

# Enhancing Grade 10 English learners' sentence construction through pre-teaching vocabulary strategies

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## Abstract

Constructing meaningful and grammatically correct sentences is critical for learners to express their ideas coherently in both written and oral communication. However, this remains a significant challenge for many learners, particularly those studying English as a Second Language. The effectiveness of language acquisition is closely linked to the instructional strategies employed by English First Additional Language (FAL) teachers. This study was underpinned by Shulman's theory of Pedagogical Content Knowledge and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which together provided a robust theoretical framework. Adopting a qualitative research design, the study investigated the implementation of pre-teaching vocabulary strategies by Grade 10 English FAL teachers and their influence on learners' sentence construction abilities. Data were collected through classroom observations involving nine teachers from schools in the Dzindi circuit. The findings revealed that pre-teaching vocabulary strategies significantly improved learners' ability to construct coherent sentences in English, thereby enhancing overall language proficiency and communicative competence.

**Keywords:** FAL; ESL; Learners; Pre-teaching strategies; Sentence construction



## INTRODUCTION



The significance of vocabulary in language learning and communication is well-established. As English functions as a global lingua franca, many individuals strive to master it, demonstrating a widespread pursuit of English language proficiency (StatsSA, 2003). Within academic contexts, vocabulary is critical for intellectual development. Babayiğit and Shapiro (2020) emphasise that a strong vocabulary base is essential for understanding and using language effectively. Mustapha and Argungu (2019) further assert that language, comprehension, and cognition are interlinked, with each influencing the others and shaping learning. The Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) echoes this view, highlighting vocabulary as fundamental to learners' thinking and academic progression (Department of Basic Education, 2016). Supporting this, Masrai and Milton (2021) associate vocabulary knowledge with academic success, while Zou, Huang, and Xie (2021) regard vocabulary instruction as vital for learner achievement. Wyse and Bradbury (2022) argue that vocabulary should

be prioritised over reading, listening, and speaking in English teaching.

However, vocabulary acquisition is challenging, especially for learners whose only exposure to English is in the classroom (Akram et al., 2020). Limited language input hampers their ability to understand unfamiliar vocabulary and syntactic complexity, which diminishes their engagement with academic content (Afzal, 2019). This can lead to frustration and disengagement, further hindering language development (Chen, 2020). Vocabulary constraints also affect sentence construction, particularly in Grade 10, where higher-level writing is crucial. Learners often struggle to express themselves clearly due to limited vocabulary, resulting in overly simplistic sentences (Yildiz & Inan, 2019; Wen & Liu, 2018).

These difficulties highlight the vital role of language teachers. However, research reveals that many educators face challenges in vocabulary instruction, including ineffective methods (Songbatumis, 2017), low learner engagement (Hiver et al., 2024), and inadequate use of

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communicative practices (Van Cahn & Renadya, 2017). Waqiah (2020) adds that overreliance on the mother tongue limits exposure to English. Vocabulary teaching is further complicated by the multifaceted nature of word knowledge. Nation (2019) argues that word comprehension goes beyond dictionary definitions. Barbaresi and Dressler (2020), and Yen and Hoai (2022), illustrate this with the word "book," which functions differently based on context and usage, which, amongst others, could include a printed publication and bound blank sheets for writing on when it has been used as a noun or reserving space when used as a verb.

Despite these challenges, CAPS offers structured vocabulary teaching guidelines. Gregorie, Ching, and Ilustra (2022), along with Pretorius (2016), affirm that effective teacher strategies significantly improve vocabulary acquisition. CAPS (2011) underscores the need for deep vocabulary knowledge in the FET phase, especially starting in Grade 10. This study thus investigates how teachers apply pre-teaching vocabulary strategies and promote sentence construction to enhance learners' vocabulary development.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Language acquisition has long been a focal point of extensive research, with scholars like Liu (2004) and Richards and Rodgers (2000) contributing to various theories on effective language teaching and learning methodologies. Within this rich landscape of pedagogical thought, Schmitt's (2010) and Chung's (2018) works have become seminal, offering foundational perspectives on how languages can be most effectively taught and learned. This study draws upon two particularly influential frameworks: Shulman's Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), initially presented in Shulman (1986) and Vygotsky (1962;1978;1986), respectively. Shulman's model emphasises the integration of teachers' subject matter expertise with their instructional philosophies, whereas Vygotsky highlights the importance of contextually appropriate teaching strategies. Given this study's aim to explore the implementation of pre-teaching vocabulary strategies and their impact on learners' ability to construct meaningful sentences in English, both theories were deemed relevant and synergistic. They provide a conceptual framework that suggests vocabulary instruction should be

both interactive and grounded in practical application.

### Strategies for vocabulary instruction

Vocabulary instruction in the English language encompasses both receptive and productive approaches. Receptive vocabulary involves understanding words heard or read, whereas productive vocabulary involves using words in speaking and writing. These approaches are derived from two fundamental instructional strategies: implicit (indirect) and explicit (direct) teaching. Implicit teaching immerses learners in the language environment, allowing them to acquire language skills unconsciously, similar to first language acquisition, without direct translation or explicit instruction. Although some favour its natural learning approach (Fernández, 2023), others deem it time-intensive (Dakhi & Fitria, 2019). Critics argue for employing effective, engaging teaching techniques. As described by Wahyudiati, Rohaeti, Wiyarsi, & Sumardi (2020), teaching strategies are subsets comprising various activities designed to achieve lesson objectives. Effective strategies involve learners in learning and encourage them to construct meanings from their interactions with texts and the environment (Allal, 2020).

The effectiveness of a teaching strategy, whether implicit or explicit, significantly impacts vocabulary learning. Both approaches can foster vocabulary knowledge and skills when correctly applied (Akbari, & Yazdani, 2020). In contexts like South Africa, where challenges such as limited vocabulary among teachers exist (Fesi, & Mncube, 2021), the CAPS document (2011) advocates for explicit vocabulary instruction, especially for learners struggling with implicit methods. This approach aligns with the need for context-aware literacy development (Luo & Xu, 2023).

### Explicit vocabulary instruction

Explicit vocabulary instruction involves consciously teaching the meanings of words through definitions and explanations (Webb, Yanagisawa, & Uchihara, 2020). This approach enhances word knowledge, communication skills, and learner motivation through supportive and engaging teaching practices (Fan, Antle, & Warren, 2020). It encompasses form-based, meaning-based, and rule-based explicit teaching strategies, fostering active learner participation (Dakhi & Fitria, 2019; Khayati & Hadi, 2021). The CAPS

framework supports utilising reading texts as a basis for teaching vocabulary, advocating for practical engagement through activities that bolster learners' vocabulary mastery (CAPS, 2011).

### **Pre-teaching vocabulary**

Pre-teaching vocabulary, defined as the instructive introduction of challenging vocabulary prior to text interaction, is posited to foster improved reading comprehension and text engagement. Numerous studies advocate this pedagogical approach, substantiating its positive impact on learners' proficiency in understanding and applying textual information effectively (Lawrence, 2014; Febrianti, Arifin, & Rohbiah, 2022; Putri, 2022). Critical to the success of pre-teaching strategies is the deliberate selection of words that are both pertinent to the instructional content and exhibit a high utility across various contexts. Beck and McKeown's (2016) vocabulary framework emphasises Tier 2 vocabulary due to its adaptability and prevalence in academic discourse. In the context of Grade 10 English learners grappling with sentence construction, pre-teaching is an advantageous pre-emptive approach.

This method equips learners with essential linguistic resources for both the assimilation of complex texts and the development of coherent written expression. Furthermore, Beck and McKeown (2016), observed that early exposure to new vocabulary strengthens learners' reading and writing capabilities by promoting adept word usage within appropriate contexts. Pre-teaching vocabulary is instrumental in educational scaffolding, bridging the gap between students' extant knowledge and novel academic concepts (Fisher & Frey, 2021). This strategy reinforces semantic relationships and fosters a cognitive framework supporting academic language acquisition.

### **Application of new words in sentences**

The pursuit of practical language utility encompasses the heart of language learning endeavours, with proficiency often being the endgame for those acquiring English as an additional language (Sukyng, 2021; Fitria, 2020). The transition from passive vocabulary recognition to active employment within expressive modalities is central to the instructional narrative. This narrative is echoed in policy frameworks such as CAPS, which advocate for cultivating a vocabulary robust enough to foster the logical and persuasive

articulation of thoughts in a manner aligned with the demands of contextual relevance. In this vein, the role of teachers becomes indispensable as facilitators of the shift from a primarily receptive vocabulary base to one that is dynamically productive, thus augmenting communicative competence and the efficacy of language education.

Implicit in the fabric of these pedagogical initiatives is the strategy of pre-teaching vocabulary—a methodology that equips learners with foundational linguistic elements prior to their engagement with complex texts or composition endeavours. Beck and associates stand by the utility of such an approach, positing its effect on the learner's ability to assemble sentences logically and grammatically. Supporting this stance, Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2008) suggest that the conscientious introduction of new vocabulary can significantly elevate a student's capacity for textual interpretation and expressive sentence construction. What emerges from the research spectrum, such as in studies by Alamria, and Rogers, (2018), is evidence suggesting that pre-teaching vocabulary enriches learners' syntactic range and results in more sophisticated sentence production. Crucially, the pedagogical impact is optimised when vocabulary is not taught in isolation but is woven into the fabric of pertinent academic subject matter, thereby fostering deeper comprehension and retention of new lexicon items.

The collective insights drawn from such research underscore the potent pedagogical benefits of an integrated approach to vocabulary pre-teaching. This practice entails deliberately introducing carefully selected words that are then embedded within structured learning activities to maximise the potential for learner acquisition. Therein lies the potential for educators to harness the power of finely tuned vocabulary instruction that prepares learners to engage with language more meaningfully and sets a robust foundation for lifelong communicative success.

Building upon the foundational platform of pre-teaching vocabulary, including explicit instruction in sentence construction, offers a powerful advantage, bolstering language development in learners. Teachers who clearly understand grammatical rules, syntactic patterns, and sentence structure provide learners with the tools

for crafting linguistically accurate and contextually effective sentences. This approach is supported by the work of Celce-Murcia (2014), who emphasises the importance of a strong grasp of sentence mechanics in language proficiency. Dedicated practice and feedback sessions are crucial for enhancing sentence construction skills, allowing learners to refine and perfect their linguistic abilities. The process of constructing sentences is nuanced and demands not only knowledge of vocabulary but also an understanding of how to sequence words to convey precise meaning and intention.

Furthermore, integrating sentence construction instruction into meaningful writing tasks provides students with a pragmatic application for their developing skills. As Graham (2022) argues, engaging in authentic writing exercises helps reinforce learners' understanding of both sentence structure and the dynamic use of vocabulary. This applied learning is pivotal, as students are more likely to retain and comprehend the usage of vocabulary and complex syntactic structures when repeatedly practising them within relevant writing contexts. By synthesising vocabulary knowledge with targeted sentence construction instruction, educators catalyse a more profound learning experience for students, thus fostering their evolution into articulate and proficient communicators.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts a non-interactive qualitative research design to observe and analyse teaching practices, particularly focusing on vocabulary instruction strategies. As noted by Patton and Cochran (2002), qualitative research seeks to understand and interpret human experiences using descriptive language rather than numerical data. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) further assert that qualitative approaches provide rich, contextualised insights into social phenomena by offering in-depth descriptions and explanations of lived experiences. Within this framework, the study investigated how Grade 10 English First Additional Language (FAL) teachers employed pre-teaching vocabulary strategies to support learners' sentence construction in authentic classroom environments. The qualitative design was purposefully chosen for its capacity to allow unobtrusive observation, enabling the researcher to examine pedagogical practices without disrupting the natural flow of lessons.

Purposive sampling was used to recruit nine teachers from nine high-performing secondary schools within the Dzindi circuit of the Thohoyandou cluster in the Vhembe District. These schools were selected based on their outstanding performance in the 2020 Grade 12 examinations, thereby ensuring that participants had relevant expertise to contribute meaningfully to the study.

Data collection relied on an observation sheet, a key instrument for non-interactive qualitative research. Kawulich (2005) identifies observation as a primary method for studying human behaviour and processes, while Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) highlight its ability to capture the nuanced realities of social settings through the researcher's sensory engagement. Ethical considerations were rigorously observed; participants were fully informed about the study's objectives and gave their consent prior to participation.

The data analysis drew on two sets of observation notes: one focusing on the teachers' vocabulary choices, and the other on learners' sentence construction using the pre-taught vocabulary. This dual-layered analysis facilitated a comprehensive understanding of both instructional approaches and learner outcomes.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This study examined how Grade 10 English FAL teachers applied pre-teaching vocabulary strategies in encouraging learners' sentence construction in English in the Dzindi circuit of the Thohoyandou cluster of the Vhembe District. The focus on the choice of vocabulary teaching strategies was informed by the National Curriculum Statement's inclination to explicit vocabulary teaching approaches, which projected clear vocabulary teaching strategies aimed at 'continuous use and production of texts' (CAPS, 2011). The researcher's findings were captured and discussed as presented in the subsequent sections.

### **Procedures used for pre-teaching new words**

While observing the various classes, teachers used texts from various sources, including past examination papers and other reading materials, to identify new vocabulary. This identification process employed different methodologies, which are detailed in the following sections. Upon entering the classrooms, teachers distributed

these texts to the learners. In some instances, teachers allowed learners to independently read the texts, encouraging them to highlight any challenging words. In other classes, select learners were asked to read the texts aloud to their peers. Subsequently, learners were prompted to identify and share the words they struggled with, which the teachers then recorded on the chalkboard.

Following the compilation of a comprehensive list of challenging words, the class engaged in a collective effort to elucidate the meanings of known words from the list, employing familiar and comfortable techniques. These techniques included using synonyms, antonyms, and code-switching to convey the meanings effectively. This method ensured that each word was addressed, with the majority being clarified by the learners themselves. Only a few terms, which posed significant challenges to the learners, required direct explanation from the teachers. For instance, one teacher clarified that the term '*synthetic*' refers to something manufactured or processed, distinguishing it from natural items.

Notably, in two classes, specific learners attempted to define challenging words using other complex terms, thereby necessitating further simplification by the teachers. An example was when a learner used the word '*probe*' to define '*explore*,' which the teacher then simplified to '*search*,' making it more accessible to the learners' understanding. This approach to vocabulary teaching facilitated the learners' active participation and ensured a comprehensive understanding of the new words introduced during the lessons.

### **Analysis of the observation's findings and discussion**

Throughout the observation phase, it was evident that all teachers exhibited a proficient grasp of pre-teaching vocabulary strategies, effectively incorporating them into their instructional practices (Zou, Huang & Xie, 2021; CAPS, 2011). Their methods highlighted an awareness of the critical role of context in vocabulary teaching and learning, aligning with existing literature that advocates for teaching vocabulary within its contextual use (Mutaliani, Omulando & Barasa, 2023; CAPS, 2011). The observation revealed that teachers focused on specific words from the reading texts, emphasising those categorised as

Tier 2 vocabulary, words essential for text comprehension. These selections were based on various criteria, including learner mispronunciations, relevance to the overall meaning of sentences and texts, and direct indications by learners of words they found challenging. The terms identified, such as 'excited', 'unique', 'suspicious', 'preys', 'vague', 'myths', 'drifted', 'distract', 'emerge', and 'intruders', exemplify Tier 2 vocabulary, which is pivotal for anchoring text understanding (Mutaliani, Omulando & Barasa, 2023). Teachers' strategies in addressing these words demonstrated their strong Pedagogical Content Knowledge, showcasing their subject matter expertise, recognition of content importance, and professional teaching approaches (Shulman, 1986; 1987).

Teachers encouraged learners to contextualise the words by using them in their sentences, provided meanings, offered clues to understanding, and employed the words in various sentences within similar contexts. This approach underlines the teachers' comprehensive knowledge of effective pre-teaching vocabulary strategies as recommended by scholars (Kaufmann, 2017).

Moreover, the teachers' efforts to direct learners to the contextual backgrounds of words, supply synonyms and antonyms, and sometimes resort to dictionary definitions underscored their adept application of progressive pre-teaching strategies. This pedagogical excellence promised a productive outcome from the pre-teaching process, primarily due to the strategic use of contexts for word clarification.

The interactions observed between teachers and learners during the discussion of challenging words reflected an understanding of the importance of social interaction in learning, resonating with Vygotsky's theories on sociocultural learning processes (Vygotsky, 1962; 1978; 1986). Teachers facilitated these discussions more as equal contributors than authoritative figures, fostering a collaborative learning environment. This pedagogical approach demonstrated the teachers' endorsement of pre-teaching vocabulary strategies and their skilful application, transcending a rigid methodology to embrace language as a dynamic tool for communication and social interaction.

### **Procedures used for teaching sentence construction using new words by the learners**

In the phase dedicated to sentence construction, teachers engaged learners by requesting them to form sentences using words previously identified and listed on the chalkboard. This task was completed by all participating teachers, who diligently recorded the sentences articulated by the learners without initially evaluating their accuracy. This approach provided a rich array of contexts in which the vocabulary could be applied, showcasing the words' versatility in real-life scenarios. Subsequently, teachers invited the learners to assess the accuracy of these constructed sentences, a process that catalysed insightful discussions among the students. These discussions enabled learners to demonstrate their grasp of sentence construction principles in the English language. They fostered a peer-review environment where learners could affirm the correctness of some sentences and identify errors in others. Remarkably, many of these evaluative discussions were initiated by the learners themselves, without direct prompts from the teachers, reflecting a learner-centred approach that encouraged active participation and critical thinking.

### **Analysis and discussions of sentence construction findings**

During the sentence construction phase of the study, it was observed that all nine Grade 10 English as a First Additional Language (FAL) teachers uniformly provided opportunities for learners to create sentences. This exercise included using various words, particularly those unfamiliar to the students, which had been highlighted in the reading materials.

Some of the correctly constructed sentences are presented below:

- 'Lufuno is excited after passing an English test.'
- 'Cell phones can distract you from your schoolwork.'
- 'Phalanndwa likes different types of clothes; he says that he wants to be unique.'
- 'My mother is suspicious that I might be pregnant.'

The active involvement of Grade 10 English as a First Additional Language (FAL) teachers in guiding learners through sentence construction exercises and utilizing pre-teaching vocabulary strategies aligns with the overarching objectives of the South

African curriculum. This curriculum emphasises the importance of students acquiring and applying knowledge and skills in contexts relevant to their lives (CAPS, 2011). The sentences crafted by the learners, as highlighted previously, underscored the effectiveness of such strategies. These instructional practices reflect the principles of effective pre-teaching vocabulary strategies, as supported by educational researchers (Mutaliana, Omulando, & Barasa, 2023; Lawrence, 2014; Febrianti, Arifin, & Rohbiah, 2022; Putri, 2022), demonstrating practical and meaningful language use. Consequently, these teachers prioritise vocabulary acquisition as a core aim of teaching English FAL, endorsing a focused approach to language learning that fosters comprehensive vocabulary development.

Despite the overall positive outcomes, there were instances where some learners' attempts at constructing sentences were incorrect. These instances were noted as follows:

- 'John preys every night before he sleeps.'
- 'I have seen his emerge in the newspaper.'

During the lesson observations across all classes, incorrect sentence construction was identified. Teachers and learners perceived these moments as opportunities for learning, with no public criticism directed at the errors made. Teachers commended the learners for their effort and willingness to try, thus fostering a supportive learning environment. This approach transformed the classroom into an interactive forum, where the correctness of sentences became the subject of collective discussion. Most learners eagerly participated, sharing diverse opinions on the sentences' construction.

The open dialogue among learners served as another channel for practising sentence construction, albeit with varying degrees of oversight. Through these discussions, learners actively engaged with the language, eventually leading to the self-correction of mistakes. The learners ultimately provided the corrected versions of sentences and explanations, showcasing their ability to learn from and correct their errors. This process underscores the educational value of collaborative learning and peer feedback in enhancing language comprehension and application.

- 'John prays every night before he sleeps.'
- 'I have seen his image in the newspaper.'

One learner clarified that while 'preys' can function as a verb, its application within the given sentence was incorrect, attributing the error possibly to phonetic confusion due to the similarity in sound between 'preys' and another word, despite their differing meanings. Another learner pointed out that 'emerge' is a verb meaning 'to appear', and its placement in a sentence requiring a noun, such as 'image,' was incorrect.

This process illuminated the invaluable learning opportunity presented by learners' attempts at sentence construction using identified vocabulary. Without these attempts, misconceptions regarding word meanings might have remained unaddressed. As demonstrated in the corrections, the practical application of vocabulary in sentence construction allowed teachers to gain insights into learners' understanding of language.

Moreover, it was observed that effective vocabulary instruction, mainly through pre-teaching specific words, facilitates practical language learning and enhances learners' linguistic competence, gradually shaping them into adept language users. The immediate correction of errors plays a crucial role in this transformation. Encouraging learners to consistently use and engage with unfamiliar words fosters the growth of their active vocabulary. The practical engagement with language, prioritised over theoretical knowledge, emerged as a key strategy in promoting sentence construction skills. Such engagement, coupled with frequent interaction with the language, is seen as a vital component in enhancing proficiency. This approach not only aids in the retention of frequently used words but also instills a linguistic rhythm in learners,<sup>32</sup> thereby fostering overall language proficiency (Sukying, 2021).

## **CONCLUSION**

Building upon the valuable insights provided by the study on the utilisation of pre-teaching vocabulary strategies by Grade 10 English as a First Additional Language (FAL) teachers within the Dzindi circuit of the Vhembe District, it is evident that these strategies significantly enhance learners' sentence construction capabilities. This efficacy underscores the pivotal role of strategic vocabulary instruction in language acquisition, particularly in the context of English FAL teaching in South African schools. By meticulously integrating pre-teaching vocabulary strategies,

teachers are not only adhering to the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) guidelines but are also enriching the pedagogical landscape with innovative approaches to language teaching.

The deliberate focus on vocabulary as a precursor to sentence construction reflects a nuanced understanding of language learning, wherein vocabulary is not merely seen as a list of words to be memorised but as building blocks for meaningful communication. This approach aligns with current linguistic theories that emphasise the importance of lexical knowledge in language competence. It supports the notion that a robust vocabulary underpins the ability to form coherent and nuanced sentences, which is essential for effective communication in any language, especially in a second language context like English FAL.

Furthermore, the emphasis on learner autonomy and active participation in the learning process represents a shift from traditional rote learning methods to more constructivist pedagogical practices. By encouraging learners to engage actively with the vocabulary and construct sentences independently, teachers are fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This learner-centred approach not only aids in language acquisition but also empowers learners by making them active participants in their learning journey.

Considering Alamria and Rogers (2018)'s assertion about the primacy of teaching strategy effectiveness, this study's findings offer a compelling case for the widespread adoption of pre-teaching vocabulary strategies in language teaching. Such strategies, when executed effectively, can significantly enhance learners' ability to construct meaningful sentences, thereby improving their overall language proficiency. This, in turn, contributes to their academic success and equips them with the necessary communication skills to thrive in a globalized world.

It could be concluded that the study vividly illustrates the transformative potential of pre-teaching vocabulary strategies in enhancing sentence construction among Grade 10 English FAL learners. It serves as a testament to the dedication and expertise of teachers in the Dzindi circuit and offers valuable insights for educators striving to optimise language teaching methodologies. By fostering a deep understanding

of vocabulary and its application, these strategies lay a solid foundation for language mastery, ultimately contributing to developing proficient and confident English users.

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