



Exploring teachers' Perspectives on the Washback Effect of Previous Examination Papers in Teaching and Learning Visual Literacy in South African TVET Colleges

Duduzile Penelope Zwane & Sakhiseni Joseph Yende

University of South Africa

Article History

Received: 22.09.2025

Revised: 09.04.2026

Accepted: 21.04.2026

Published: 12.09.2026

Keywords

Education

Training

Visual literacy

Washback

How to cite:

Zwane, D. P., & Yende, S. J. (2026). Exploring teachers' Perspectives on the Washback Effect of Previous Examination Papers in Teaching and Learning Visual Literacy in South African TVET Colleges. *Research Journal of Education, Teaching and Curriculum Studies*, 4(2), 1-19.

Abstract

This study examines the influence of washback on the teaching and learning of Visual Literacy in English First Additional Language (FAL) within National Vocational Certificate (NVC) Levels 2-4 at Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges in Gauteng Province, South Africa. It responds to concerns that Visual Literacy was introduced without sufficient teacher training, resulting in limited pedagogical depth and an overreliance on examination-driven practices, particularly within under-resourced TVET classroom contexts. The study is guided by washback theory, which explains how assessment practices shape teaching content, instructional strategies, and learner engagement. A qualitative research design was employed, using a purposive sample of three English FAL teachers drawn from two TVET colleges in Gauteng Province. Data were generated through curriculum document analysis, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews, and were analysed using a comparative approach to identify patterns and relationships across data sources. The findings reveal that washback plays a significant role in shaping classroom practices. Teachers' reliance on past examination papers promotes content repetition and limits opportunities for the development of higher-order thinking skills. However, these papers also assist teachers in identifying question types and aligning lessons with assessment expectations. Variations in instructional approaches were observed and were largely influenced by teachers' confidence, training background, and levels of teaching experience. The study is limited by its small sample size and specific institutional context, which may affect the transferability of the findings. Nevertheless, it contributes to understanding assessment-driven pedagogy in TVET contexts. The study recommends targeted teacher training, strengthened curriculum support, and pedagogical strategies that promote critical engagement with Visual Literacy teaching and learning.

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Introduction

It is important to begin this study with a brief background to contextualise the focus on teaching and learning within the field under investigation. Providing this context enables a clearer understanding of the historical, educational, and curricular factors that continue to shape classroom practices. It also foregrounds the importance of examining the challenges of teaching Visual Literacy in South African classrooms, particularly within English First Additional Language (EFAL) contexts. A substantial body of international literature has explored the concept of washback, including studies by Ozmen (2011), Saif (2006), Cheng (1997), and Zwane (2017). Washback refers to the influence that assessments exert on teaching, learning, curriculum content, and classroom activities. Saif (2006) conceptualises washback as the effects that tests have on course content, teaching strategies, and learner engagement, highlighting the complex relationship between assessment and pedagogy. Similarly, Ozmen (2011) argues that when tests shape learning, changes in test design and implementation may also influence how learners engage with the curriculum. Such dynamics can either constrain or enhance teaching practices, depending on how assessment is designed and used in the classroom. While washback has been widely studied internationally, it remains under-researched in South Africa, particularly in relation to language education and curriculum implementation. Limited research has examined how assessment practices influence day-to-day teaching within the national curriculum, particularly in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) contexts. This gap provides the impetus for the present study, which seeks to explore how washback influences the teaching and learning of Visual Literacy within the EFAL curriculum in TVET colleges.

To understand this relationship, it is necessary to consider the nature and placement of Visual Literacy within the curriculum. Visual Literacy (VL) is a relatively recent addition to the EFAL curriculum, having been formally introduced in 2006. Its introduction brought new pedagogical demands, particularly for teachers trained before its inclusion, who therefore often lack formal preparation in this area (Moodley, 2013). This has created uneven levels of confidence and competence in its classroom implementation. Visual Literacy is central to this study because it provides the conceptual lens through which the effects of washback are examined. It involves the ability to interpret, analyse, and create meaning from visual texts, enabling learners to engage critically with images encountered in both academic and everyday contexts. Newfield (2011) defines Visual Literacy as an educational approach that develops understanding of the role and function of images in representation and communication, particularly within media and multimodal environments. Similarly, Sims et al. (2002) describe it as the ability to select and interpret images that convey meanings ranging from concrete information to more abstract concepts. These definitions emphasise that Visual Literacy extends beyond basic recognition of images; it includes interpretation, communication, and critical evaluation of visual meaning. In contemporary education, where learners are increasingly exposed to digital and multimodal texts, Visual Literacy has become an essential competency.

The purpose of this study is to explore how washback influences the teaching and learning of visual literacy within the EFAL curriculum. The study seeks to examine both the positive and negative effects of assessment-driven practices on pedagogy, teacher confidence, and learner engagement.

Against this backdrop, and considering the challenges associated with teacher preparation and assessment-driven instruction, this study is guided by the following research questions:



This study is guided by the following research questions:

- a) How do teacher-participants evaluate their confidence and understanding of Visual Literacy?
- b) What experiences do teachers have in teaching Visual Literacy?
- c) How have teachers been trained to teach Visual Literacy in English First Additional Language classrooms?
- d) How are previous examination papers used, and what effects do they have on learning?
- e) How do teachers interpret and implement the Visual Literacy curriculum in their lessons?

These questions provide a structured framework for examining the relationship between assessment practices and classroom pedagogy. They also enable the study to investigate how teachers' professional preparation influences their instructional choices in Visual Literacy. Collectively, the questions support a deeper understanding of how washback shapes both teaching practices and learner experiences within the EFAL classroom.

Significance of the study

The motivation for this study arises from the need to understand how washback affects the teaching and learning of visual literacy within the EFAL curriculum. By investigating teachers' experiences and strategies, the study aims to shed light on how assessment practices influence pedagogical approaches and learner engagement. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for improving curriculum implementation and enhancing teacher preparedness. Insights gained from this research may inform professional development programmes, providing targeted support to teachers and helping them to move beyond reliance on past examinations and textbooks. Moreover, examining washback in relation to visual literacy contributes to a broader understanding of how assessment shapes learning outcomes, offering practical implications for curriculum design, instructional practice, and policy development. In a context where visual communication is increasingly central to education and society, ensuring that learners are effectively equipped with visual literacy skills is essential. This study, therefore, addresses both theoretical and practical needs, seeking to contribute to scholarly knowledge while offering guidance on improving teaching and learning in South African classrooms.

Literature review

Although Visual Literacy was formally incorporated into the English First Additional Language (EFAL) curriculum in 2006, it is not entirely new to South Africa. Historical accounts indicate that Visual Literacy was already included in the English Home Language curriculum during the apartheid era, where it was primarily designed for white learners within a segregated education system (Prinsloo & Criticos, 1991, as cited in Mbelani & Murray, 2009). This historical context illustrates that while the concept of Visual Literacy has long existed in South African education, access to it has been uneven and shaped by political and social inequalities. The democratic curriculum sought to broaden educational access and transform teaching practices, yet many teachers responsible for implementing Visual Literacy in the post-apartheid era entered the profession without formal preparation in this specialised area. Mbelani (2008) notes that teachers often struggle to interpret the curriculum requirements for Visual Literacy, while Moodley (2013) observes that many EFAL teachers depend heavily on previous examination papers and prescribed textbooks to guide their classroom instruction. Such dependence frequently occurs at the expense of encouraging critical engagement, independent interpretation, and deeper understanding among learners. This reliance on assessment materials reflects the practical



effects of washback, where assessment shapes not only what teachers teach but also how they teach it. In such circumstances, classroom practice may become narrowly focused on preparing learners for examinations rather than developing broader analytical skills. This can reduce opportunities for creativity, discussion, and critical reflection, all of which are central to effective Visual Literacy teaching. Understanding these classroom realities is essential because they reveal how assessment practices can influence curriculum implementation, either supporting or constraining meaningful learning.

International scholarship provides useful perspectives on the influence of washback on teaching and learning across different educational systems. Cheng (1997), for example, found that in Hong Kong, teachers introduced past examination papers from the early years of secondary schooling, significantly shaping how learners approached their studies. Although this practice provided learners with a clear sense of examination expectations, it also narrowed learning to the content most likely to appear in tests, thereby discouraging broader exploration of the subject. Similar patterns have been identified in other contexts. Saif (2006) found that examination structures can strongly influence teachers' instructional choices, often causing teachers to prioritise tested content over conceptual understanding. Ozmen (2011) similarly argues that when assessment becomes the central driver of instruction, learners may adopt surface approaches to learning rather than engaging deeply with knowledge. These international studies suggest that washback can have both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, assessments can provide direction, clarify expectations, and support curriculum alignment. On the negative side, they may restrict innovation, reduce learner autonomy, and encourage repetitive teaching practices. Despite the relevance of these findings, South African scholarship on washback remains limited. Few local studies have examined how assessment practices influence the teaching of Visual Literacy within EFAL classrooms, particularly in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training sector. Zwane (2017) acknowledges that research on washback in South Africa is still emerging, with most studies focusing on general language assessment rather than specific curriculum components such as Visual Literacy. Existing research indicates that teachers often experience uncertainty when teaching visual texts, yet little attention has been given to how examination pressures shape these experiences.

However, few studies have specifically examined the intersection between washback and the teaching of Visual Literacy in South African EFAL contexts. Although some research has explored washback as a general assessment phenomenon and other studies have investigated Visual Literacy as a curriculum component, the relationship between these two areas remains insufficiently understood. A significant gap exists in understanding how reliance on previous examination papers influences teacher confidence, instructional strategies, and learner engagement in Visual Literacy lessons. Teachers may use past papers as practical resources to structure lessons and familiarise learners with assessment formats, but this approach may also limit opportunities for critical inquiry and multimodal interpretation. Similarly, learners may become skilled at recognising recurring question patterns without developing greater visual analytical skills. The interaction between assessment and pedagogy, therefore, deserves closer examination. This gap underscores the need for empirical investigation into how washback shapes classroom practice, learner participation, and curriculum outcomes in the South African context. By exploring this relationship, the present study contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges teachers face and the ways assessment practices influence the teaching and learning of Visual Literacy in EFAL classrooms.



Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Constructivist Theory, one of the most influential frameworks in contemporary education. Constructivism posits that learning is not a passive process of knowledge reception but an active process of meaning-making through experience and engagement (Fosnot, 2013; McLeod, 2024). Within this broad framework, two complementary strands are identified: cognitive constructivism, which focuses on individual knowledge construction, and social constructivism, which emphasises learning as a socially mediated process shaped by interaction, language, and cultural context (Schunk, 2020). Together, these perspectives provide a useful lens for understanding teaching and learning processes in Visual Literacy, where interpretation, meaning-making, and critical engagement are central.

Cognitive constructivism, associated with Jean Piaget, views learning as an active process in which individuals construct knowledge by integrating new experiences into existing cognitive structures (Piaget, 1972). Learners continuously organise, interpret, and reorganise information, resulting in the development of more complex understanding. In Visual Literacy, this is particularly relevant because learners interpret visual texts through prior knowledge, lived experiences, and cultural frameworks. When learners are encouraged to analyse images, question assumptions, and articulate interpretations, they develop deeper cognitive engagement and critical thinking skills (Driscoll, 2005). Such processes enable learners to move beyond surface-level recognition of images towards more analytical and interpretive understanding.

Social constructivism, strongly influenced by Lev Vygotsky, extends this view by emphasising that learning occurs through social interaction and collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). A central concept in this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which describes the difference between what learners can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guidance. In this context, scaffolding becomes essential, as teachers support learners through questioning, modelling, and guided practice to help them reach higher levels of understanding. However, in high-stakes examination contexts, scaffolding is often removed prematurely or replaced with rigid answer templates, which may constrain the development of independent interpretive skills within the ZPD. In Visual Literacy, this can limit learners' ability to explore multiple meanings, as assessment pressures prioritise correct answers over interpretive exploration. Collaborative learning environments, by contrast, enable learners to engage with multiple perspectives and refine their understanding through dialogue (Palincsar, 1998).

Constructivism is therefore highly relevant to the concept of washback in Visual Literacy classrooms. Washback refers to the influence of assessment on teaching and learning practices (Cheng, 2005; Schissel, 2018). Depending on how teachers respond to assessment demands, washback can either support or constrain meaning-making. Heavy reliance on past examination papers, for example, may result in negative washback by encouraging rote learning and limiting opportunities for interpretation and critical engagement. In such cases, learning may be reduced to reproducing expected answers rather than constructing meaning from visual texts (Alqahtani, 2021). Conversely, when assessments are used as tools for discussion, reflection, and interpretation, they can promote positive washback by enhancing learner engagement and deeper understanding (Schissel, 2018). From a constructivist



perspective, the key concern is whether assessment practices promote active knowledge construction or reinforce passive learning.

This framework also redefines the role of the teacher. Rather than acting as transmitters of knowledge, teachers function as facilitators who guide learners in constructing meaning, support diverse interpretations, and extend cognitive engagement (Mohammed & Kinyo, 2020). Constructivism emphasises learner-centred, active, and collaborative learning processes, all of which are particularly relevant in Visual Literacy, where meaning is inherently interpretive and context-dependent. Learners are thus positioned as active participants in knowledge construction rather than passive recipients of information.

In this study, cognitive and social constructivism are integrated. Cognitive constructivism explains how learners individually interpret and reorganise visual information, while social constructivism highlights how interaction and collaboration enrich this process. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for analysing how washback influences Visual Literacy teaching and learning. They enable an examination of whether classroom practices foster meaningful engagement and critical thinking, or are constrained by examination-driven approaches. In this way, constructivist theory offers a robust lens for understanding the pedagogical implications of washback in EFAL Visual Literacy classrooms.

Method

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design, guided by Hittleman and Simon (2006), to explore washback in Visual Literacy (VL) classrooms. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study as it allows the investigation of human experiences and classroom practices as they naturally occur (Davidavičienė, 2018). The approach provides an opportunity to construct realities from participants' perspectives rather than testing predetermined hypotheses. This aligns with the study's aim to understand how teaching and learning practices are influenced by previous examination papers and to explore both positive and negative washback effects.

The qualitative approach was selected because it enables a rich, contextualised understanding of classroom interactions and teacher decision-making. Unlike quantitative methods, which rely on numerical data and statistical analysis, qualitative research captures the nuances of human behaviour, communication, and thought processes. In the context of this study, it was crucial to observe how teachers applied or adapted the Visual Literacy component, how they incorporated prior examination materials, and how learners responded. The open-ended nature of qualitative research allowed these dynamics to emerge naturally, providing deeper insight into the educational process and the implications of washback.

Participants

Data were collected from three participants who had extensive knowledge and experience in teaching Visual Literacy within the English First Additional Language curriculum. In this study, "extensive experience" refers to teachers with substantial classroom practice and sustained engagement with EFAL teaching, including Visual Literacy instruction, with each participant having more than ten years of teaching experience at the senior phase and Further Education and Training levels. Creswell (2013)



suggests that a reasonable sample size for phenomenological studies typically ranges from three to twenty-five participants, depending on the depth of inquiry and the richness of data required. The participants were purposively selected based on their direct involvement in teaching Visual Literacy and their accumulated classroom experience within the EFAL curriculum. The study was conducted in a South African educational context, where participants were actively engaged in classroom teaching and curriculum implementation. Their selection ensured that the data reflected practitioners with sustained exposure to the challenges and pedagogical demands of Visual Literacy instruction, rather than those with novice or intermittent experience. Although the sample size was small, it was appropriate for the qualitative, phenomenological nature of the study, which prioritises depth of insight over breadth of representation. The decision to work with three participants was further supported by the principle of data saturation, as interviews and observations yielded rich, detailed accounts that became increasingly repetitive around emerging themes. No substantially new categories of meaning emerged in the later stages of data collection, indicating that sufficient depth had been achieved to address the research questions. However, the limited sample is acknowledged as a contextual constraint, and findings should therefore be interpreted as providing in-depth insights into lived experiences rather than statistically generalisable conclusions.

Data Collection Instruments

Data collection followed a three-step process conducted between 15 July 2015 and 30 September 2015. First, a detailed analysis of the Visual Literacy component of the English First Additional Language curriculum was undertaken to establish the conceptual and instructional framework for classroom observation. Second, lessons were recorded with the informed consent of both teacher participants and learners, allowing for in-depth examination of teaching practices, classroom interactions, and the integration of prior knowledge and examination materials (Yin, 2018). Third, follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with teacher participants to gain deeper insight into their pedagogical decisions, perceptions of learner engagement, and reflections on the influence of previous examination papers. The integration of these three methods ensured triangulation of data sources, thereby strengthening the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the findings.

Although the data were collected in 2015, the study remains relevant to current educational practice because the English First Additional Language curriculum framework for Visual Literacy has not undergone substantial structural revision since its introduction in 2006. While minor refinements to assessment guidelines and implementation support have occurred over time, the core curriculum expectations, particularly regarding Visual Literacy teaching and assessment, have remained largely consistent. The analysis and interpretation of the data, therefore, remain applicable in understanding ongoing classroom practices, especially in contexts where teachers continue to rely on examination-driven instruction.

However, it is acknowledged that the broader educational environment, including assessment pressures and teaching resources, may have evolved since data collection. To address this, the study engages with more recent literature to contextualise and interpret the findings within current scholarly discussions on Visual Literacy and washback. This approach allows the historical data to be meaningfully connected to contemporary pedagogical debates while maintaining methodological coherence.



Procedures

The study followed a chronological process. Ethical clearance was obtained from the university (Ref: 2015ECE002M) prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study and were provided with written consent forms. Upon obtaining informed consent, curriculum analysis was conducted to guide the observation process. Classroom lessons were then recorded over the data collection period, followed by semi-structured interviews with participants. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. Confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy were maintained throughout, and all data were securely stored in accordance with university standards.

Data Analysis

A comparative analysis method was employed to examine links between multiple data sources. Lesson recordings, teacher interviews, and previous examination papers were systematically compared with curriculum requirements to identify patterns of teaching practice and washback effects. This method allowed the researcher to identify both positive and negative influences of assessment on classroom instruction, as well as the extent to which teachers fostered critical engagement, interpretation, and learner autonomy. The study further utilised thematic analysis following the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023), namely: familiarising oneself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing the themes; redefining and naming the themes; and producing the report. The thematic analysis enabled the transformation of raw data into meaningful findings and supported the development of clear, well-defined themes.

Triangulation approach

A triangulation approach was used to enhance the credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness of the study findings. This involved integrating and comparing multiple data sources, namely curriculum analysis, classroom lesson recordings, and semi-structured teacher interviews. By using triangulation, the study cross-verified evidence from multiple perspectives, reducing the likelihood of bias and ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of washback in Visual Literacy classrooms. This approach enabled the identification and interpretation of inconsistencies and convergences in the data, thereby strengthening the validity of the study's conclusions.

Results

This section presents the study's findings by identifying key patterns in the teaching and learning of Visual Literacy (VL) within the English First Additional Language (EFAL) context. The purpose is to present empirical data derived from lesson observations, semi-structured interviews, and curriculum document analysis without interpretation. The findings are organised into four main themes that emerged consistently across the dataset: (a) teacher-participant self-perceived confidence and perceived competence in teaching Visual Literacy; (b) teacher-participant professional history and formal training in Visual Literacy, including pre-service and in-service exposure; (c) use of previous examination papers in classroom practice; and (d) teacher understanding and interpretation of the Visual Literacy curriculum. These distinctions are made to ensure analytical clarity, particularly between teachers' subjective evaluations of their own competence (theme a) and their actual training background and professional preparation (theme b). Together, the themes provide a structured presentation of the data



and support a clearer analysis of how perception, training, assessment practices, and curriculum interpretation interact in EFAL Visual Literacy classrooms.

Theme 1: Teacher-Participant Self-Evaluation of Visual Literacy Competence

At the beginning of the data collection process, teacher participants were requested to evaluate their own understanding of Visual Literacy (VL) and their perceived confidence in teaching this component of the EFAL curriculum. The responses were collected through semi-structured interviews and were corroborated with observational data from classroom practice.

Teachers T1 and T2 expressed confidence in their ability to teach VL. Both participants indicated that they were in positions to support other teachers while also receiving assistance from colleagues when necessary. Their responses suggested a sense of professional assurance regarding VL teaching.

T3 similarly indicated confidence in teaching VL. However, T3 also acknowledged that his understanding of certain aspects of VL was incomplete and that there was still room for further professional development in this area. This self-assessment reflected recognition of ongoing learning in teaching practice.

These findings are presented in contrast with earlier studies in the field. Moodley (2013) reported that teachers without formal training in VL often expressed uncertainty in teaching the subject and tended to rely heavily on previous examination papers as instructional tools. Mbelani (2007) similarly found that some teachers lacked the necessary visual language to teach VL effectively, with many relying on mechanical marking schemes and examination-driven instruction. The current dataset reflects differing self-reported levels of confidence among participants, as captured through interview responses and classroom engagement data.

Theme 2: Teacher Experience and Background in Visual Literacy Teaching

Teacher participants were asked to describe their experience in teaching Visual Literacy and their exposure to formal training in the subject. Their responses were collected through semi-structured interviews and triangulated with classroom observation notes and curriculum implementation timelines. The findings indicate variation in both formal preparation and teaching experience. T1 reported having no formal training in Visual Literacy, whereas T2 and T3 indicated they had been exposed to it during their undergraduate studies. Although this suggests differences in initial preparation, it does not necessarily reflect sustained pedagogical competence in teaching the subject, which was introduced into the English First Additional Language curriculum in 2006 (Mbelani, 2008).

In terms of overall teaching experience, T2 reported approximately 9 years, while T3 reported approximately 27 years. It is important to clarify that these figures refer to overall classroom teaching experience, not to specific experience teaching Visual Literacy as a curriculum component. Given that Visual Literacy is a relatively recent addition to the curriculum, even more experienced teachers may have limited long-term exposure to its pedagogical demands. This distinction is critical, as it shows that years of teaching do not automatically translate into expertise in Visual Literacy instruction.

Resource availability was also identified as a contextual factor influencing teaching practice. T1 reported limited access to instructional technologies such as projectors and digital devices, which constrained her ability to present visual texts in more interactive ways. She explained:



"...uhm, it would have been nice if they had iPads so that one can make them open the cartoons and see the colours and everything that you can't do here."

Instructional approaches further varied across participants. T1 and T2 indicated that they typically provided learners with visual texts for independent interpretation before offering explanations or notes, while T3 reported using textbooks, whiteboards, and previous examination papers as key teaching resources. Classroom observations largely confirmed these accounts, although the use of past examination papers was not directly observed in T3's lessons. Overall, the findings suggest that Visual Literacy teaching is shaped by an interaction between formal training, curriculum exposure, teaching experience, and resource availability, rather than by experience alone.

Theme 3: Use of Previous Examination Papers in Teaching Visual Literacy

The use of previous examination papers emerged as a consistent theme across participant responses and classroom observations. All participants discussed the role of past examination papers in Visual Literacy instruction, particularly within the EFAL curriculum context.

Participants collectively indicated that previous examination papers should primarily function as revision tools rather than as core instructional resources. This position was consistently stated across interviews.

T1 reported the selective use of previous examination papers in classroom instruction. The following extract illustrates her approach:

I use them very carefully. I would select a question from them, for instance, I saw the question paper for this year, it has a nice example for a cartoon...

T3 also described the use of previous examination papers as a revision strategy rather than a teaching method. The following extract reflects this position:

...normally I would use past question papers basically for revision because this would be on what they already know, what I have already taught them, so basically it would be some sort of revision...

T2 provided an additional perspective on the use of examination papers. She noted that while they may reduce learner anxiety before assessments, they may also influence learner behaviour in ways that limit creativity:

...the problem is once you give the learners the question paper first, they no longer have the creativity in mind because they'll focus on what they see in front of them...

Across the dataset, only T1 was observed using previous examination questions during classroom instruction. T2 and T3 did not use examination papers during the observed lessons.

Analysis of curriculum materials and examination papers from 2012 to 2014 for NC(V) Levels 2–4 indicated recurring patterns in text selection and question structure. These materials are presented descriptively in relation to classroom practices without interpretation. Participants also reported occasional use of supplementary texts such as newspapers and magazines; however, such materials were not consistently observed across all classroom sessions.



Theme 4: Teacher Understanding and Interpretation of the Curriculum

Participants were asked to describe their understanding of the Visual Literacy curriculum within the EFAL framework. Their responses were collected through interviews and supported by classroom observation data.

T3 indicated that the curriculum emphasises comprehension of visual and written texts before responding to assessment questions. This statement reflects his description of curriculum expectations as presented in the interview data.

All participants acknowledged certain limitations in the Visual Literacy curriculum, particularly regarding technical skill development and the range of visual texts provided for instructional use. These responses were consistent across the dataset.

T1 reported supplementing curriculum content by introducing additional materials beyond those prescribed. This practice was described as part of her teaching approach during the interview phase.

The Visual Literacy curriculum promotes opportunities for learners to engage critically with texts. This expectation is documented in curriculum guidelines and is reflected in participant responses.

However, classroom observation data indicated that lessons were predominantly teacher-centred across all participants. Instances of learner interaction, peer discussion, and collaborative learning activities were infrequent.

T1's classroom practice showed a stronger focus on technical aspects of Visual Literacy, as reflected in observation notes. T3 demonstrated some engagement with critical language concepts during instruction. T2's classroom practices reflected limited engagement with Visual Literacy content during observed sessions.

Instances of learner interaction were minimal across all observed classrooms. Where interaction occurred, it was typically teacher-directed rather than emerging through collaborative peer engagement.

Figure 1 presents a schematic diagram illustrating the four main themes that emerged from the analysis of interview data, classroom observations, and curriculum documents. The purpose of the figure is to provide a visual summary of how the key findings are organised within the study.

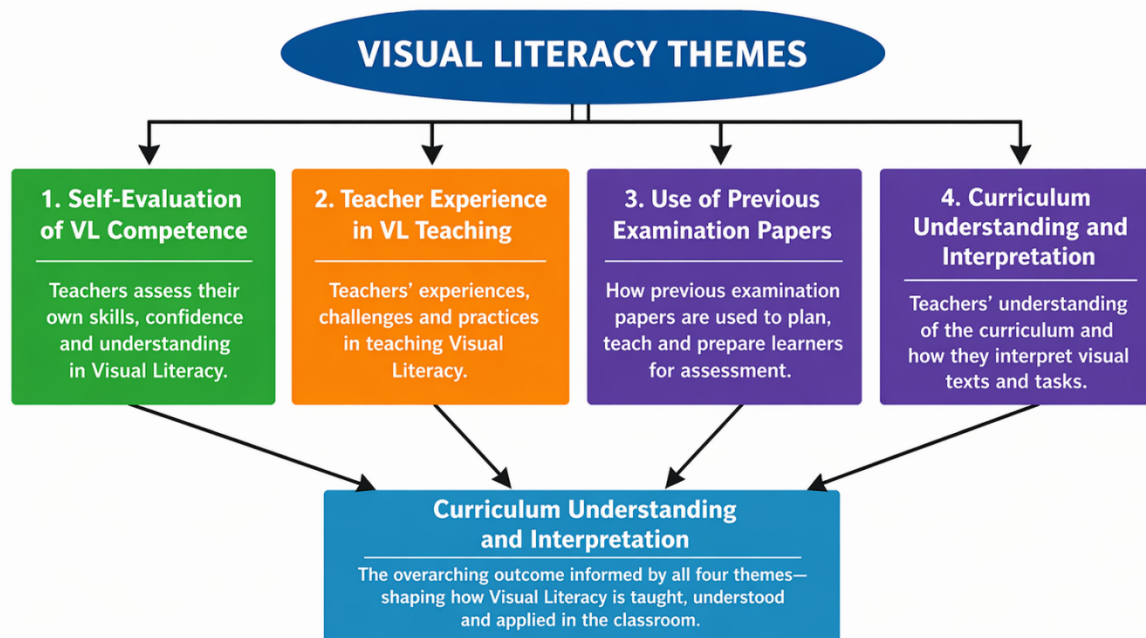


Figure 1. Visual Literacy Themes Overview

(A schematic representation of the four major themes: self-evaluation of VL competence, teacher experience in VL, use of previous examination papers, and curriculum understanding and interpretation).

The figure shows these four themes as interconnected components of Visual Literacy teaching practice. The schematic structure demonstrates that the themes were derived from multiple data sources and collectively represent the study's key findings.

Table 1 presents a comparative summary of responses from the three teacher participants (T1, T2, and T3) across the four identified themes. The table allows for direct comparison of similarities and differences in teacher experiences and practices related to Visual Literacy.

Table 1: Summary of Participant Responses

Theme	T1	T2	T3
Self-evaluation of VL competence	Confident, selective awareness	Confident, supported practice	Confident, reflective awareness
Training and experience	No formal VL training reported	Undergraduate exposure reported	Undergraduate exposure reported
Use of previous examination papers	Selective instructional use	Awareness, no classroom use observed	Revision-focused use reported
Curriculum understanding	Supplementary materials used	Limited VL engagement observed	Text comprehension emphasis reported

Source: Authors



Table 1 demonstrates both convergence and variation across participants. All three teachers reported confidence in teaching Visual Literacy; however, differences were evident in their training backgrounds, use of examination papers, and interpretation of the curriculum. The table provides a structured comparison of teacher responses across all four themes identified in the study.

Theme Synthesis

Across all data sources, four consistent themes were identified from interviews, classroom observations, and curriculum analysis. This included teacher self-evaluation of Visual Literacy competence, teacher experience and background in VL teaching, use of previous examination papers, and teacher understanding of the curriculum. The themes were derived from repeated patterns in participant responses and observational records collected throughout the study period.

The dataset reflects consistency across multiple sources, including interview transcripts, lesson observation notes, and curriculum documents. These sources were analysed collectively and are presented here in structured thematic form without interpretation or discussion.

These findings align descriptively with earlier studies that have reported similar patterns in Visual Literacy teaching contexts. Mbelani (2007) noted that some teachers lacked sufficient visual language competence to effectively teach Visual Literacy, particularly where formal training was limited. Moodley (2013) similarly reported that teachers often relied on previous examination papers as central teaching resources, reflecting patterns of instructional dependence observed across classrooms.

Furthermore, Lamely and Stoneman (2000) documented a tendency among learners to focus primarily on examination formats rather than to engage deeply with textual meaning, a pattern also observable in examination-driven instructional contexts. Zwane (2017) also reported that Visual Literacy instruction is frequently shaped by assessment practices, with curriculum implementation varying according to teacher interpretation and available resources. These studies are presented here solely as contextual comparative literature and are not used for the interpretation of the current findings

- Since your study is situated in the South African EFAL/NC(V) context, in the discussion section, you could mention whether the limited diversity of visual texts in the curriculum is a systemic issue. Does this force teachers into negative washback because they simply don't have other materials?

Discussion

This article has argued that the teaching and learning of Visual Literacy (VL) within the National Vocational Certificate [NC(V)] English First Additional Language curriculum is significantly shaped by teachers' content knowledge, pedagogical practices, and classroom decision-making. The findings demonstrate that introducing VL into the curriculum requires teachers to simultaneously interpret unfamiliar visual texts, develop appropriate instructional strategies, and support learners in developing interpretive and critical skills. As a result, the effectiveness of VL instruction is closely linked to teachers' confidence, experience, and methodological choices in the classroom.

The variation in teacher confidence observed in the findings aligns with Moodley (2013) and Mbelani (2007), who both reported that teachers often experience uncertainty when teaching Visual Literacy due to limited formal training and insufficient exposure to visual language pedagogy. In the present findings, teachers who reported greater confidence tended to demonstrate more structured lesson



delivery and greater use of instructional resources, while those with lower confidence relied more heavily on textbooks and routine instructional practices. This pattern reflects broader systemic challenges in teacher preparation programmes, where Visual Literacy is not always sufficiently embedded in pre-service training. These findings further correspond with Alder and Reeds (2002), who emphasise that resource availability and teacher preparedness significantly influence classroom practice and learner engagement.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be explained through constructivist learning theory (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978), which positions learning as an active process of meaning-making supported by interaction, scaffolding, and prior knowledge. Teachers who facilitated opportunities for learners to interpret visual texts, discuss meanings, and engage collaboratively created classroom environments consistent with social constructivist principles. In contrast, teacher-centred approaches limited learners' opportunities to co-construct meaning, thereby restricting deeper engagement with visual texts. This suggests that pedagogical orientation plays a central role in determining the quality of Visual Literacy learning experiences.

The findings also demonstrate that teachers' instructional practices are strongly influenced by their interpretation of curriculum expectations. Where teachers interpreted the curriculum narrowly, instruction tended to focus on surface-level comprehension and technical identification of visual elements. Where teachers adopted broader interpretations, learners were exposed to more critical engagement with meaning, context, and representation. This variation reflects inconsistencies in curriculum enactment, a phenomenon also observed by Mbelani (2007), who noted that curriculum implementation is often mediated by teacher understanding and contextual constraints.

The use of previous examination papers emerged as a significant instructional feature across the dataset. The findings indicate that examination papers are primarily used as revision tools rather than as central teaching resources. This selective use aligns with the intention of maintaining curriculum coverage while supporting assessment preparation. However, the findings also indicate that when examination papers are used in isolation, they may narrow the range of text types and limit opportunities for creative interpretation. This observation is consistent with Moodley (2013), who reported that excessive reliance on examination papers can lead to formulaic teaching approaches in Visual Literacy classrooms. Similarly, Lamely and Stoneman (2000) found that learners often prioritise examination patterns over conceptual understanding, which may restrict critical engagement with texts. Zwane (2017) also highlights that assessment-driven instruction can shape classroom practice, influencing both teaching strategies and learner responses.

From a washback perspective, the findings suggest both positive and negative influences of assessment practices on teaching and learning. Positive washback is evident where examination papers are used selectively to reinforce learning, guide revision, and familiarise learners with assessment formats. Negative washback emerges where instructional practices become overly dependent on examination structures, potentially limiting exposure to diverse visual texts such as advertisements, posters, and real-world media. The findings indicate that teachers who supplemented examination materials with additional resources created more varied learning opportunities, thereby broadening learners' interpretive experiences.



The curriculum itself appears to provide limited guidance on the depth and diversity of visual text examples, requiring teachers to extend instructional content independently. This places additional responsibility on teachers to bridge the gap between curriculum specifications and classroom realities. Teachers who actively supplemented curriculum materials facilitated broader engagement with Visual Literacy concepts, while those who adhered strictly to prescribed materials demonstrated more constrained instructional approaches. This variation reflects differences in pedagogical interpretation and resource utilisation across classrooms.

The findings further suggest that learner engagement is influenced by the extent to which teachers incorporate interactive and dialogic teaching strategies. Where classroom interaction and guided discussion were present, learners demonstrated greater participation in meaning-making processes. Conversely, in classrooms where instruction was predominantly teacher-led, learner engagement was more limited and centred on receiving information rather than constructing meaning. These patterns align with constructivist principles (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasise the role of social interaction in cognitive development and learning.

In the South African EFAL/NC(V) context, these dynamics must also be understood within broader structural limitations. The curriculum appears to offer limited diversity in visual texts, requiring teachers to supplement materials independently. This places additional responsibility on teachers to bridge gaps between curriculum expectations and classroom realities. Consequently, reliance on textbooks and examination papers may reflect pragmatic responses to resource scarcity rather than purely pedagogical preference. In this sense, washback should not be viewed solely as an instructional issue but as a systemic phenomenon shaped by curriculum design, resource availability, and institutional expectations. As Schissel (2018) notes, assessment systems are embedded within broader educational ecologies that influence classroom practice in complex ways.

Overall, the findings indicate that Visual Literacy teaching is shaped by an interaction between teacher knowledge, curriculum interpretation, instructional resources, and assessment practices. Teacher competence and confidence appear to influence the extent to which learners are exposed to critical and interpretive learning opportunities. Constructivist pedagogical approaches are associated with more interactive, meaning-rich classroom environments, whereas more traditional instructional approaches are associated with limited learner participation and reduced interpretive depth. These dynamics highlight the central role of teachers as mediators of curriculum implementation and learning experiences in Visual Literacy classrooms.

Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. Firstly, the study employed a small, purposive sample of three teacher participants. While this approach enabled the collection of rich, in-depth qualitative data, the limited sample size restricts the generalisability of the findings to broader populations of Visual Literacy teachers in other contexts. The use of purposive and convenience sampling also introduces the possibility of selection bias, as participants were included based on availability and relevance rather than random selection.

Secondly, the study relied heavily on self-reported data obtained through semi-structured interviews. Such data are inherently subject to self-report bias, including social desirability bias, in which



participants may present their teaching practices in a more favourable light. Although classroom observations were used to triangulate the interview data, it is important to note that the researcher's presence during lesson observations may have influenced teacher behaviour. Teachers may have consciously or unconsciously adjusted their instructional practices to reflect what they perceived as "ideal" teaching, resulting in more structured, textbook-adherent, or formally presented lessons than would typically occur in their natural classroom environment. This observer effect may therefore have limited the extent to which fully authentic classroom practices were captured.

Thirdly, the research design was cross-sectional, with data collected over a limited period. As a result, the study does not capture longitudinal changes in teacher practice or the sustained washback effects over time. A longer-term study would be required to examine how teaching practices evolve in response to assessment pressures, curriculum reforms, and professional development interventions.

Fourthly, the study was conducted within a specific educational context in South Africa, focusing on NC(V) Visual Literacy within the English First Additional Language curriculum. This contextual specificity limits the transferability of the findings to other educational systems, grade levels, or subject areas. In addition, cultural, institutional, and resource-related factors unique to the study setting may have shaped teacher practices and responses in ways that are not generalisable to other contexts.

Fifthly, the study did not control for key teacher-related variables such as differences in training backgrounds, institutional support structures, or access to teaching and learning resources. These uncontrolled variables may have influenced instructional approaches and classroom practices, making it difficult to isolate washback effects as the sole or primary explanatory factor for observed teaching behaviours.

Future research could address these limitations by employing larger, randomly selected samples across multiple institutions and provinces to enhance generalisability and reduce selection bias. Longitudinal research designs could also be used to track changes in teaching practices over time and provide deeper insight into the sustained effects of washback. In addition, mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative insights with quantitative measures of learner performance could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how assessment practices influence Visual Literacy teaching and learning.

Recommendations

1. **Targeted Professional Development:** Future teacher development programmes should focus specifically on Visual Literacy pedagogy, including interpretation of visual texts, critical literacy strategies, and the integration of constructivist teaching approaches. Training should move beyond content familiarity to emphasise practical classroom application, particularly the use of scaffolding strategies within learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Teachers should be equipped to gradually shift from direct instruction to guided discovery, in which learners are supported through questioning, modelling, and increasing independence in interpreting visual texts.
2. **Longitudinal Research on Washback Effects:** Future research should examine the long-term effects of examination-driven teaching on learner achievement and critical literacy development using longitudinal designs over extended periods (e.g., 6–12 months or longer), incorporating multiple classroom observations and assessment points. Such studies would provide deeper insight into how



washback influences teaching practices and learner development over time, rather than capturing only a single snapshot of classroom reality.

3. **Resource Enhancement and Digital Integration:** Educational institutions should prioritise providing diverse teaching resources, including multimedia tools, digital platforms, and visual-text archives. Research should also explore how low-resource classrooms can effectively integrate everyday visual materials such as advertisements, posters, and community-based texts to support meaningful interpretation and engagement with Visual Literacy concepts.

4. **Curriculum Review and Expansion:** Curriculum developers should review the Visual Literacy component to ensure greater diversity of visual text types and clearer guidance on developing higher-order critical thinking skills. This should include stronger alignment between assessment expectations and pedagogical aims. Future studies should evaluate the impact of curriculum revisions on classroom practice, particularly regarding teacher autonomy and learner engagement.

5. **Strengthening Constructivist Classroom Practices:** Teachers should be supported in implementing learner-centred approaches, such as group discussions, peer interactions, and scaffolded analysis of visual texts. Emphasis should be placed on scaffolding as a deliberate instructional strategy that supports learners' progression from dependence to independent interpretation. Further research should investigate the effectiveness of constructivist strategies for improving learner engagement, interpretive competence, and the development of critical visual literacy in EFAL classrooms.

Conclusion

This study investigated the teaching and learning of Visual Literacy (VL) within the NC(V) English First Additional Language curriculum, with a particular focus on the influence of previous examination papers on classroom practice. The findings demonstrate that VL teaching is shaped by a combination of teacher confidence, professional training, resource availability, and interpretation of curriculum requirements. While teachers showed awareness of the importance of VL and its role in developing learners' interpretive skills, classroom practices were often characterised by limited pedagogical diversity and inconsistent alignment with curriculum expectations.

A key contribution of this study is its demonstration of the dual nature of washback in VL classrooms. The use of previous examination papers functions both as a supportive revision tool and, in some cases, as a constraint on creative and critical engagement with visual texts. This highlights how assessment practices can significantly shape teaching approaches and learning opportunities. The study also contributes to understanding the gap between curriculum intentions and classroom realities, particularly in contexts where teachers face resource constraints and limited specialised training in Visual Literacy.

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