

## Evaluation of Grade Seventh English Teachers' Mastery of Concepts

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**ABSTRACT** Teaching English as a second language poses difficulties for second language teachers who have not fully mastered the teaching concepts. A study was conducted among 102 randomly sampled South African Second Language English Grade 7 primary school teachers in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province. The investigation focused on whether the teachers had adequately mastered the concepts they were to teach or not as Grade 7 is the final class at primary school level. Learners are expected to have been fully ready to learn through English at Secondary school level. A questionnaire comprising English language multiple items selected from Grade 7 English text books was used to elicit the responses. The results revealed that the majority of the respondents had not adequately mastered the concepts dealing with literature, but had averagely mastered the language usage concepts. The study concludes that teachers' inadequate mastery of all concepts they had to teach impacts negatively on successful English teaching and learning. Therefore, Department of Education should revive teacher training colleges and conduct in service training for teachers already in the system.

### INTRODUCTION

The challenges of teaching and learning through the use of second language or foreign language have been problematic throughout the world. South Africa is not an exception because most teachers and learners are English Second Language (ESL) speakers (de Wet and Wolhuter 2009; Mokiwa 2014). Primary school learners from Grade 5 are expected to learn all the subjects through the use of English as a second language. However, research indicates that English as a medium of instruction in most primary schools has a detrimental effect on the mastering of academic content by learners (Lemmer 1995; Weideman and van Rensburg 2002; Rhalmi 2014). In order for the learners to succeed, or overcome the barriers of language difficulties teachers have to be fully competent and proficient of concept they have to teach (Elsworth 2014). It is crucial that teachers must be knowledgeable in the subject that they teach (Kimberly 2009) because subject mastery is likely to interact positively with knowledge on how to teach the subject. Zadourian (2014) emphasizes that competence in the English language is required to discuss course content, through the academ-

ic language associated with subject material. Fakey (2012) in his findings further attests that subject matter competence or mastery is a predictor of achievement in English language teaching.

### Teacher Concepts Mastery and Meaningful Learning

The Vygotskian theory on learning states that language cannot be studied productively unless word meaning form the basis of all study, as word meaning unites thought and speech into verbal thought. Concepts are defined as a general idea or meaning that is associated with a word or symbol in a person's mind (Novak 1988; Richards et al. 1992; Vygotsky 1967). Learning with understanding therefore, is more likely to promote transfer than simply memorizing information from a text or a lesson. This experience or idea or meaning which is the knowledge coupled with language that the learner brings into the learning situation, is the most important factor that influences learning (Bransford et al. 1999; Lemmer 1995; Guo and Pink 2011). In school-based learning, language is the primary means of gaining access to knowledge and skills as well as highly systematic (Ovando 1989; Green 2013; Myles 2014).

Learners seems to gain knowledge from teachers which according to Shulman (1986) are not only capable of defining for students the ac-

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cepted truths in domain, but are able to explain why a particular proposition is deemed warranted, why it is worth knowing and how it relates to other propositions. He further states that a teacher must make the subject comprehensible to others and understands what makes learning of a specific topic easy or difficult. It is therefore, important that teachers should have the ability to help learners from a poor English linguistic background to learn both language and knowledge simultaneously without simply memorizing. Furthermore, teachers should not only possess the knowledge of the subject that they are to teach, but also have the ability to understand it from the learner's level of understanding (Shulman 1986; Reinke 1997; Rillero 1998; Ball 2000; Moseley 2000; Mokiwa 2014).

#### **Relationship between Teacher Mastery of Concepts and Learners' Difficulties**

The research findings by Lambani (2001), confirm that most Grade 5 Venda learners could not learn all their subjects through English Medium of Instruction (EMI). They furthermore could neither name, nor circumscribe (in Tshivenda, nor in English) many of the identified core or broader concepts from their syllabuses or textbooks. Her research identifies learners' lack of conceptual understanding that is presupposed in their learning as a major problem. However, the paper has not investigated if teachers themselves have mastered the concepts as well as being competent to teach these concepts in English which is the medium of instruction.

In support of the above assertion, the findings also revealed that ESL learners find learning academic content complex because they need to simultaneously learn both the English language and concepts which in most cases they are not familiar with (Johnson 1995; Zadourian 2014). Therefore, teachers have to fully master the concepts that they have to teach and be competent in the English language in order to help learners understand both the concepts and the language. However, the findings have revealed that most teachers lack the appreciation of the role of language in academic development and are incapable of distinguishing between concepts and other things they wish learners to learn (Ehrenburg 1981; Mokiwa 2014).

As conceptual knowledge and teaching are intertwined, it is imperative that teacher ade-

quately master concepts if meaningful teaching has to take place. Learners, who are simultaneously learning English and learning in English, face a more difficult task meeting a common set of learning standards (Short 2000; Green 2013). Not only do they have to focus on the cognitive conceptual demands of a given class, learning new subject matter, procedures and tasks, but they have to do so while learning the new vocabulary, linguistic structures and academic discourse through which they have to express themselves (Fraser et al. 1998). It is the responsibility of the teachers to take cognizance of the learners' difficulties and adapt language and teaching method accordingly. In most cases learners are left to fend for themselves due to lack of teacher understanding of what challenges learners are faced with.

Ortiz (2001) asserts that English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in English Medium of Instruction (EMI) classrooms are ill prepared to improve poor scholastic achievement and in South Africa, the challenge manifests itself clearly in Grade 12 (South Africa) results, while it actually starts as early as at primary school level. Adediwura and Bada (2007) attest that nobody could teach what he does not understand or know. The teacher must thoroughly understand what they teach, but most teachers seem not to possess the competence of the subject where English is used as a second language.

#### **Mastery of Concepts and Prior Knowledge**

According to Vygotsky (1967) and Gagne' (1977), prior knowledge facilitates learning. Some teachers understand concepts based on their tradition based on what they acquired as they grew Beukes (2012). Therefore the responsibility of the second language teachers includes facilitating the learners' generation of meaning and understanding by helping them to relate prior knowledge to new knowledge.

In order to do so, teachers must be aware of learners' conceptual, language inadequacies and must have mastered the required knowledge to assist learner (Chandler 1989; Tedick and Walker 1994). However, some teachers seem to lack approaches to determine what conceptual knowledge learners have or should have for prescribed learning, and they do not seem to adequately understand the role of language in conceptual teaching (Gonzalez et al. 2000). This can be as-

cribed to teachers' lack of the English language concepts mastery which is a predictor for teaching confidently through English as a Medium of Instruction, as they are mostly required to do (Hancock 2002). Furthermore the problem is exacerbated by a lack of professional dedication in many classrooms that is unsupportive of conceptual learning and language proficiency. This may be attributed to a lack of knowledge, skills and motivation among some teachers (Clair 2001; Coonan 2003; Murphy 2014).

Ehrenberg (1981) also asserts that teachers are not sufficiently clear and consistent about what they think a concept is. They cannot distinguish between concepts and other things they want learners to learn, such as facts, principles, attitudes and skills. The assumption that concepts are learned in the same way as facts are learned creates a problem to the process of teaching and learning. The process of learning and teaching concepts differs from those appropriate for fact, principle, attitude and skill learning. Lack of understanding of those differences on part of the curriculum developer or the teacher could certainly contribute to teacher failure to teach concepts.

It is, however, questionable whether all South African teachers have the knowledge, skills or motivation to link academic concepts to learners' contexts in order to scaffold learning (Jaworiski et al. 1999; Lambani 2001; Tirosh et al. 2001). A structured approach or a highly organized/planned teaching method to conceptual acquisition, enrichment and learning will provide a learning process for learners who may lack the ability to structure their own learning environment (Haas 2000; Warger and Burnette 2000; Kuo 2000). Teachers have to use teaching approaches which emphasize purposeful comprehension and communicative production that yields superior receptive and expressive accuracy that seem to be absent from most learners (Akindele 1996; Gonzalez et al. 2000; Tomlison 2000; Cranville 2000; Lepota and Weideman 2002; Cohen 2003; Klopper and Power 2014). This can only be achieved if the teachers are highly competent in their subjects.

### **Mastery of Concepts as Indicator for Effective Instruction**

Fakeye (2012) in his research confirms that there is a correlation between what teachers know

and what they teach. The ability to teach effectively depends on the knowledge of the subject matter even from the traditional point of view (Hodkinson 2005; Beukes 2012; Shim 2014). English teachers as is required need to master both languages usage, structure and literature. In literature they need to know about particular authors and their works, about literary genres and styles, they also need to know about interpretation and criticism (Grossman 1996). Their knowledge of concept therefore should be way above board enabling them to teach efficiently.

The quality of the instruction that learners receive is a significant factor in whether they succeed academically or not (Cornell 1995). Effective instruction presupposes that teachers master the concepts (which is a basic requirement) that they teach and the language in which they teach them. In order to do this, teachers should have comprehensive knowledge of learners' ability to understand, communicate and learn through the medium of English (Moseley 2000). They should also have the knowledge of teaching approaches and procedures, such as planned intervention strategies, that are effective to help learners achieve academically (Shulman 1986; Ball 2000). However, the knowledge of teaching approaches and strategies may not be enough if teachers have not fully mastered the concepts they must teach they cannot share with learners the knowledge that they themselves do not have.

Although the adapted core curriculum in South Africa provides core concepts, it seems that not all teachers understand how to check, adapt, revisit or reinforce and most importantly teach these. It is therefore; critical to ascertain if teachers in ESL classrooms implement educational practices including mastery of concepts they must teach which have proven to be effective for underprepared poor linguistically diverse learners (McKoen 1994). James (2014) attests that good instruction can result in transfer of knowledge to the learners.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The study intended to evaluate the Grade 7 English language teachers' mastery of the concepts at selected South African primary schools. Precisely, the study sought to: 1). assess Grade 7 English language teachers' understanding of the concepts; 2). reveal their strengths and weaknesses regarding mastery of concepts; and 3). recommend ideas for improvement.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

An evaluation design was used to conduct the study. According to Trochim (2006), evaluation is the systematic acquisition and assessment of information to provide useful feedback about some object. JBA (2009) explains that an evaluation design is the conceptual lens through which the evaluation is viewed and implemented. For the purpose of this study the researcher used an evaluation research design because there was a need to gather information about the teachers' mastery of knowledge regarding what they had to teach.

### Population and Setting

The study was conducted in the Vhembe District within the Limpopo Province which is rated amongst the poorest and second lowest in terms of the Grade 12 National Results. It is located in the Northern part South Africa. The Department of Education Vhembe District comprises four municipalities with 1,240,035 population, six clusters namely Thohoyandou, Soutpansberg, Malamulele, Vuwani, Mutale and Hlanganani, twenty seven circuits. The population comprised seven hundred and twenty three teachers from senior primary schools where English is offered as a subject in Grade 7. The researchers targeted circuits on the basis of their being located in rural areas. All these circuits are composed largely of TshiVenda followed by XiTsonga speaking people residing in rural traditional villages, where learners seemed to have very limited opportunity of using English out of the school environment.

### Sampling

The sample in this study comprised one hundred and two Grade 7 English participants (66 males and 36 females) teaching at primary schools of the 18 selected circuits in the Vhembe District within the Limpopo Province, South Africa. Their ages ranged from twenty-nine years to sixty years. Random sampling was used because a complete sampling frame was available before the specific sampling method was implemented. A sampling frame is a numbered list of all the elements in the population from which a

sample is drawn (Botma et al. 2010). A list of all the clusters, circuits including the primary schools which have Grade 7 classes was obtained from the Vhembe District Regional Education Office. From that list, the researchers wrote down the names of all twenty seven circuits and placed them into five separate boxes according to the clusters from which they belong. They randomly picked school names from each box.

### Research Instrument

The data collection instrument for this study was a questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised of twenty one language and literature concepts extracted from Grade 7 English text books. The questionnaire also had an optional section on the demographic details of the participants. The participants answered the multiple questions without the help of the researcher (Bryman 2008). The questionnaire was pre-tested amongst three Grade 7 female teachers from the Vhumbedzi, Sibasa and Dzindi circuits. It was done to identify and eliminate problems allowing for an opportunity to make corrective changes or adjustment before actually collecting data from the target population. It involved simulating the actually data collection process on a small scale to get feedback on whether or not the instrument was likely to work as expected in a real world situation (Project 2008).

### Data Collection

After obtaining permission from the Vhembe Regional Education Office, principals and participants to conduct the study, the researchers and assistants travelled to schools where the questionnaires were distributed to individual participants at their schools. The researchers and assistants administered 102 questionnaires and collected them twenty minutes soon after being filled in because travelling back to schools to collect questionnaires would have been costly to the researchers. This method ensured hundred percent return rate.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed to place information gathered in the numerical form and manipulating it according to the arithmetic properties to derive meaning from it (Monnette 2005).

Descriptive statistics (simple frequency distribution of scores) were used to analyse data. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences SPSS version 19 was used to analyse the data.

### Ethical Considerations

The researchers collected data after the approval of the research instrument was granted by the Research Ethics Committee (DRIC) of the Tshwane University of Technology and permission to conduct the study obtained from the Vhembe Education Regional Office. Informed consent was sought from the participants. Participation in the study was voluntary. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. The participants were not subjected to any harm. The participants were informed that they would not receive any remuneration in money or kind for taking part in the study. However, they were informed that their participation was highly appreciated.

### RESULTS

The results revealed the performance of teachers regarding their mastery of concepts they had to teach. About 90% to 95% of the participants performed well on six items. About 70 to

89% of the participants performed satisfactorily on 8 items. About 30% to 49% of the participants performed unsatisfactorily on 6 items. Approximately 62% of the participants performed dismally as they could not understand what a reflexive pronoun entailed (Table 1).

The findings are presented according to frequencies and percentages scored with regard to both correct and incorrect responses. The discussion of the findings follows immediately after the presentation according to the order of scores starting from the highest to the lowest.

### DISCUSSION

The findings revealed that all the participants could not score 100% on concepts identified from Grade 7 English textbooks they had to use while teaching. This is contrary to the findings by (Ovando 1989; de Wet and Wolhuter 2009; Green 2013; Myles 2014) that language understanding is access to gaining knowledge and skills. It was expected that all the teachers had a clear understanding of the twenty one language and literature concepts they had to answer. The findings revealed that the majority of the participants scored highest (90% to 95%) on six items out of twenty one relating to language usage concepts. The highest score of 95% was ob-

**Table 1: Teachers' understanding/mastery of concepts (n=102)**

Question	Correct responses		Incorrect responses	
	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Lavender is	81	79.4	21	20.6
Figurative language is	54	52.9	48	47.1
Siblings are	95	93.1	7	6.9
An uncle is	54	52.9	48	47.1
Persuasive language is language used to	82	80.4	20	19.6
A reflexive pronoun is	39	38.2	63	61.8
The following is an example of superlative form	83	81.4	19	18.6
Vegetarians do not eat	94	92.2	8	7.8
Miscommunication is failure to	57	55.9	45	44.1
An antonym is	96	94.1	6	5.9
A synonym is	89	87.3	13	12.7
A suffix is	90	88.2	12	11.8
Alliteration is the	67	65.7	35	34.3
The following is an example of a question tag	78	76.5	24	23.5
The simple present tense is used to	95	93.1	7	6.9
An onomatopoeia is a word	56	54.9	46	45.1
The following is an example of a simple past tense	94	92.2	8	7.8
An indirect speech refers to	97	95.1	5	4.9
An autobiography means	65	63.7	37	36.3
The following is an example of a present perfect tense	79	77.5	23	22.5
The acronym of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is	90	88.2	12	11.8

tained for the language concept relating to indirect speech followed by 94.1% concept relating to the antonym, 93.1% two concepts relating to siblings and simple present tense, 92.2% two concepts relating to vegetarians and simple past tense. The finding revealed that teachers performed well in concepts relating to language usage than in literature. It is however questionable if these teachers have mastered the concepts well enough to perform what (Shulman 1986; Ball 1993; Reinke 1997; Rillero 1998; Moseley 2000; Mokiwa 2014) have advocated.

The concepts included the AIDS acronym where 90 out of 102 participants scored 88.2%. The positive performance regarding the acronym might have been influenced by the teachers' background knowledge or prior knowledge about HIV and AIDS which was currently a pandemic in the country. The positive response of 79.4% concerning the colour lavender might also have been attributed to the floor polish colour that was used in many rural households. The observation was that many of the participants associated the polish with the colour lavender. The findings confirm what (Vygotsky 1967; Gagne' 1977) that prior knowledge facilitates learning. The background knowledge which teachers possessed assisted them to perform better in concepts they already knew or were familiar with. This is indicative of the fact that it is imperative to make learning meaningful to learners by relating new knowledge to what they already know. The majority scored 80% which was the highest percent scored regarding the literature concept on persuasive language. Again the reason might be that they hear more of the expression than other literary concepts.

As regards to the three tenses (present, past and perfect), the participants performed highest in the first two and satisfactorily in the perfect tense. The implication might be that the perfect tense is more demanding than the other two and also most ESL speakers are not well conversant with the past participles. Although the performance was satisfactory, it was not expected that English teachers would state that '*they had already come*' is a correct English language usage. The indication here is that teachers had not mastered the perfect tense or the past participle forms of irregular verbs as postulated by (Chandler 1989; Tedick and Walker 1994). The finding maintains what (Ehrenburg 1981; Webb 2002) found that most teachers lack the appreciation of

the role of language in academic development. Also, Clair (2001), Coonan (2003) and Murphy (2009) confirm that lack of skill knowledge and motivation is disadvantageous to learners.

Fifty percent of the participants performed unsatisfactorily on six items the majority of which entailed literature items. It was expected of the teachers to understand what figurative language entailed. The explanation that one can put forward is that most ESL teachers do not teach literature. Even at university level learners find it difficult to study literature. Many participants confessed that they had never seen the word '*onomatopoeia*' before, although the researcher extracted the concepts from the textbooks prescribed for Grade 7 learners. The findings revealed that the teachers had not adequately mastered all the concepts they had to teach. The findings support Ortiz's (2001) assertion that teachers are ill prepared to improve poor learners' scholastic achievement. They do not possess the knowledge required to teach (Ball 1993; Reinke 1997; Rillero 1998; Mossely 2000; Mokiwa 2014). Most of the participants performed below average, they did not understand the concept uncle in English. In the African tradition, (Tshivenda) uncle only refers to a brother of one's mother only. The implication is that learners in these classrooms are taught English from the teachers' traditional perspective. The finding maintains the suggestion by (Beukes 2012) that most South African teachers understand issues from their home language perspective and the best language for teaching is mother tongue or the language which is widely used in the local environment.

Most of the participants scored below average regarding the concept figurative language. Again the implication is that most teachers did not master the literature concepts they had to teach. The finding confirms what Grossman (1996) says that people learning ESL find many types of figurative language challenging because of their vocabulary limitation. It is recommended that English teachers have to know every aspect relating to literature. The finding is disturbing as teachers cannot offer what they do not have and probably there is no effective instruction taking place in their classrooms.

Approximately 62% of the participants performed dismally as they could not understand what a reflexive pronoun entailed. The finding contradicts what is expected of teachers that a

desired level of competency is required from teachers in order to understand and explain concepts to learners (Shulman 1986). On the other hand it confirms what (Stormski 1997) suggested that poor language skills by teachers contribute towards lack of better learning and understanding. Teachers have to use teaching strategies which emphasize purposeful comprehension and communicative production that yields superior receptive and expressive accuracy that seem to be absent from most learners (Akindele 1996; Gonzalez et al. 2000; Tomlison 2000; Granville 2000; Lepota and Weideman 2002; Cohen 2003; Klopper and Power 2014).

The findings regarding teachers' adequate mastery of concepts was generally satisfactory as they performed better in 14 conceptual items. The fact that they performed unsatisfactorily in 7 items leaves much to be desired as this kind of performance could be compared to that of the learners. The expectation was that teachers would perform above average on all the concepts as they were identified from the Grade 7 recommended texts. As there is a correlation between effective teaching and knowledge, Fakeye (2012), the low throughput rate experienced at Grade 12 level might be due to teachers' lack of full understanding of some concepts.

### CONCLUSION

The study found that Grade 7 English teachers had not fully mastered all the English concepts they had to teach. None of the teachers scored 100% of the concepts provided. They performed better in language concepts as compared to the literature concepts. Although the teachers' performance in certain aspects was satisfactory, it is a worrying factor that they did not do well in some. It can be concluded that teachers in the study possessed adequate knowledge of the concepts selected, but not sufficient enough to teach excellently.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

The study unearthed the strength and gaps in knowledge of Grade 7 English teachers regarding mastery of concepts. The findings will serve as a wakeup call because it informs the current English teachers of their strengths and weaknesses and might help them want to study

further to enhance their English knowledge. The study is also of importance to all the stakeholders in the education system particularly leaders who must come up with strategies to help teachers improve their knowledge. It is also questionable if the teachers are able to teach learners proficiently and it can be implied that they share the blame for learner poor performance.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The study shows that there are weaknesses and gaps which need to be filled and is important that teachers fully master the concepts they must teach in order to help learners understand. If both the teacher and the learner do not understand then meaningful learning will not take place. Therefore, there is a need to revive teacher training colleges and revamp the curriculum with a view to produce quality teachers. There is also a need to conduct in-service training programmes for current Grade 7 English teachers to help them improve their English proficiency. A special emphasis needs to be placed on the improvement of English language literature.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study findings were based on the results of 102 participants sampled from 723 teachers randomly selected from Vhembe District in the Limpopo Province, South Africa. The results might be limited to conclude that the teachers had only averagely mastered the concepts they had to teach. There are many Grade 7 teachers in South Africa comprising of highly diversified teaching experiences and backgrounds, but the study was confined to teachers in rural areas.

Other teachers might be better or less competent for effective conceptual teaching in EMI classrooms. The findings might be only applicable to black Grade 7 teachers in Limpopo and its comprehensiveness might not be adequate to present precise general conclusions. Future study should focus on teachers from other provinces.

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