3-11	2.23

The correlations of VKT and LDA are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: VKT and LDA Correlations

	Explain (L2)	Explain (L1)	Morph.	Phon.
LDA	.535 (p<.05)	.305	.281	.232
Explain (L2)		.858 (p<.001)	.726 (p<.001)	.278
Explain (L1)			.687 (p<.001)	.286
Morph.				.055

3.2 Cluster analysis

Three main clusters emerged from the analysis, with one teacher constituting a cluster of his/her own. Of particular interest was the teaching philosophy of the group (n=5) who demonstrated high LDA and VKT scores.

The groupings are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Four clusters and their membership

Subject ID	Cluster	Distance
13	2	0.000
2	1	2.425
11	1	1.217
12	1	1.296
15	1	1.755
17	1	1.865
8	3	1.414
9	3	1.581
10	3	1.658
7	3	1.658
16	3	2.958
18	3	2.121
20	3	1.414
19	3	2.179
14	4	2.088
1	4	1.922
3	4	1.641
4	4	2.774
5	4	1.537
6	4	2.007

4 Discussion

A number of interesting insights were gained from analyzing the results. Possibly the most surprising was the finding that several of the teachers had a poor grasp of the lexical content of texts they use in their everyday teaching. There would appear to be a need to look in more detail at teachers' understanding of the language content of their teaching materials. The scores on the VKT reveal a wide range of ability, with particular concerns about teachers' morphological and phonological awareness. Giving explanations of word meaning using L2 appears to represent a greater challenge for teachers that using L1.

Possibly less surprising was the finding that while some teachers appear to be sensitive to the lexical difficulties in texts, others appear to be unaware of the challenges faced by their students when they read an English text. This psycholinguistic dimension of teacher language awareness appears to have been relatively unexplored so far and invites closer attention. Ideally, teachers should focus their attention on language that their students need to learn and avoid wasting time explaining language that students already know or can understand by themselves.

The teachers who performed well on the Lexical Difficulty Awareness (LDA) task tended to prefer using English to explain the meaning of new words, while most of the poor performers on LDA used Cantonese regularly in the English classroom. The ability to use English for explanations requires a high level of competence in English, since paraphrasing, simplification and synonymy are all involved. It is possible that some of the experienced teachers who participated in the study do not possess such a flexible command of English.

5 Conclusion

This small-scale study of a group of 20 teachers reveals enormous individual differences within an apparently homogeneous teaching population. To return to the two research questions, there does appear to be a strong positive relationship between a teacher's command of English vocabulary and their sensitivity to lexical difficulty from a learner's perspective. As far as individual teaching philosophies are concerned, teachers who are most sensitive to lexical difficulty tend to favour the use of English for classroom explanations and encourage their students to work out meaning by themselves from examples. As the results suggest, there is a need for further research into the psycholinguistic dimension of teacher language awareness.

6 References and appendix

6.1 References

- Andrews, S. (2007) *Teacher language awareness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- McNeill, A. (2005) Non-native speaker teachers and awareness of difficulty in pedagogical texts. In Lurda, E. (ed.) *Non-Native Language Teachers. Perceptions, Challenges and Contributions to the Profession*. New York: Springer.

6.2 Appendix

ITP Questionnaire Statements

Section A: General Orientation

1. I generally subscribe to the Communicative Language Teaching.
2. I don't believe in any single approach to teaching English.
3. My teaching style is heavily influenced by the textbook I use.
4. I constantly experiment with new approaches to teaching.
5. English should be used wherever possible in the classroom.
6. I believe my students learn English better if I give explanations in Chinese.

Section B: Teaching Vocabulary

1. I use English to explain meaning.
2. Explanations in Chinese are more effective.
3. Students should work out meaning from examples rather than through teacher explanation.
4. Getting students to produce a sentence with the target word is an effective way of checking learning.
5. I always teach the pronunciation of new words.
6. I spend less than 10% of classroom time on vocabulary.

Section C: Teaching Reading

1. I find it difficult to know which words students will find difficult.
2. Textbooks should indicate the difficult words.
3. L1 translations of new words should appear in texts.
4. The teacher needs to check whether students understand the vocabulary content of reading texts.

5. I explain new vocabulary before students read a text.
6. I explain new vocabulary while students are reading a text.
7. I explain new vocabulary after students have read a text.
8. Students should check the meaning of new words on their own before they come to class.