Understanding Teachers' Pedagogical Knowledge in ESL Vocabulary Teaching

Maizatulliza Muhamad[1], Richard Kiely[2]

ABSTRACT

In communicative language teaching classrooms, one of the main emphases is on students' ability to use the target language for real life purposes. To achieve this goal, teachers may have to ensure that students have adequate vocabulary to express their feelings and ideas. Previous research on vocabulary teaching and learning tends to be quantitative in nature focusing on testing the effectiveness of some techniques. This research study however, is an attempt to understand teachers' pedagogical systems that influence their practice in actual classroom interactions during vocabulary teaching and learning. In-depth interviews and classroom observations with two experienced Malaysian ESL teachers were conducted. The interviews highlighted the teachers' beliefs as well as challenges they faced with regards to vocabulary teaching and learning. The classroom observations revealed that their practice was very much a reflection of their own beliefs, based on their own experience as students as well as teachers. The results of this study showcased the fact that teachers operate within the spectrum of their pedagogical knowledge.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, ESL, Teaching of Vocabulary.
This is an open access article under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

1. Introduction

In communicative language teaching classrooms, one of the main principles held is "Language is a system for the expression of meaning: primary function – interaction" (Nunan & Lamb, 2001: p.31). Thus, the main focus in these classes is on developing students' communicative ability. As such, language learning is seen as "… learning how to communicate as a member of a particular socio-cultural group" (Breen & Candlin, 2001, p.10). Folse (2004) posits that students can still communicate even if they do not master the grammar of the language. However, poor vocabulary may result in some communication difficulties. Without ample vocabulary knowledge, students therefore, may not be able

---

[1] Senior Lecturer, English Language and Literature Department, Sultan Idris Education University, Malaysia. Email: maizatulliza@fbk.upsi.edu.my
[2] Professor, Modern Languages and Linguistics Department, University of Southampton, United Kingdom. Email: R.N.Kiely@soton.ac.uk

to communicate well. As one of the aims of communicative language teaching is to ensure communicative ability, vocabulary should be an integral part of teaching and learning.

Research on vocabulary teaching and learning is abundance (Schuetze, 2015; Moskovsky et.al, 2015; Qing Ma, 2014; Khoii & Sharifar, 2013). These studies focus especially on the effectiveness of certain techniques or approaches in teaching and learning vocabulary and their results tend to be quantitative in nature. The results of the said studies provided some insights on best approaches which teachers may want to adopt. However, according to Schmitt (2008),

> … the best means of achieving good vocabulary learning is still unclear, partly because it depends on a wide variety of factors and so it is perhaps not surprising that teachers and learners have often been unsure of the best way to pursue it (p. 329).

This suggests that, vocabulary is complex to teach as the rules are not as structured as grammar and practices cannot play the role they play for skills in lessons. Therefore, teaching methods or approaches are dependent on teachers' own understanding and construction of the challenges. As such, to understand effective vocabulary teaching and identify ways of improving it, there is a need to understand teacher cognitions related to vocabulary teaching. According to Borg (2003),

> … teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalised, and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts, and beliefs (p. 81).

The above quote indicates that teachers' instructional decisions are the results of a myriad of factors, which very often are influenced by their personal experience and point of view. Their decisions may be the results of "…their pedagogical systems – the beliefs, knowledge theories, assumptions, and attitudes that teachers hold about all aspects of their work …" (Borg, 1998: p. 9). Understanding these systems would allow some knowledge on the reasons behind the teachers' practice in the classrooms. This is turn, may help teachers and students determine the kinds of approaches and techniques which are best for their own context. Based on the premise, this qualitative study was conducted to investigate two Malaysian ESL teachers' pedagogical systems which influence their instructional decisions in teaching vocabulary. The findings suggest that teachers' practice in the classrooms depends on their beliefs as English language learners and teachers. As such, the attempt to identify the best approach to teach vocabulary, should consider teachers' beliefs.

This paper will continue with the discussion on vocabulary teaching and learning as well as the context and the participants of the study. It will be followed by the data collection and analysis procedures, the presentation of the findings and the discussion before it ends with a conclusion.

2.   Vocabulary teaching and learning

In the research about English language vocabulary teaching and learning, two of the main issues discussed are 1) quantity – how many words and 2) quality – what knowledge of each word. The quantity of words indicates the number of vocabulary learners should know in order to use and understand a language (Schmitt, 2014; Nation, 2001). The quality of words is the elements of vocabulary which learners should know in order to use them correctly. Nation (2001) claims that knowing a word means knowing the 1) form – spoken, written, word parts; 2) meaning – form and meaning, concept and references, association; and 3) use – grammatical functions, collocations, constraints on use. In the classrooms, these three components of word knowledge may be learned incidentally or explicitly (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2010).

Incidental learning of vocabulary involves learners acquiring new words subconsciously while engaging in learning activities designed for developing skills such as reading or writing. Explicit vocabulary learning, on the other hand, involves specific activities designed to ensure students' awareness and acquisition of specific words, which may be selected in advance. Even though incidental learning of vocabulary has its merit, Nation (2001) states that in many instances, learners may not acquire sufficient vocabulary to become effective language users. Thus, explicit vocabulary learning is necessary for many language learners.

In communicative language teaching classrooms, incidental and explicit focus on vocabulary are related to Ellis, Basturkmen and Loewen's (2002) discussion on 'focus-on-form' (FoF) practice. This practice refers to "… the treatment of linguistic form in the context of performing a communicative

task" (p. 1). FoF takes place when the need to highlight specific linguistic features such as lexical, arises during communicative focused activities. Explicit FoF happens when a teacher, for example, purposely includes a focus on one or two vocabulary items when designing a lesson which aims to develop students' communicative ability. Incidental FoF on the other hand, may be observed when a teacher in a communicative classroom, shifts her attention to explaining the meaning of a word students could not understand, without a prior plan (Ellis et.al, 2002).

2.1   Studies investigating vocabulary teaching and learning

Research on vocabulary teaching and learning has shown various techniques and approaches which may be implemented in the classrooms. For example, Khoii and Sharififar (2013) investigated the effectiveness of rote-memorizing – learning of material by repeating it until it is memorized – and semantic mapping – "… a visual strategy for vocabulary expansion and extension of knowledge by displaying in categories words related to one another …" (p. 202) – on the acquisition of L2 vocabulary. They discovered that even though rote memorization has been criticised for its lack of communicative value, its effectiveness in helping students increase word storage was similar to semantic mapping technique.

In a study by Schuetze (2015), the spacing technique, which involves determining the type of intervals that lead to the highest vocabulary retention rates, was discovered to be useful to help students gain vocabulary for both short-term and long-term memory. Even though the results showed some variations on the mean scores between the expanded group and the uniform group, one conclusion derived was this technique carried some merits teachers could use in the classrooms to help learners increase and retain their vocabulary knowledge.

Comparing two groups in reading classes, File and Adams, (2010) developed reading treatments to measure the rates of vocabulary learning and retention. One of the groups studied some words in the reading passage in isolation (explicit FoF) and the other group learned the same words while they were reading the passage (incidental FoF). The statistical analysis they employed showed both explicit and incidental vocabulary instructions led to similar rates of vocabulary retention. However, the explicit instructions led to a higher rate of learning compared to the incidental instructions. The results of the study support the contention that explicit teaching is necessary for vocabulary knowledge development.

The studies discussed above showed the variety of techniques and approaches for the teaching and learning of vocabulary. The results were useful as they informed teachers the kinds of techniques they can employ in the classrooms to help students improve vocabulary knowledge. Using the findings of these studies, teachers may design lessons on vocabulary building and retaining. However, according to Nation (2005), vocabulary teaching tends to be problematic because at every interaction, teachers can only focus on a small number of words and only on a few parts of what students need to know about a word. Thus, explicit vocabulary teaching using the above techniques may not always be possible and may not be the only way to teach and acquire vocabulary.

All of the above studies are quantitative in nature. Xie (2013) however, conducted a qualitative research study analysing four English-major instructors conducting vocabulary lessons in a university in China. Unlike a number of other studies that focused on investigating the effectiveness of certain vocabulary teaching techniques, this study explored actual interactions that took place during vocabulary lessons. She discovered that the instructors' practice tended to be intentional, deliberate and extensive. Even though this study managed to provide an insight into what happened in actual classrooms during vocabulary teaching, it did not reveal the instructors' pedagogical knowledge underlying the practice.

Most of the studies above have one similarity. They were conducted in a controlled environment – with some pre-determined categories – where activities were carefully designed so that the effectiveness could be measured. However, in an actual classroom practice, teachers do not function in a context where everything is within their control. Very often their practice is influenced by various contextual factors such teachers' own skills and competencies as well as students' expectations. Borg (1998) claims that investigation on teachers' "… complex, personalised pedagogical system …" provides essential information that explains actual accounts of teaching practice (p. 28).

Even though Borg's study was on the teaching of grammar, we extend his framework on vocabulary teaching.

In addition to research on specific techniques on teaching and learning vocabulary, research on teacher cognition has been abundance especially in relation to grammar and skills. For example, Irvine-Niakaris and Kiely (2015) studied the pedagogical knowledge practice of four experienced teachers in reading lessons. The results indicated that the teachers displayed knowledge and skills which were in tandem with "... the theoretical and methodological principles of the teaching of reading conceptualized in this study as knowledge about reading instruction with varied adaptations" (p. 389). This study proved that teachers' practice in the classrooms is very much a reflection of their beliefs, knowledge and experience. As there has been little similar studies in the context of vocabulary teaching, we set to investigate teachers' pedagogical knowledge in this area.

3.   Contexts and participants

This study was conducted in Malaysia where English is taught as a second language using a communicative language teaching syllabus. In the Malaysian ESL syllabus document, vocabulary is presented in a 'Language Content' section consisting of a list of words which may be introduced to students during teaching and learning. According to Coxhead (2000),

> An academic word list should play a crucial role in setting vocabulary goals for language courses, guiding learners in their independent study, and informing courses and material designers in selecting texts and developing learning activities. (p. 214)

A word list functions as a guidance for teachers and learners in the process of teaching and learning vocabulary. The list provides the basis of selections for various materials and activities. However, wordlists are "... restricted to individual words" (Martinez & Schmitt, 2012: p. 302). An individual word list means there is no specific instruction as to how these words should be introduced to students in the classrooms. In the Malaysian ESL syllabus document, it is stated that teachers are to treat the word list only as a reference as they are not obliged to teach these words and are free to introduce other vocabulary deemed fit (Curriculum Specifications, 2003). Based on the content of the syllabus document, it may be assumed that teachers have the autonomy to design activities or discussions on vocabulary according to their own preference and knowledge. In other words, the lack of instruction means the teachers have to rely heavily on their own pedagogical knowledge when making instructional decisions for vocabulary teaching, thus, strengthening the relevance of research into teacher thinking in this area.

The teachers observed and interviewed for this study were two very experienced female English language teachers – T1 and T2. They were both in their mid-forties and have been teaching English for more than twenty years. We chose to study experienced teachers as they have formed a solid understanding of the requirements of the syllabus. They have also developed a particular style of teaching which reflects their pedagogical beliefs and knowledge. Unlike novice teachers who may still be grappling with many aspects of the system, these two teachers would provide us with more definite insights into their beliefs and practice in the teaching of vocabulary in actual classroom settings. Their experience as learners and teachers are typical of a large number of English teachers in the Malaysian ESL context. During the data collection process, both teachers were teaching Form Two students aged 14 years old in two suburb government schools.

4.   Data collection and analysis

For the purpose of this study, we conducted 15 non-participant classroom observations – seven observations for Teacher 1 (T1) and eight observations for Teacher 2 (T2). All 15 lessons were video-recorded and the observations commenced from the moment the teachers entered the class and ended when they left the classrooms. Each recorded classroom interaction was transcribed and the transcriptions were shown to the teachers for verification purposes. Cohen et al., (2000) claim that observations would enable us to understand the real context of programmes and discover important information that may not be revealed in an interview.

Even though we recorded the whole of each eighty-minute lesson, the analysis for this study focused on the episodes where vocabulary was involved. Following the method employed by Kiely and

Davies (2010), we defined episodes on vocabulary as the time in the classrooms during which teachers and students involved in activities or discussions where one or more vocabulary became the focus of the interaction. These episodes have the following two characteristics:

- Boundaries – Each episode had a clear start and finish for both the teachers and the researchers.
- Theme – Each episode focused on a specific vocabulary.

In addition to the classroom observations, individual interviews were conducted with the two teachers. Bogden and Biklen (1998: p. 94) claim that, "… interview is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects interpret some piece of the world". Using the semi-structured interview approach, we formulated the following five main guiding questions:

a) How do you view the importance of vocabulary in language teaching and learning?
b) What is the best way to learn vocabulary?
c) How did you learn vocabulary as learners/teachers?
d) How do you normally teach vocabulary?
e) Which aspects of vocabulary do you normally focus on?

The above questions were only guiding questions and we did not ask these questions in this order or in the forms they were written. The interviews were first conducted prior to the observations. The purpose of the interviews was to gain some primary ideas on how the two teachers viewed vocabulary teaching and learning. After each classroom observation, the teachers were once again interviewed. They were prompted to discuss their rationale, their beliefs, their experience as well as their pedagogical beliefs that led to their practice during those episodes on vocabulary. All of the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were shown to the teachers, again for verification purposes. Analysis of the interview data started with the content analysis coding of the teacher's responses to the interview questions. Each response was coded based on the following three main criteria:

a) Teachers' beliefs about the teaching and learning of vocabulary;
b) Teachers' own experience in learning and acquiring vocabulary; and
c) Teachers' practice in teaching vocabulary.

5. Findings

The data sets used for the discussion in this sections are as follows:
- 17 audio-recorded and transcribed interviews.
- 6 video-recorded and transcribed classroom observations

We will first present the data gathered from the interviews prior to the classroom observations. This will be followed by the data from the classroom observations.

5.1 Interviews

Both T1 and T2 believed in the importance of having an extensive vocabulary knowledge to help them fair as English language students and teachers. They both claimed that wide range of vocabulary enabled them to speak, write and understand English better. However, this belief was not extended to their practice as English language teachers. To both teachers, vocabulary was not their priority in the classrooms. For example, T1 claimed that compared to grammar, vocabulary was given less attention. According to her,

Okay, well, vocabulary is important [but] they are never the main focus, my main focus in the classrooms. The main focus is always grammar. What I mean is, when I plan my lessons, let say, reading lesson, so I will specify one or two grammar items [which] will be included in my plan, but not vocabulary. If students don't understand any words in the reading passage, then I will explain the meaning or I ask them to check the dictionary. I don't remember planning a lesson based on one or two specific words that I, you know, think of before the class. So if I happen to teach good class, the students understand all the words in the passage, then there would be no vocabulary. Well, I mean of course a lot of vocabulary but we don't discuss any because they don't have any problem.

Similarly, T2 posited

Vocabulary learning in my class mainly involves [me] asking the students whether there are any words that they don't understand. This happens for example, when I give them a passage to read. Then I discuss with them the meaning. Ask [them] to refer to the dictionary or guess based on context. If I know there's not enough time, then I just tell them the meaning, no discussion. Do I design a specific lesson plan for vocabulary learning? No, I don't. Vocabulary is too wide. There are too many words. Students will learn new words while doing other activities. Learning grammar is also, you know, learning vocabulary. So basically, vocabulary is being learned all the time. It's just that, it is learned subconsciously, very little direct teaching.

Based on the above claims, vocabulary, even though important, was not the focus of the teachers' lessons. Unlike grammar, vocabulary was the language item which would be dealt with only when students faced some difficulties. This suggests the existence of incidental FoF practice (Ellis et.al, 2002). Vocabulary lessons in their classes took place in the form of discussing, explaining and finding the meaning of unfamiliar words. The teachers mentioned about asking students to use a dictionary with the sole purpose of discovering the meaning of the incomprehensible words.

The teachers' practice stemmed from their beliefs based on their experience as English language students, English language teacher trainees as well as English language teachers for more than 20 years. T1 mentioned,

Even when I was in school, I don't quite remember my teachers teaching me vocabulary. I mean, you know, I can tell you how I learned grammar in the class, but vocabulary, not really. I happen to like English so I read English story books, different type, Mills & Boon *(Laugh)*, as a teenager of course but that's how I learn new vocabulary. I'm not saying my teachers did not teach me any vocabulary at all but what I mean is I gained a lot of vocabulary through my own reading, listening to songs, English songs, Debbie Gibson, Tiffany *(Laugh)*, and I guess my students, I mean I expect them to learn new vocab on their own as well. I can do so little as their teacher because I cannot focus on vocabulary all the time in the class.

Resonating T1's claim, T2 stated

I remember one of my English teachers made us bring our dictionary to her class and made us check the dictionary every time we didn't understand [a word]. Not much teaching of vocabulary going on but she sort of developed that habit for me, you know, use the dictionary, and I read a lot of story books, English story books, so after sometimes, I guess, my English got better. I know more vocabulary. I do have friends who were not very good in English and they always said English is difficult. I found English was not that difficult, the only subject in school I was good at. So I guess I was inspired to read a lot and all and that's how I think I learned vocabulary, informally, not in the class but while reading at home, watching tv, you know. I notice same pattern with my good students. They read story books a lot. So yes, their English is good. I don't really have to teach them vocabulary at all in the class.

Both teachers had a similar experience of acquiring English language vocabulary. They both did not have much recollection of learning new vocabulary in their English language classes. Instead, vocabulary knowledge was developed as a result of their own interest in the English language. As such, it can be suggested that, in this context, the apprenticeship of observation (Borg, 2004) is a major driver of practice in the teachers' current classrooms. The apprenticeship of observation (AoO) is the term used to describe the situation whereby teachers develop their perspectives on teaching and learning based on their experience as students, observing their own teachers in action. As both teachers did not recall much vocabulary teaching took place in their English classes, it may be assumed that their practice in teaching vocabulary was the result of a pre-conceptual idea developed as learners. The AoO is apparent as both teachers expected their students to learn vocabulary on their own, transcending their experience as learners, to their students.

The teachers' experience as English language students was complimented by their experience as English language teacher trainees. Both teachers talked about learning subjects such as 'The teaching of grammar' and 'The teaching of language skills' in the university, but not 'The teaching of vocabulary'. This, according to them, suggested that vocabulary was not the main focus of teaching and learning in the classrooms. The belief was intensified by the specifications of the Malaysian ESL syllabus document which mentioned vocabulary only briefly. T1 stipulated,

As a teacher trainee, doing TESL, I never got the impression that vocabulary is a big deal, you know. Most of the time it's grammar and of course, the skills just like the syllabus and I guess, the TESL programme that I went to, would make reference to the syllabus because after all, we would go out and teach in schools using this syllabus. So, I guess, it's not surprising if I don't always think about vocabulary when I go to class *(Laugh).* Now that you ask me about vocabulary, then only it got me thinking of it *(Laugh),* but, yes, people don't really talk about vocabulary, how you teach [vocabulary] or how the students learn [vocabulary]. People, I mean, I expect my students to learn new vocabulary, you know, on their own as they do other activities inside and outside the class.

The teachers' initial belief about vocabulary teaching and learning was clearly developed by factors which became the backdrop of their experience learning English. Obviously, vocabulary was the language items they were expected to develop on their own whilst learning grammar as well as the language skills. The fact that the specifications of the Malaysian ESL syllabus document dedicated a very small fraction to vocabulary further enhanced the teachers' assumption and attitude about vocabulary - it was less important compared to grammar and the four skills.

5.2   Classroom observations

The two teachers' beliefs on vocabulary teaching and learning were translated into their practice in the classrooms. In the fifteen classroom observations conducted, we identified only six episodes on vocabulary – four episodes from T1 and two episodes from T2. All six episodes – lasted between three to ten minutes – occurred in the form of the teachers explaining to the students the meaning of words found in the materials given to them. In addition to these episodes, throughout the observations, we noticed both teachers repeatedly reminded their students to use the dictionaries should they encountered any incomprehensible words. The following table summarizes the six episodes on vocabulary.

Table 1: Episodes on vocabulary

Teachers	Vocabulary episode
Teacher 1 (T1)	Inhospitable - T1 explained the meaning of 'inhospitable' Thermal wear - T1 explained the meaning of 'thermal wear' Festivities - T1 explained the meaning of 'festivities' Abandon - T1 explained the meaning of 'abandon'
Teacher 2 (T2)	Stir - T2 described how the word 'stir' is equivalent to *'kacau'* in the Malay language Suspension - T2 explained the meaning of 'suspension'

The first example of an episode on vocabulary is demonstrated in the following excerpt from one of T1's classes. At the end of this lesson, the students were expected to answer ten reading comprehension questions based on a passage about two brothers exploring the North Pole. T1 commenced the class by explaining the purpose of the lesson and the task the students had to do. Once she was satisfied that her students understood her explanation, she then allocated 5 minutes for the students to read the passage silently. T1 also asked the students to underline all the words they did not understand while reading. The following episode took place after the students finished reading the passage.

Table 2: Classroom excerpt 1: Teacher 1

Turns	Classroom Interactions
T1	Okay, let's go back to our Read brothers. Do you have problems understanding the

	passage?
S1 (Sam)	Some words teacher.
T1	What words?
S1 (Sam)	Inhospitable?
T1	Okay, you don't know what it means? Do you know what is hospitable? Check your dictionary. Inhospitable is not hospitable.
S2 (Sara)	Not friendly?
T1	Okay, lets imagine North Pole. Very cold, very dangerous. Is it a nice place to visit?
Ss	(*In unison*) No.
T1	So that's why it is inhospitable, because the place is not nice. Malaysia is a hospitable place to visit right? Why?
S2 (Sara)	Not cold, not dangerous.
T1	Good Sara. That's what inhospitable mean.

This first episode on vocabulary, was immediately followed by a second episode which took place in the same class by T1. This second episode was a continuation of the discussion on the two brothers who went to the North Pole.

Table 3: Classroom excerpt 2: Teacher 1

Turns	Classroom Interactions
T1	Anything else? You can check your dictionary right? So if there's any word you don't understand, check your dictionary.
S3 (Tim)	Teacher, thermal underwear?
T1	Aaa, hmm, we don't wear that here in Malaysia. It's a kind of pants and shirt that you wear inside your clothes to keep you warm. Okay, refer to the interview. Gerald said several layers of clothing. So the first layer is the thermal underwear. Then maybe the t shirt. May be one or two t shirts because it's very cold. But thermal underwear is to keep you warm.
S4 (Kat)	Is it thick teacher?
T1	Not really but it's made of materials which will keep you warm, like cotton or wool. Okay? Any other words?
Ss	*Silent*
T1	Okay, you understand the rest right? Now, let's look at the questions.

In the two excerpts above, the discussions on the meaning of the words started when a student, Sam asked for the definition of the word 'inhospitable'. T1 responded by providing some descriptions of an inhospitable place. She then continued by giving an example of a place with the opposite qualities. The discussion on vocabulary resumed in the second episode with the word 'thermal wear', which was initiated by another student, Tim. T1 provided a descriptive explanation of a 'thermal wear'. Both episodes indicated an incidental FoF practice (Ellis et.al, 2002) as T1 did not plan in advance to shift the students' attention from the communicative activities to the two lexical items. During this particular lesson, T1 did not highlight any other words but the two presented in the above excerpts. In the interview conducted to discuss these episodes on vocabulary, T1claimed that that she did not plan to have an extensive discussion on vocabulary as her priority was on ensuring students to achieve the objective of the lesson. T1 explained,

I know it's such a short exchange to discuss vocabulary, but like I said before, vocabulary is not really the focus. It's just unplanned. If none of the students asked for the meaning of those words, this [discussion on vocabulary] would never take place. Again, I'm not saying it's not important, but this is something they can learn on their own. What's good about this is, hopefully, it will make the students aware that they should use their dictionary, you know, that vocabulary is also important. If I don't ask them about words they don't understand at all, they, the students might just, you know, ignore vocabulary. So, the little discussion we have, hopefully, will encourage them to use their dictionary more and learn more words.

T1's claim resonates, to a certain extent, with Nation's (2001) vocabulary acquisition strategy called "noticing". The strategy requires the teachers to help students become aware that vocabulary is a language item they need to learn. Even though Nation's strategy is far more complex as teachers should design lessons and materials to assist students 'notice' the words', T1's practice of highlighting words students do not understand, could be seen as a little step she made to raise her students' awareness.T1's practices in Classroom Excerpt 1 and 2 were the manifestation of her claims during the interview prior to the classroom observations that vocabulary was never her main focus in the classrooms.

The following classroom excerpt was taken from T2's class. The learning aim of the lesson was to get students to write an essay of 150 words describing the process of preparing a cup of coffee. During the first 20 minutes of the lesson, T2 discussed the content of the essay with the students. She wrote all the main ideas on the board and asked the students to copy them in their workbook. The students had to work individually and they were instructed to use a dictionary to help them with vocabulary. Once T2 was satisfied that she had provided all the information needed, she then asked the students to start writing. The class was in silent once the students started working on their essays. This particular episode took place at the fortieth minute of the eighty-minute lesson while the students were engrossed in their work.

Table 4: Classroom excerpt 3: Teacher 2

Turns	Classroom Interactions
S1 (Amy)	Teacher, what is '*kacau*'
T2	'*Kacau*'?
S1 (Amy)	Yes, teacher, '*kacau*' the coffee.
T2	Okay, what does the dictionary tell you?
S2 (Lynn)	Disturb?
T2	Disturb? Are you sure Lynn?
S3 (Meg)	Stir, teacher.
T2	What's that again, Meg?
S3 (Meg)	Stir, teacher. Stir the coffee.
T2	Yes, very good Meg.'*Kacau*' is stir. So, you stir the coffee. So, what is disturb?
S2 (Lynn)	'*Kacau*' also, teacher, in dictionary.
T2	Yes, disturb is also '*kacau*', but what is the difference? Why we cannot say disturb the coffee? Anyone?
S4 (Zara)	Disturb is not '*kacau*' with coffee *(Laugh)*. I don't know teacher.
T	Okay, remember I told you, when you use Malay-English dictionary, you cannot always use the first word the dictionary provided. Okay, those with dictionaries, look at the word '*kacau*' now. Okay, what do you see?
Ss	*(In unison, murmurs)* Disturb, harass, stir
T2	Yes, your dictionary lists, disturb, harass, stir. But, disturb is different from stir, disturb is '*ganggu*'. For example, Your younger sister disturbs you when you're studying. But when you cook, or make drinks, you don't disturb the water, you stir. Stir is also '*kacau*'. So both, disturb and stir mean '*kacau*' but you use them differently. In different situations.

The above excerpt shows that the episode on vocabulary was initiated by a student, Amy, who wanted to know the English translation for the Malay word '*kacau*'. T2 responded by asking the students about the translations they found in the dictionary. Based on the two different answers given by two different students, T2 highlighted the differences between the words 'disturb' and 'stir' which could be translated into one Malay word – '*kacau*'. T2 asked her students to be careful when they used a bilingual dictionary (in this particular case, a Malay-English dictionary) as they might not be able to use all of the words listed, in all contexts. For example, the word 'disturb', though carried the same

meaning with the word '*kacau*' in the Malay language, could not be used in the context of describing the process of making a cup of coffee.

In the interview discussing this episode on vocabulary, T2 claimed

I decided to have a little discussion on this because this is something that keeps on occurring. Students tend to use Malay-English dictionary, you know. Small little pocket dictionary. Helps them a lot, especially in writing. The problem is, they, I mean the dictionary, there's no context provided. So it's only list of English words for each Malay word entry. So, students normally use the first word on the list. I had students written something like 'I harass the water', disturb the water, quite common. So, I hope, with this discussion, I help the students to be aware that, you know, okay, you can use the dictionary, but not all [words] there can be used. To be honest, I don't think I do this often enough, only when problem occurs, like in this class. Sometimes, I, you know, when the student asked, what is '*kacau*' teacher, I would just tell her, 'stir', no discussion. But, for this particular lesson, I realised there is still time, so I decided to have a longer discussion. So time plays a role. I want them to finish their work, their essay, so more time is spent on writing.

The above interview data revealed that the episode on vocabulary in this particular class took place because this was a recurring problem and T2 had some time to spare to discuss the confusion. These two reasons suggest that vocabulary was not part of the lesson plan – indicating an incidental FoF practice (Ellis et.al, 2002) – and this reflects T2's belief about vocabulary teaching and learning. Unlike the two episodes in Classroom Excerpt 1 and 2 where T1 only explained the meanings of the words 'inhospitable' and 'thermal wear', T2 in this episode also made an attempt to explain the third component of 'knowing a word' – use (Nation, 2001). This is evident as T2 explained the constraint on using words in different contexts especially when translating a word from a language to the other.

These three episodes on vocabulary presented here are typical of our data sets. The focus on vocabulary occurred incidentally (Sonbul & Schmitt, 2013) and the two teachers' emphasis was on getting the students to understand the meaning of the words discussed.

6.   Discussion

Vocabulary, to the two teachers in this study, was not a priority in their classrooms. This view is also reflected in the specifications of the Malaysian ESL syllabus document as vocabulary is only presented in the form of a word list without any instruction on how the words should be presented to the students. However, for students to be able to communicate well, they need to have a strong grasp of vocabulary so that they can express ideas clearly. According to Schmitt and Schmitt (1995), vocabulary teaching can reach its maximum potential if vocabulary recycling design principle is used in the curriculum. The principle requires teachers to use materials which contain a list of recycled vocabulary to ensure an extensive exposure. However, just like the two teachers in this study, many teachers work within the constraint of a prescribed syllabus and textbooks, which do not put much emphasis on vocabulary. Because of this, Schmitt (2008) suggests teachers, on their own accord, to conduct explicit vocabulary teaching with repeated exposures to a large number of words. However, during the interviews, both teachers claimed that teaching vocabulary was not their main objectives. The data from the classroom observations depicted the kind of practice in which focus on vocabulary was only incidental and the words discussed were never recycled in the classes which followed. Nevertheless, both teachers' practices in the classrooms were rich in terms of learning opportunities provided for their students. This was evident, for example, by their constant encouragement for students to use the dictionary and their efforts to explain the meaning of words highlighted by their students.

According to Hatch and Brown (1995), when learning vocabulary, students need to 1) have sources to encounter new words, 2) learn the forms of the new words, 3) learn the meanings of the words, 4) make a strong memory of the words and 5) use the words. Schmitt (2008) further adds that all these have to be done with each word in different contexts. The data from the classroom observations for this study revealed that, the teachers did adhere to the first three strategies. They provided the opportunities for the students to encounter new words through their reading passages and writing exercises. By asking the students to identify words they did not understand, the teachers let them learn the forms and later the meaning of the words. However, there was no evidence of the

teachers' attempt to help students remember and use these words. Schmitt (2008) claims that even though knowing the meaning of the word is important, students should also be prepared to use the new words productively. Thus, knowing the meaning is not enough to guarantee accurate and appropriate production of the words.

As stated by Folse (2004), vocabulary should be explicitly taught and learned because it rarely develops through exposure to written or spoken language. This explains why students cannot be expected to learn vocabulary incidentally. However, it is almost impossible for teachers to teach students the entire list of the English language vocabulary. As such, they should make the students aware of how their vocabulary knowledge can be expanded. According to Littlewood (2004), there is the need for teachers in communicative language classrooms to provide guidance for students to overcome their weaknesses and enhance their strengths. Teachers should help students improve their language skills whenever the opportunity presents itself. The two teachers in this research study provided such opportunity by allowing their students to identify English words they could not comprehend and spent some time explaining the meaning of these words.

The teachers' practices in teaching vocabulary were very much repetitions of their own experience learning vocabulary. Both teachers claimed that they acquired their vocabulary through their own learning without specific guidance from their English teachers. They viewed their short engagements in the classrooms as reminders for the students to make the effort to improve their vocabulary knowledge.

7.   Conclusion

The various discussions on vocabulary teaching suggest that it should be an integral part of an ESL lesson. However, the data gathered from the interviews and the observations indicated that vocabulary teaching in the classrooms was simplified to only discussing the meaning of some incomprehensible words. The teachers' practices clearly reflected their pedagogical knowledge which stemmed from beliefs developed through their experience as English language learners and teachers. The findings are significant as they suggest that teachers' pedagogical knowledge would determine their practice in the classrooms. Therefore, any quest to identify the best approach to teach vocabulary, should consider this knowledge. This study was based on the practice of only two teachers. The data presented and discussed were analysed from a limited number of interviews and classroom observations which may not be typical of the context. Thus, in interpreting the findings, we have taken these limitations into consideration.

References

Breen, M.P. & Candlin, C.N. (2001). The essentials of a communicative curriculum in language teaching. In D.R. Hall & A. Hewings (Eds.), *Innovation in English language teaching* (pp9-26). London: Routledge.

Bogdan, R. C. & Biklen, S.R. (1998). *Qualitative research for education. An introduction to theory and methods*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Borg, M. (2004). The apprenticeship of observation. *ELT Journal,* 58(3), 274-276.

Borg, S. (1998). Teachers' pedagogical systems and grammar teaching: A qualitative study. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(1), 9-38.

Borg, S. (2003). Teacher cognition in language teaching: A review of research on what language teachers think, know, believe and do. Language Teaching Journal, 36, 81-109.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2000). *Research methods in education*. London: Routledge.

Coxhead A. (2000). A new academic word list. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34 (2), 213-38.

Curriculum Specifications (2003). Curriculum Development Center, Ministry of Education. Kuala Lumpur.

Ellis, R., Basturkmen, H. & Loewen, S. (2002). Doing focus-on-form. *Systems,* 30, 419-432.

File, K.E. & Adams, R. (2010). Should vocabulary instruction be integrated or isolated? *TESOL Quarterly,* 44 (2), 222-249.

Folse, K.S. (2004). Myths about teaching and learning second language vocabulary: What recent research says? *TESL Reporter,* 37(2), 1-13.

Hatch, E. & Brown, C. (1995). *Vocabulary, semantics and language education.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Irvine-Niakaris, C. & Kiely, R. (2015). Reading comprehension in test preparation classes: An analysis of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly,* 49(2), 369-392.

Kiely, R. & Davis, M. (2010). From transmission to transformation: Teacher learning in English for speakers of other languages. *Language Teaching Research,* 14(3), 277–295.

Khoii, R. & Sharififar, S. (2013). Memorization versus semantic mapping in L2 vocabulary acquisition. *ELT Journal,* 67(2), 199-209.

Littlewood, W. (2004). The task-based approach. Some questions and suggestions. *ELT Journal,* 58(4), 319-326.

Martinez, R. & Schmitt, N. (2012). A phrasal expressions list. *Applied Linguistics,* 33(3), 299-320.

Moskovsky, C., Guowu Jiang, Libert, A. & Seamus, F. (2015). Bottom-up or top-down: English as a foreign language vocabulary instruction for Chinese university students. *TESOL Quarterly,* 49(2), 256-277.

Nation, I. S. P. (2001*). Learning vocabulary in another language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nation, P. (2005). Teaching vocabulary. *Asian EFL Journal,* 7(3), 47-54.

Nunan, D. & Lamb, C. (2001). Managing the learning process. In D.R. Hall & A. Hewing (Eds.), *Innovation in English Language Teaching* (pp27-45*).* London: Routledge.

Qing Ma (2014). A contextualised study of EFL learners' vocabulary learning approaches: Framework, learner approach and degree of success. *The Journal of Asia TEFL,* 11(3), 1-156.

Schmitt, N. (2008). Instructed second language vocabulary learning. *Language Teaching Research, 12(3), 329-363.*

Schmitt, N. (2014). Size and depth of vocabulary knowledge: What the research shows. *Language Learning,* 64, 913-951.

Schmitt, N. & Schmitt, D. (1995). Vocabulary notebooks: Theoretical underpinnings and practice suggestions. *ELT Journal,*49(2), 133–143.

Schuetze, U. (2015). Spacing techniques in second language vocabulary acquisition: Short-term gains vs long-term memory. *Language Teaching Research,* 19(1), 28-42.

Sonbul, S. & Schmitt, N. (2010). Direct teaching of vocabulary after reading: Is it worth the effort? *ELT Journal,* 64(3), 253-260.

Sonbul, S.& Schmitt, N. (2013). Explicit and implicit lexical knowledge acquisition of collocations under different input conditions. *Language Learning,* 63(1), 121-159.

Xie, X. (2013). Vocabulary explanation in English-major university classrooms in China. *ELT Journal,* 67(4), 435-445.