

Teachers Awareness and Perception of Schema-Based Instructional Strategy in the Teaching of English Polysemic Words in Ado-Ekiti Local Government Area, Ekiti State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This qualitative study was carried out to investigate teachers' awareness and perception of schema-based instructional strategies for teaching English polysemic words in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State. The qualitative research design was adopted for the study. The sample for this study comprised 20 English teachers. The instruments used for data collection were interview guides on teachers awareness and perception of schema-based instructional strategy in Teaching English Polysemic Words. The data collected was analysed using content analysis. Findings showed that many of the participants were aware and understood what the Schema-based Instructional strategy is and implemented activities around the strategy in their classrooms. Findings also showed that teachers positively perceive Schema-based instructional Strategy to be effective in enhancing students' understanding of Polysemic words. Based on the findings, it is recommended that the government, curriculum developers and other stakeholders should intentionally include polysemy as a topic in the curriculum for secondary schools with the best instructional strategies, resources, facilities and guide to teaching it effectively. They should integrate its application to English language teaching ensuring it features prominently trainings, workshops, seminars and conferences designed for teachers. There should be more publicity on the theory and the schema -based strategy.

Keywords: Teachers Awareness, Teachers Perception, Schema-based Instructional Strategy, Polysemic words

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) has become prominent research interests among academics all over the world and numerous studies have been published on effective teaching methodology and learner issues. Vocabulary instruction occupies a central position in secondary school language curricula because lexical knowledge directly underpins reading comprehension, academic writing, and oral proficiency. Secondary school learners, typically aged 11–18, face increasing demands for academic and specialised vocabulary, yet traditional methods often prove insufficient. Contemporary research therefore advocates a balanced, multi-method approach that integrates explicit teaching, incidental exposure, and strategy development while adapting to learner proficiency, achievement level, and context (Kuder, 2017; Ramadhani, 2023).

The English language is replete with words that carry multiple meanings, a phenomenon known as polysemy. This aspect of semantics poses interesting challenges and

opportunities for language teachers and language learners alike. Understanding polysemy is crucial for grasping the nuances of language, enhancing communication skills, and advancing linguistic theory (Toshtemirova, 2024). Polysemous words are lexical items characterised by a single form associated with multiple related meanings. This relatedness arises through motivated cognitive mechanisms such as metaphor, metonymy, experiential correlation, and inference, rendering polysemy a systematic rather than arbitrary phenomenon. This structured organisation enhances linguistic efficiency, enabling lexical economy and stability in relations among lexical units (Dalieva, 2024).

Polysemy in English language seems to have been ignored in many Second Language Learning situations. When teaching a second language in a typical Nigerian school, teachers tend to place a high value on grammar and reading rather than vocabulary development. Also, in most cases, many English as a Second or Foreign Language teachers follow the

traditional “read and translate” as the preferred way of classroom instruction. The fact that teachers do not often come across a big variety of polysemous words pushes them to opt to limit themselves to just providing students with just a translation of the word relevant to the given context. They do not go further in explaining the word meanings not only at elementary level, but also at higher level to promote a deeper and more efficient understanding of polysemy. The ESL teachers tend to teach these polysemous words individually without drawing connections among their extended meanings and core meaning. As a consequence, the learners tend to have confusions when they encounter the same word with a different meaning in context.

Recent studies consistently highlight that many EFL/ESL learners exhibit low awareness of polysemy, struggle with extended metaphorical senses, and frequently misinterpret words when contextual cues differ from previously learned meanings (Alnamer, 2017; Zhang and Li, 2020; Yang, 2024). These problems are particularly acute in secondary and tertiary education where academic and specialised vocabulary demands increase. Yang (2024) linked poor polysemy knowledge directly to reduced academic performance and weaker overall lexical competence. The cumulative effect of these problems is that many learners develop a shallow, context-bound understanding of vocabulary. They master one or two common senses but remain ill-equipped to handle the full semantic network of polysemous items when encountering them in authentic texts, conversations, or examinations (Dehghan and Soleimani, 2021). Without explicit cognitive-linguistic scaffolding, polysemy continues to function more as an obstacle than a resource.

Hence, research from 2017 to 2025 consistently identifies low awareness, difficulty with extended meanings, contextual disambiguation failures, cultural interference, and inadequate teaching methods as the core problems associated with teaching English polysemy. Addressing these issues requires moving beyond traditional translation and

memorisation towards cognitively informed, context-rich, and metaphorically explicit instruction.

Useini (2023) investigated the current status of English vocabulary teaching practices and the extent to which vocabulary instruction is neglected in secondary schools in EFL/ESL classrooms: the majority of teachers reported allocating insufficient class time to vocabulary, teaching only eight to ten (8–10) words per lesson (which many considered inadequate for retention), relying on a limited range of techniques and rarely applying university-learned methods consistently. Effective strategies therefore necessitate cultivating both breadth (overall lexical size) and depth (mastery of multiple senses), alongside metacognitive skills to navigate contextual cues. Schema-based instruction has been extensively researched for its effects on student outcomes in mathematics, medical education, and special education, empirical investigations specifically addressing teachers' perceptions and awareness of this instructional approach remain remarkably scarce in the language-teaching domain. The study by Bante (2023) stands out as one of the few recent works that directly captures practising teachers' beliefs, preferences, and self-reported challenges when applying schema theory in daily reading lessons. This limited body of research highlights both the acceptance of schema-based principles among ESL teachers and the persistent need for systematic professional development to translate theoretical awareness into consistent classroom practice.

Recent empirical research on teaching polysemic words (lexical items with multiple related meanings) has moved beyond traditional memorisation and isolated translation toward cognitively motivated approaches that emphasise meaning networks, prototypes, semantic fields, and contextual relations. These studies demonstrate explicitly highlighting systematic connections among senses leads to superior retention, comprehension, and accurate use compared with conventional methods.

Schema-Based Theory serves as the foundational lens for investigating teachers'

awareness and perceptions of schema-based instructional strategies in the teaching of English polysemic words. Originating in cognitive psychology and extensively applied in educational linguistics, the theory posits that human cognition organises knowledge into structured mental frameworks called schemas. These schemas enable efficient processing, interpretation, and storage of new information by connecting it to pre-existing knowledge networks. In the context of second language vocabulary acquisition, particularly polysemy, schema-based theory explains why learners struggle with words that carry multiple related meanings and how explicit schema instruction can transform this challenge into a systematic learning opportunity.

The concept of schema traces back to Sir Frederic Bartlett's seminal work in 1932. In his classic experiments on story recall, Bartlett demonstrated that participants did not reproduce narratives verbatim; instead, they reconstructed them according to their existing cultural and personal knowledge structures. He defined schemas as "an active organisation of past reactions, or of past experiences" that operate as organised settings for new information. This early formulation highlighted schemas as dynamic, reconstructive mental templates rather than static repositories. Building on Bartlett, David Rumelhart (1980) formalised schema theory within cognitive science, describing schemas as hierarchical data structures that represent generic concepts stored in memory. Richard Anderson (1984) extended schema theory into educational psychology, particularly reading comprehension. Anderson argued that schemas function as "ideational scaffolding" that organises incoming information and facilitates recall.

In vocabulary instruction, schema-based theory evolved into Schema-Based Instruction (SBI), a pedagogical approach that explicitly teaches learners to recognise and build schematic networks rather than memorise isolated meanings. The significance of Schema-Based Theory lies in its explanatory power across cognitive, linguistic, and pedagogical

domains. The implications of Schema-Based Theory for teaching polysemic words are profound and multi-layered. First, it shifts instructional focus from rote memorisation of multiple senses to explicit teaching of core prototypes and motivated extensions. Second, the theory highlights the role of prior knowledge activation. Third, implications extend to assessment and differentiation. Teachers aware of schema theory can design tasks that reveal whether learners are operating at the prototype level or successfully navigating peripheral senses, allowing targeted scaffolding for low-proficiency students who often struggle most with polysemy.

The learning outcomes improve when learners are taught schematic networks rather than isolated meanings. However, little or no previous study has examined teachers awareness and perceptions of schema-based instructional strategies for teaching English polysemic in Ado-Ekiti, Ekiti State, Nigeria, the present research fills this critical gap. While Bante (2023) offers valuable insights into positive attitudes toward schema activation among ESL teachers, her study is geographically limited to the Philippines and does not target polysemic words specifically. This absence is particularly problematic in the Nigerian educational landscape, where English functions as both subject and medium of instruction, yet secondary teachers often default to traditional methods because of inadequate pre-service and in-service training, large class sizes, and high-stakes examination demands. The current study directly addresses this void by focusing on secondary school teachers in Ado-Ekiti Local Government Area, thereby bridging the gap between what research shows works in controlled experiments and what actually occurs in real Nigerian classrooms.

Statement of the Problem

Many students have shallow knowledge of English vocabulary especially the polysemous words. ESL learners in secondary schools exhibits low awareness of polysemy, struggle with extended metaphorical senses and

frequently misinterpret words when contextual cues differ from previously learned meanings. In secondary school leaving certificate examinations in English Language like West Africa Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO), students are expected to replace words in context which confirms the fact that a word can have more than one meaning. Therefore, because words can have multiple meanings, polysemy should be taught in secondary schools so that the students will not have problem of appropriate replacement of words in context. Also, students always find it difficult to unravel the meaning especially when they are asked to suggest alternative meanings of words in context. This study is thus aimed at investigating teacher's awareness and perception of schema-based instructional strategy in the teaching of English polysemic words in Ado Local Government Area, Ekiti State, Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

In view of the preceding discussions, the specific objectives of this study are to:

1. explore teachers' awareness of the schema-based instructional strategy and how they implement it in their classrooms.
2. investigate how teachers perceive the Schema-Based Instructional Strategy (SBIS) when teaching polysemic (having multiple meanings) English words.

Research Questions

On the basis of the objectives of this study, the following research questions are formulated to guide the study:

- a. what is the general awareness among secondary school English teachers regarding schema-based vocabulary instructional strategies for teaching polysemic words?
- b. how do teachers perceive the effectiveness of schema-based vocabulary instructional strategies in enhancing students' understanding of polysemic words?

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is to investigate teacher's awareness and perception of schema-based instructional strategy in the teaching of English polysemic words in Ado-Ekiti Local Government, Ekiti State, Nigeria. The study is restricted to twenty English teachers in ten (10) Senior Secondary Schools in Ado Local Government, Ekiti State, Nigeria. It is hoped that the findings of this research would highlight those factors affecting the teaching and learning of English polysemic words and proffer solutions to the effective teaching and learning of the English polysemic words.

Polysemy is just one out of the several aspects of lexis that need to be taken into account when teaching vocabulary. These other important aspects are synonym, antonym, homonym and hyponym any of which can be equally studied. The restriction has been dictated by the need to attempt a reasonable depth of treatment within the time available. The restriction notwithstanding however, there is strong indication from the available literature that the findings and conclusions will be generalisable in most Senior Secondary Schools in the country today.

Significance of the Study

The study not only extends the global scholarship on cognitively grounded vocabulary pedagogy but also provides contextually relevant insights for teacher professional development and curriculum improvement in Nigeria and similar multilingual, resource-constrained settings. Understanding the multiple meanings of words and their semantic implications is crucial for both linguists and language learners. For linguists, polysemy offers a rich area of study. It sheds light on the dynamic nature of language and how meanings evolve over time. It also poses questions about how words are stored and accessed in the mental lexicon. Studies on polysemy contribute to broader discussions on language processing, cognitive linguistics, and the interface between language and thought.

Therefore, this study will try to help teachers better deal with polysemous words. This study would provide teachers with pedagogical method that can be used in the instruction of a set of high frequency lexical items, ones that were previously assumed too complicated to teach. This study provides ideas for English teachers to change vocabulary teaching methods, so as to improve the efficiency of Senior Secondary School students' vocabulary learning. It would also equip English teachers with feasible ways to teach polysemous words more efficiently, and improve the learners' ability to comprehend the polysemization mechanism more easily thereby improving the learners' overall language proficiency.

Methodology

The qualitative research design was adopted for the study. The simple random sampling technique was used to select ten (10) senior secondary schools from the existing (19) public secondary schools in Ado Local Government Area, Ekiti State, Nigeria. Twenty (20) Senior Secondary School Two (SSS2) English teachers (two per school) were purposively selected to participate in this study. The instruments used for data collection were Interview Guides on Teachers Awareness and Perception of Schema-Based Instructional Strategy in Teaching English Polysemic Words. The data collected were analysed using content analysis.

Results

Research Question One: what is the general awareness among secondary school English teachers regarding Schema-based vocabulary instructional strategies for teaching Polysemic words?

Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the awareness of English secondary school teachers was at two levels namely quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, twelve (12) of twenty (20) teachers (amounting to sixty percent (60%) of the participants) interviewed claimed to know

and use schema-based instructional strategies for teaching polysemic words.

Qualitatively, the twelve (12) teachers who affirmed familiarity with Schema based Instructional Strategy showed different levels of awareness, mastery and implementation of the strategy. Many teachers conceived Schema Based Instructional Strategy as previous or prior knowledge which the teacher activates to facilitate teaching of the new lesson, which in this study is vocabulary and polysemic words. However, statements from teachers show a marginal awareness or mastery of the instructional strategy with no real depth. Teachers' comments showed that they do not have deep mastery of Schema-Based Instructional Strategy. As regards mode of implementation, especially in relation to vocabulary and polysemic words, teachers admitted to using the dictionary, comprehension passages, the internet, flashcards and their lesson notes in actual classroom teaching and learning of the concept. Comments from some teachers regarding their awareness, mastery and implementation of Schema Based Instructional Strategy are given below:

Interviewer: *So, we move to section B now, Awareness of Schema-Based Instruction*

Interviewer: *Are you aware/familiar with Schema Based Instructional Strategy?*

Teacher: *Yes, I am familiar with it*

Interviewer: *How will you define it in your own words*

Teacher: *As a teacher, students should move from known to unknown for easy understanding of the lesson*

Interviewer: *Okay sir, can you describe any lesson or activity where you have used the learners' prior knowledge or experience to help them understand words with multiple meaning?*

Teacher: *Yes, vocabulary development or aspect of language where they use vocabulary development, they move from what they have taught to the*

one you want to teach them.

Interviewer: How do you usually teach polysemic words that is, words that have multiple meaning in your English language lesson?

Teacher: We need to write on the board, as a teacher you need to have a dictionary meaning, then give it to your students as assignment

Interviewer: Okay sir, have you ever explicitly incorporated schema theory or schema related strategy in your lesson plan.?

Teacher: Yes, this is where we have the previous knowledge

Interviewer: If yes, how?

Teacher: I have been using it in the classroom setting

Excerpt from Teacher 2

Interviewer: Now we move to section B, Awareness of schema-based instructional strategy. The first question is that "Are you familiar with the term "Schema based instructional strategy?"

Teacher: Yes, I do

Interviewer: How would you define schema-based instructional strategy?

Teacher: It is talking about the prior knowledge of what we have thought the children in our previous work

Interviewer: Can you describe any of your lessons where you have used learners' prior knowledge to help them understand the words with multiple meaning?

Teacher: I think that is talking about the use of the schema method in teaching the students so that they will understand better

Interviewer: Have you used it in any of your classes before?

Teacher: Yes

Interviewer: Can you describe that lesson?

Teacher: Vocabulary

Interviewer: Which topic?

Teacher: Prefix

Interviewer: How do you usually teach polysemic words in your class?

Teacher: I use dictionary to teach them so that when they know the meaning of a word then they will be able to use the knowledge to know other meaning related to the word

Excerpt from teacher 7

Interviewer: We move to section B, which is Instructional strategy; are you familiar with the term schema based instructional strategy?

Teacher: Yes, I am

Interviewer: So how will you define it in your own word?

Teacher: It is a kind of idea that is conceived to let the students be taught a new thing from the previous knowledge

Interviewer: Okay sir, how did you first learn about the schema-based instructional strategy?

Teacher: I learnt about it during my PGD

Interviewer: Can you describe any lesson or activity where you have used your learners' prior knowledge or experience to help them understand word with multiple meaning?

Teacher: As English teacher, any word you are teaching especially topics like synonyms, antonyms, homophones, all these things circle around schema, so we make use of all these things in teaching our students and it is very effective.

Interviewer: How do you usually teach polysemic words that is words with multiple meaning in your English lessons?

Teacher: By referring to our teaching methodology, before a teacher goes to the class to teach, he must have prepared for that lesson so if he wants to teach a particular topic he must have researched the topic

Interviewer: Have you taught polysemic words in your class before?

Teacher: Yes, I have

Interviewer: How did you teach it?

Teacher: Like when I was teaching connotative and denotative words so in such situation, I used schema

Interviewer: Thank you sir, have you ever explicitly incorporated this schema-based strategy in your lesson plan?

Teacher: Yes, frequently. In order to catch the attention of your students, you have to start from words that they are familiar with so as to get their attention

Excerpt from Teacher 13

Research Question 2: How do teachers perceive the effectiveness of Schema-based vocabulary instructional strategies in enhancing students' understanding of Polysemic words?

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts showed that teachers positively perceived Schema-based vocabulary Instructional Strategy as effective in enhancing students' knowledge of vocabulary and polysemic words, in spite of their verbal affirmation of their awareness of or lack of the strategy. Unanimously, teachers perceived Schema based Instructional Strategy to be beneficial for students' vocabulary learning and learning of polysemic words, including improving students' attitudes – ensuring openness and receptivity towards learning polysemic words. In addition, teachers also opined that the strategy will outperform the traditional strategy of teaching vocabulary. In addition, teachers claim that there should be teaching resources and training for teachers on using Schema-based Instructional Strategy. Comments from participants are given below:

Interviewer: Now we move to section D, Perception of effectiveness, in your opinion, what are the benefits of using schema-based strategy when teaching polysemic words?

Teacher: It is of benefit to the students because it will help them to understand what

we teach them and it will help them to apply it in their vocabulary

Excerpt from Teacher 3

Interviewer: So, we move to section D, Perception of effectiveness, in your opinion, what are the benefits of this schema-based strategy when teaching polysemic words?

Teacher: To learn more faster

Interviewer: How do your students typically respond when they see strategies that builds on their prior knowledge?

Teacher: They respond very well

Interviewer: Do you believe schema strategy instruction improve student's understanding of polysemic words

Teacher: Yes

Interviewer: Compared to traditional method?

Teacher: Yes

Interviewer: Why and how?

Teacher: It does because there are some words they are used to in their environment, if you introduce them through those words it will make them understand better

Excerpt from Teacher 5

Interviewer: So, we move to section D, Perception of effectiveness, in your own opinion, what are the benefits of using schema-based strategy when teaching polysemic words?

Teacher: When such theory is used, it will broaden the knowledge of students some of them believe this word means this so when they hear another word that will catch their attention and create curiosity in them

Interviewer: How do students typically respond when you use strategies that build on the background knowledge?

Teacher: It create a sense of familiarity, it makes them to be more relaxed and able to learn more because starting form unknown, it creates a boundary or

gap being what they know and what you want them to know

Interviewer: *Do you believe schema-based instruction improve students understanding of polysemic words?*

Teacher: *Yes*

Interviewer: *Why?*

Teacher: *Because it broadens their knowledge as I have said, it builds their grammar and word bank*

Interviewer: *What kind of support or resource would help you implement better schema strategy in the classroom?*

Teacher: *Seminars should be organized to give the teachers training on knowledge of the theory and books either soft copy or hard copy to explain the theory more. Then, there should be more publicity on the theory*

Excerpt from Teacher 9

Discussion

Secondary School English Teachers' General Awareness of Schema-Based Vocabulary Instructional Strategies for teaching Polysemic Word

Findings showed that many of the teachers were aware and understood what the Schema-based instructional strategy is and implemented activities around the strategy in their classrooms. Analysis of transcripts also showed that teachers use the strategy in relation to teaching vocabulary and polysemic words. This finding is in agreement with those of Salazar and Mendoza (2024), Useini (2023), Bante (2023), Asyiah (2017) who claim that teachers utilize vocabulary strategies in the classroom. Schema-based Instructional Strategy involves activating students' prior knowledge which is brought to bear on the new instruction.

Participants reported using dictionaries, the internet, flashcards and their lesson notes to implement schema-based instructional strategy, with claims about the effectiveness of the strategy in aiding students understanding of polysemic words. Participants reported schema-based instructional strategy as vital to

engendering and maintaining students' interest in learning vocabulary items. Additionally, participants reported that schema based instructional strategy was more effective than its traditional counterpart in teaching vocabulary and recommended it for adoption by the government for implementation in secondary schools all over the country. All of these assertions by the participants are supported by Alghamdi and Ahmed (2018) whose study showed that students' achievement in vocabulary instruction significantly improved when innovative strategies like dictionary use, mini presentations and flash card games which are elements of schema based instructional strategy, showing that schema based instructional strategy is indeed effective in aiding students' comprehension of and skill in vocabulary and polysemic words.

Teachers' Perception of Schema-Based Vocabulary Instructional Strategy in enhancing Students' Understanding of Polysemic Words

Findings show that teachers positively perceive Schema-based Vocabulary Instructional Strategy to be effective in enhancing students' understanding of Polysemic words. Teachers all agreed that the Schema-based Vocabulary Strategy will outperform the traditional method of teaching vocabulary. In addition, teachers hold the opinion that students will be positively motivated towards learning vocabulary through the use of Schema-based Vocabulary Instructional Strategy. This finding is in agreement with those of Avdiu and Maxharraj (2025), Alkhonini (2025), Vardidze (2020), Liu, Kuo and Chou (2019), and Mitsugi (2017) whose studies all show that learning polysemic words is made easier through Schema-based Vocabulary Strategy. Experiments conducted by the scholars in the studies show that students taught using Schema-based Vocabulary Instructional Strategy outperformed their contemporaries taught with traditional methods in vocabulary or polysemy learning. The vocabulary retention and conceptual understanding of students improved

significantly through the use of Schema-based Vocabulary Instructional Strategy.

This result is due to the fact that the background knowledge of students matters in learning new vocabulary, especially by leaning on any other language the students may possess (or their mother tongue). By activating students' prior knowledge, the learning of polysemous words is made easier and comfortable.

Conclusion

It could be concluded from the study that teachers are aware and understand what the Schema-based instructional strategy is and implemented activities around the strategy in their classrooms. Teachers positively perceive Schema-based Instructional Strategy to be effective in enhancing students' understanding of Polysemic words. It is therefore necessary to conclude that if teachers are aware of the schema-based instructional strategy and perceive it as a good method in teaching English polysemy and they utilize it, it will help students understand the relationships between different senses of a word, leading to better retention and easier recall thereby improving their communication skill.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that:

1. The government, curriculum developers and other stakeholders should intentionally include polysemy as a topic in the curriculum for secondary schools with the best instructional strategies, resources, facilities and guide to teaching it effectively.
2. Enhancing pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes deepen conceptual knowledge of schemata, providing targeted pedagogical training opportunities, and exposing teachers to diverse classroom contexts so that schema-based strategies can be implemented more confidently and effectively. Therefore, they should integrate its application to English

language teaching ensuring it features prominently trainings, workshops, seminars and conferences designed for teachers.

3. Moving beyond traditional, teacher-fronted methods toward innovative, learner-centred and context-rich approaches produces measurable gains in vocabulary acquisition across primary, secondary, and university levels in diverse cultural settings. It is also recommended that teachers should combine fully-contextual and de-contextual strategies while systematically introducing students to a wide range of vocabulary learning strategies to enhance long-term mastery.
4. Teachers should balance vocabulary instruction with grammar and other skills, allocate more dedicated time, employ a broader variety of creative and contextual techniques, and provide students with meaningful opportunities to use new words in authentic contexts.

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