KNOWLEDGE BASE FOR EFL/ESL EDUCATORS: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

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Searching for an appropriate definition of what constitutes knowledge base in the teaching profession has become a central focus of attention for researchers, educators, and accreditation agencies during the last decades. The importance of clarifying such a definition has a double value. On the one hand it has become a determinant factor when assessing if teacher preparation programs are meeting the standards for excellence in education. On the other hand, the issue concerns prospective and experienced teachers themselves as they search for opportunities to acquire such knowledge whose ultimate goal is to improve the quality of their practice.

But what exactly does this knowledge embrace and more specifically how does it influence an English language teacher? The purpose of this article is to present a synthesis of the most significant responses to these questions and to invite English language teachers to examine their knowledge framework in the hope that this reflection allows for an enrichment of their practice.

The "truth" about knowledge base: An allegory

Richard Wisniewski (1988) presents an allegory that appropriately portrays the quest for a definition of knowledge base. When trying to meet a requirement of NCATE (an agency in the USA for the Accreditation of Teacher Education), Illinois Smith, the fictional character of the story, is selected by a principal to search for the "truth" about knowledge base. Smith lives a series of adventures until he finally finds the Temple of Wisdom. Expecting a precise answer for his quest, the character is led by a wise member of the Temple to the hall where the "truth" is. Perplexed and astonished, Smith found a complex mosaic. It was composed of varied images portraying different aspects of the teaching profession. He, as well as his colleagues, was expecting a concrete, tangible answer. Instead, he found a repertoire of images that did not form a specific pattern. The clues were there, but he had to make sense out of them.

The allegory is pertinent to demonstrate that a single answer for defining teachers' knowledge base would be difficult to determine. For a long time the formulation of knowledge base was limited to the acquisition of the basic skills required for teaching, the competency of educators in their subject matter area, and the use of pedagogical skills. However, there are other variables that are critical in the teaching profession. Such variables include the classroom context, the physical and psychological characteristics of the learners, and the subject matter itself. Recently other variables have been included in the list: the personal and practical experiences of teachers, their reflective practices and research skills.
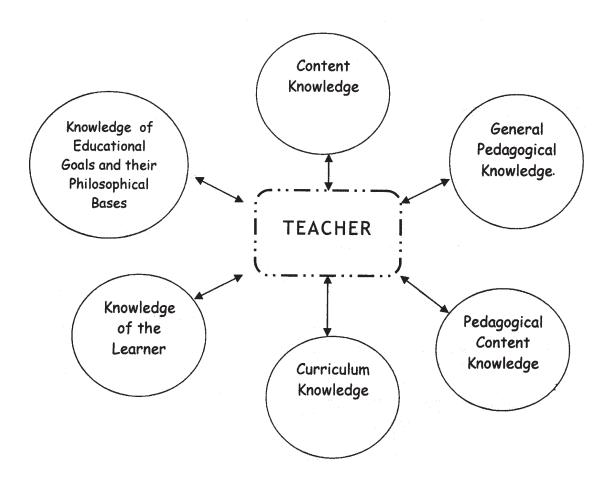
Knowledge base categories

Shulman (1987), in a pioneer work about teachers' knowledge base, proposed a theoretical model that embraces the following categories: (1) content knowledge; (2) general pedagogical knowledge; (3) pedagogical content knowledge; (4) curriculum knowledge; (5) knowledge of the learner; and (6) knowledge of educational goals and their philosophical bases. The diagram below depicts all these categories nourishing educators in order to eventually excel in their profession. The arrows indicate that teachers' experiences and insights enrich each category making knowledge base dynamic.

1. Content knowledge

It refers to the amount and structure of knowledge itself in the teacher's mind.

Teachers should not only possess a set of truths in a given discipline, but also be able to establish relationships among those truths. They are held responsible not only for how much they communicate but also for how assertive their explanations about those truths are. Being able to explain the how and why of certain propositions in a given discipline is knowledge that "encourages the willingness to be surprised by new evidence" (Buchman: 1984, 43). A teacher should, therefore, go beyond the memorization and be alert to establishing the validity of new truths.

But how does this translate in the EFL/ESL domain? According to Day and Concklin (1992), content knowledge is what EFL/ESL teachers actually teach. That is, teaching the English language as represented by courses in syntax, semantics, phonology, pragmatics, and literary and cultural aspects of the

language. If we follow Buchman's ideas, an English teacher should not only be knowledgeable in these areas, but must be ready to challenge this knowledge as new insights from theory and research emerge. This idea implies that English language educators should not be content with what they learn in their preparation programs, but should be constantly updating themselves. The notion that a teacher preparation program is solely responsible for providing appropriate content knowledge is obsolete. A change in paradigm took place, as it is the individual teacher who undertakes the task of keeping informed and evaluating new insights.

2. General pedagogical knowledge

It embraces generic teaching strategies, beliefs and practices that are usually related to classroom management, motivation, and decision-making. These issues are usually addressed in methodology courses.

3. Pedagogical content knowledge

It is defined as the means to represent and communicate the subject so as to make it comprehensive for other people. Analogies, demonstrations, examples, pictures, explanations and so on, are means through which subject matter can be represented. Teachers should possess a repertoire of alternative forms of knowledge formulation. The understanding of the easiest and most difficult topics in teaching a foreign language and the anticipation of misconceptions that may interfere with learning should be included in this area. Instructional strategies should be adopted to overcome those difficulties. In the EFL/ESL domain this knowledge is represented in courses such as grammar, material design, reading and writing skills, and TESL/TEFL methods.

4. Curricular knowledge

It refers to the understanding of curricular choices from which educators can derive their instruction. In addition to an awareness of existing curricular materials, teachers should get acquainted with the curricular programs of their students' school system so that they can relate their own area of specialization to others their pupils are dealing with. Curricular knowledge enables teachers to try to incorporate ideas that the students acquired in previous courses or in other disciplines. For the English teacher it means examining the articulation with other subjects to achieve meaningful learning.

5. Knowledge of the learner

Besides the physical and psychological characteristics of the learners, educators should include knowledge about students' cognitive processes. Prospective educators should focus on the learning processes of their learners; that is, knowledge about how children, adolescents and adults learn. For English teachers this is especially important as they adapt their instruction, strategies and material to the students' stage of cognitive development. Therefore, if they lack knowledge about how content is received, patterned, stored, and retrieved, the perspective of how to apply those strategies would become ineffective.

6. Knowledge of educational goals and philosophical bases

This type of knowledge requires the teacher going beyond her/his classroom; that is, examining the expectations of the society in which the student is embedded and the principles that guide the education system.

This type of knowledge permits the teacher to respond to new challenges and to make informed decisions.

Reflection and research as components of teachers' knowledge base

Back in 1991, Tamir stated that professional knowledge in the teaching field, as in any other, was determined to a great extent by its interaction with the cognitive structure of the teacher. In other words, when a body of general knowledge and skills interact with the individual's cognitive organization, the result is an idiosyncratic version of that knowledge and skills. Shulman and Grossman (as cited by Torres and Clavijo: 1999) later supported this contention. They stated that the knowledge base of teachers is the result of the interaction among the intellectual activities that this profession embraces. Consequently, effective teaching knowledge derives from the comprehension, transformation, progressive application, and evaluation of new conceptualizations the teacher does. All these areas demand from the teacher constant reflection, which becomes a determinant factor to build and solidify the teaching knowledge base.

Reflection entails two issues. One has to do with thoughtfulness about educational theories and practices (Tom and Valli: 1988). Continuous professional growth is obtained whenever the individual teacher engages in a permanent critical analysis of educational traditions. Through this analysis, educators deliberate over main education issues as well as contemplate the aspects that would be more favourable to improve their teaching performance. More concretely, this means that English teachers adopt a critical position regarding the old and new proposals for teaching and learning a language. This is particularly true nowadays that there have been great advancements in the use of technology.

Knowledge on teaching and learning with technology should be integrated in teachers' preparation programs to ensure that educators address the "equitable availability and distribution of information to all learners, regardless of socioeconomic standing" (National Conference on Teacher Quality, Department of Education, USA, 2000). New technologies have generated alternative means not only to communicate with others, but also to produce varied types of texts. English teachers benefit enormously from learning about the applications of technology in their classrooms. However, they need to be cautious of its limitations in order to avoid making it the panacea for the language teaching profession.

The other issue related to reflection deals with an in-depth exploration of one's teaching practices as a means to construct a solid conceptualization of teaching. Self-reflection should begin by examining one's view about teaching and learning. This is known as personal practical knowledge. It relates to the moral, affective, and aesthetic experiences that had an impact on the teacher (Connelly and Clandinin: 1988). Usually, the naïve conceptions of both student teachers and experienced teachers about teaching come from two sources. One is the impact of prior school and home experiences as a child or adolescent. The other arises when there is a fragmentation and little articulation between courses and field experiences at the college level. Thus, identifying one's pre-conceived ideas and possible misconceptions about teaching and learning aid in determining what detract us from an effective practice.

Richards and Lockhart (1997) state that teaching experience without a critical reflection is not enough to enlarge an educator's knowledge base. They suggest that second or foreign language educators also engage in a systematic exploration of classroom processes so that they assess and evaluate the impact of their teaching on their learners. Exploring one's teaching practices helps to understand the nature of teacher development. According to these authors, a teacher who gains knowledge and awareness of the multiple dimensions of teaching is better prepared to make effective decisions. This understanding, in turn, can be obtained through self-inquiry. That is, teachers working individually or with a colleague can collect information about their own practices that hopefully will make visible the multiplicity of aspects that usually go unnoticed in a classroom. Critically examining teachers' own experiences "involves posing questions about how and why things are the way they are, what value systems they represent, what alternatives might be available, and what the limitations are of doing things one way as opposed to another" (p.4).

These assumptions implicitly view the *language teacher as a researcher*. The tradition that external agents should conduct research is challenged. Freeman (1998) clearly points out that teacher generated research is being directed towards creating and testing knowledge: "teachers are creating, in their own terms, a new viable community around the issues of teaching that are central to their work. At its core, it is a question of power and participation because it means separating from the disciplinary communities that have hosted educational research thus far, and defining new relationships with them" (p.13). Teachers are now empowered to conduct research in their classrooms to gain understanding about teaching and further their professional development.

Prospective language educators as well as more experienced teachers should reposition themselves in terms of their role and learn to recognize that they can become producers of knowledge by means of doing research. There is not a precise, concrete formula that could prescribe how a teacher is to engage in it. Whatever the paradigm adopted, research should be rigorous and systematic so as to produce reliable results. The nature of the type of research an English teacher is to undertake will be determined to a great extent by factors such as the nature of the context, the teacher him/herself, the learners, the program, and so on.

A quest for an answer

Apparently, there is lack of consensus about the criteria attributes that would characterize a definition of knowledge base in the language teaching profession. Although it is widely recognized that English teachers should possess solid subject matter knowledge (that is knowledge about the language) and sound pedagogical skills (how to teach the language more effectively), limiting teachers' knowledge to these two aspects would detriment their intellectual and thus professional growth.

Considering a wider dimension of what constitutes the teaching profession enables teachers to envision a more complete framework of reference for future professional application. This vision embodies thoughtful reflection not only about the proposals made by scholars in the field, but also about teachers' own practices. A starting point for such reflection requires becoming a skillful observer willing to capture those moments

that could eventually generate amazement and puzzlement. Teachers who constantly wonder about and attend to the "what", "how" and "why" of teaching and learning events will be prone to engage in research practices. Such an involvement allows to examine the incidence of what teachers do in their classrooms and will also shed light on the complex issues that our profession embraces.

As research and insight are being collected not only by authorities and scholars in all the fields related to language teaching and learning, but also by the language teachers themselves, the criteria for including indispensable elements in the knowledge base would continue to grow. Therefore, defining what knowledge base is for any English language educator, as for any other kind of teacher, is an overwhelming and demanding task. It thus becomes a matter of interpreting the "mosaic" of ideas that have been generated through the years in the field and incorporating them in their repertoire. This brings us back to our allegory at the beginning of this article. The Wise One in Wisniewski's story asserts to point out that the elements are there, but it is educators themselves who have to look at the myriad of possibilities in a more comprehensive manner so as to continuously enlarge their knowledge and their practice.

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