

## CONTENT KNOWLEDGE IN TEACHER EDUCATION: WHERE PROFESSIONALISATION LIES

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### **Introduction**

One fundamental approach to investigate teachers and their practices is to begin by assessing the impact of initial language teacher education (ILTE). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to understand which foundations in initial language teacher education (ILTE) programmes in Chubut, Argentina, should be improved by investigating the perceptions a group of teachers from this province had as regards the programmes they completed, their impact in their professional life, and how they perceived programmes could be improved.

### **The knowledge base in ILTE**

In two seminal articles, Shulman (1986, 1987) proposes the knowledge base in teacher education based on how knowledge of pedagogy and content evolve in the minds of novice teachers. Shulman argues that understanding of this knowledge base cannot be founded only on research on effective teaching (Freeman and Johnson 1998a: 399) or on a view of teaching which sees the teacher as able to understand what needs to be taught and how it is to be taught (Shulman 1987: 7). Therefore he proposes three main categories: content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, i.e. pedagogical knowledge informed by Psychology, Pedagogy, Philosophy among others. He also proposes pedagogical content knowledge, that is, pedagogical knowledge applied to, in our field, ELT. In this paper, I will focus on content knowledge as it was the component which received most participants' attention.

### **Content knowledge**

Content knowledge refers to the amount and organisation of knowledge per se in the mind of the teacher (Shulman 1986:9; 1987:9). As regards teachers of EFL, Roberts (1998: 105) points out that having content knowledge means that teachers show knowledge of the systems of the target language and competence in it. This means that teachers should have declarative knowledge of the language (Bailey et al.

2001: 23; Day 1990:43), i.e. knowledge about English grammar and phonetics, for instance, and be simultaneously proficient and confident users of it as they will become language models for their learners (Barnes 2002:199).

Although it is asserted that well founded content knowledge provides ground for authority and supports the idea that teaching is a profession (Ball 2008:404), it is essential that we acknowledge the fact that in ELT, English may be a foreign language taught as a subject (Widdowson 2002: 67-68). This means that teachers will present a pedagogical construct of the language as a real entity, which should not be equated to the language as experienced by its native speakers. Therefore, we might suggest then that teachers in Argentina, for example, should not be expected to know English as if it were their L1. Such an expectation would fail to recognise the numerous contextual features which might go against this goal in language teacher education.

### **Sources of content knowledge**

The sources for this type of knowledge will come from, as Shulman (1987: 8-9) states, scholarship content disciplines related to English as a system. However, when we refer, as has been advanced above, to content knowledge, we mean not only knowledge about the language but also the development of the different components of communicative competence. Needless to say, some of the sources, such as Linguistics, Phonetics, and Grammar, will enhance the linguistic competence of prospective teachers. With reference to Linguistics, Bartels (1999: 46-56) adopts a cautious stance. He believes that linguistic knowledge will become meaningful to student-teachers provided it shows them how this knowledge can be used for language teaching. Linguistic teaching, Bartels continues, should be for developing knowledge of interlanguage analysis, and developing skills in analysing second language learning in specific students.

On the other hand, it is also claimed that communicative competence will be best

achieved if intercultural understanding (Woodgate-Jones 2008:2-3), i.e., understanding which might be connected with sociopragmatic competence, is included in the programme. Within this same line of thought, though emphasising the social aspect, Byram (1999: 73) suggests that another vital source in content knowledge should come from intercultural communication so as to help textual interpretation and critical cultural awareness to be passed on to learners. Also, Davies (2002: 63) states that a social component in the shape of sociolinguistics offers ILTE both knowledge about the complexities of speech communities found in the English language, and skills which will inform curriculum choices among varieties of English. This sociolinguistic source within content knowledge applies to both subject matter knowledge, the language as a system, and cultural awareness. To speak about communities of practice in this matrix is to include information about World Englishes as another source for knowledge-base whose origin is not American or European (Brown 2002: 446).

Even though subject matter could be isolated within content knowledge (James 2001: 5) there is still another area which needs to be considered, that of the social component of language. This component cannot be separated from cultural competence, i.e., knowledge of the complex representations of society. These representations can be grouped under what we might call general cultural knowledge whose sources could be History, Geography and Literature among others which see language in society, such as Sociolinguistics or Intercultural Communication. Therefore we can make a distinction between subject-matter knowledge, i.e., knowledge of the language connected with linguistic competence, and general cultural knowledge, which aims at expanding the cultural capital of student-teachers in their ILTE. This distinction is seen as vital components in ILTE programmes in Argentina.

#### ***Language as subject matter development***

Initially, we might consider the fact that once a certain level of proficiency has been achieved, it may be necessary to improve it. For instance, Berry (1990:97-98) asserts that

this language improvement can be achieved if two components are solidly shaped in LTE programmes: content knowledge and language improvement. Both Berry (1990) and Cullen (1994: 164-165) stress that this emphasis in language improvement is mostly felt in EFL contexts where teachers do not have many opportunities of interaction with speakers whose English is their L1. Berry (1990), for instance, conducted a study in Poland where teachers were asked to rank Methodology, Theory (theories of language and teaching) and Language Improvement in order of importance according to their needs. Language Improvement was ranked first followed by Methodology. Theory did poorly in participants' ranking as they felt they had had enough of it.

Another example of the impact of language improvement comes from a study in which supervisors from MATESOL programmes in the US and Canada were interviewed. Llorca (2006) concludes that there is a strong belief that NNS teachers with a high language proficiency level will be better prepared to teach in more contexts and all levels, as language proficiency is thought to be closely linked with self confidence in a teaching situation. This expected degree of knowledge depends on the type of ELT model advocated, since some might focus on linguistic competence while others will emphasise language awareness (Woodgate-Jones 2008:2).

In contexts such as Argentina, where there has been a movement towards communicative language teaching, teachers are under greater pressure as regards language proficiency (Zappa-Hollman, 2007: 621-622). They are expected to use English naturally and spontaneously and be able to introduce in their lessons more semi-authentic or authentic material which will hopefully trigger authentic responses from learners.

When some programmes need to introduce changes in their components to enhance the content knowledge of prospective teachers, there are some suggestions to follow. First, language can be improved if most components of a programme are taught through the medium of English. Second, both language and methodology components can be integrated if the concept of loop input (DelliCarpini

2009) is explored as it will combine content with communicative strategies at the same time. In a nutshell, loop input refers to the combination of content of what is to be learnt with the process on how to learn about it, i.e., an alignment of content and process (Woodward 2003: 301). For instance, if trainers need to introduce the concept of dictogloss, they can use the very same technique to present its procedures and the benefits of it.

As regards the myriad of aspects considered within content knowledge, we might agree with Widdowson (2002: 80) who summarises his position by saying that subject knowledge means knowing about the language and how this can be managed in a such a way that learners are induced to learn.

### The study

Fifteen teachers graduated at higher education institutions in Chubut were randomly contacted via e-mail. They had completed a four-year ILTE programme and had around 10 years of experience.

In March, 2009, they were submitted a questionnaire (appendix 1) in which they were asked to mention positive and negative aspects of their ILTE programme. In addition, they were also asked to assess the impact of the different strands or components which represent the knowledge base proposed by Shulman (1986; 1987). In this paper, I will only report on those questions and responses which were connected with the impact of content knowledge in ILTE.

### Results

In question 3 of the questionnaire, the participants were asked:

What was positive and/or negative in your programme as a whole? List 3 at least. Feel free to add others and/or explain.

#### **Content knowledge: positive and negative aspects**

Figure 1 below shows the number of positive responses under categories which group the answers collected.

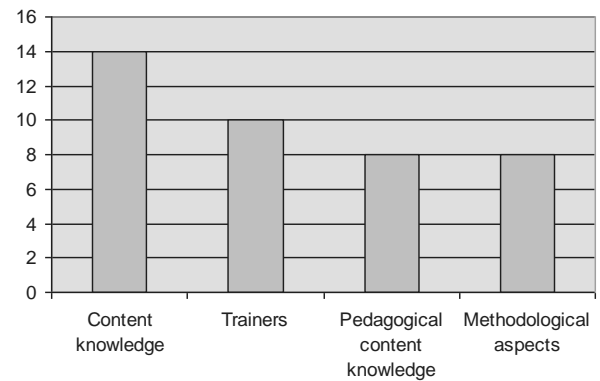


Figure 1: Positive aspects in ILTE

The programmes' interest in offering a solid base for content knowledge was acknowledged by most participants. In their responses, it is clear the distinction between subject matter concerning knowledge of the language, and cultural knowledge as a means to language improvement (Berry 1990). Most participants expressed views which could be represented through these quotes:

- 'Learning Grammar and Phonetics' (P1)<sup>1</sup>
- 'Learning Linguistics' (P3)
- 'Intensive syllabi in English Language and Grammar' (P6)
- 'Learning about English culture' (P10)
- 'Learning about other countries through Literature and History' (P11)
- 'Improving my language skills through Literature' (P12)
- 'Learning about other cultures through Portuguese' (P13)

It is clear from these quotes that teachers valued their exposure to different aspects of and about the target language. It was their view that mastering English was paramount in their professional education, a position which is similar to Berry's study (1990). This mastery was not only associated with the language itself but also with the cultural aspects that entail learning a language that is to be taught as a subject in the educational system in Chubut. One particular aspect to observe is that some participants also valued the presence of an L3 in the programme, in this case Portuguese. One participant who expanded on this positive aspect asserted that

<sup>1</sup> The P and number in brackets represent participants in the study.

It was very enriching to our training since we had the opportunity to experience how learning a new language feels on the side of the student. (P13)

The study of another language may have helped participants reflect and experience again how a language may be learnt (Flowerdew 1998) and to some extent, share what their own learners may undergo in the process of learning a foreign language.

However, when participants mentioned negative aspects of the programmes they had completed, they also referred to content knowledge.

Subject-matter knowledge was thought to be threatened by the fact that, according to some responses, there was not enough feedback on language improvement from trainers, and grammar and phonetics were only present as separate subjects in two years of the programme.

'No feedback for language improvement' (P7) 'I had Grammar and Phonetics in years 1 and 2 only' (P8)

It follows that participants would have liked to receive more L2 input not only through the general pedagogical subjects taught in English but also by increasing their exposure to studies about the English language. So far we may say that participants stressed the importance of subject-matter knowledge in their initial teacher education. This could be understood if we bear in mind that opportunities to use the target language are scarce and teachers usually believe their level is not good enough to be teachers of English in a foreign language context. Although the programmes the participants attended did have content knowledge as a priority in terms of hours allocated to this strand, there is a need to have this strand increased together with a more extended use of English as medium of instruction.

Initially, it may be argued that the most positive aspect of ILTE programmes in Chubut stems from the content knowledge strand. This attitude reveals participants' adherence to a conception of teaching where knowledge of the subject is paramount in their education. On the other hand, trainers and pedagogical knowledge appear to be more controversial than other

aspects. First, teachers' responses revealed that trainers were thought to be responsible for the success of a programme and that they were expected to show the connections that there exist between theory and practice in teaching. When trainees cannot see such links in theory-practice, the former may be discarded, and reliance on the latter appears to increase.

#### ***Impact of content knowledge in participants' professional life***

Question 4 (see appendix 1) asked participants to show their level of agreement on a number of items which represented the types of knowledge usually found in programmes. I will report here on content knowledge only as it was the area which received most of their concern.

Regarding knowledge of language, this can be recovered from items **a** and **b**. Almost all participants strongly agreed that learning English grammar and phonetics in the first place and linguistics in the second place had a positive influence in their teacher education. These results support what participants expressed as one of the most positive aspects of programmes as a whole. Therefore, the stress on subject-matter knowledge stands unchallenged by other components in the programme. Within content knowledge, cultural knowledge was also acknowledged as positive. Learning Literature, and, to a lesser extent, learning Culture, History and Geography were seen as having a positive impact on teacher education.

However, this positive attitude seemed to disperse along the intensity scale when it came to evaluating the methodologies trainers adopted to teach content. Even though all answers were located within the positive side, participants tended to consider this item differently. It follows that, on the one hand, participants reflected positively towards content but were able to draw a distinction between content and methodology. This distinction in my opinion seems to be connected with some of the negative aspects highlighted above, mainly those concerning trainers' ability to teach in this strand.

So far we, we may assert that the teachers who took part in this study believed that the most salient aspects of the knowledge base in teacher education were

content knowledge for language proficiency, provided trainers in charge of it adopt methodologies advocated in the ELT pedagogical knowledge strand, and an ongoing dialogue between theory and practice is reflected in the practicum.

**Balance in the knowledge base**

Question 6 asked the participants to distribute 100% in four types of knowledge according to their balance in the knowledge base in ILTE programmes. The participants viewed that the balance should be as follows (Figure 2).

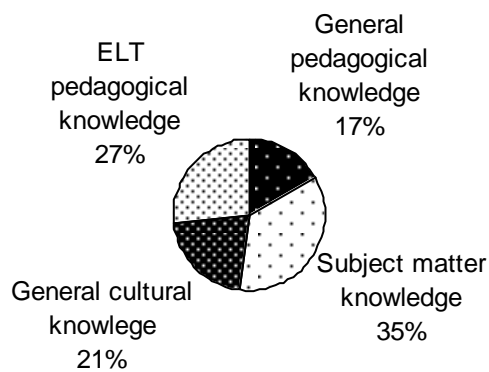


Figure 2: Balance in the knowledge base

Needless to say, content knowledge, both in the form of language study and cultural knowledge for language improvement, is thought to be foundational in the base. This type of knowledge is followed by ELT pedagogical knowledge, i.e., pedagogical content knowledge, and last, general pedagogical knowledge, that is, pedagogical knowledge regardless of any specific subject-matter.

Let us analyse and discuss here the two aspects which can be seen under content knowledge: subject matter and general cultural knowledge.

**Content knowledge**

Following the integration of both subject-matter knowledge (Shulman 1986; 1987) as study of the language, and cultural knowledge as an opportunity for language improvement as well as cultural knowledge of English speaking countries (Brown 2002: 446), results show that the percentage allocated to this strand in the knowledge

base is 56%. More than half of ILTE programmes, according to respondents of the questionnaire, should be devoted to the study of language, language improvement and cultural studies of the target language. This seems to confirm what the National Curricular Guidelines (2007) suggest, since they allocate between 50-60% to this type of knowledge in programmes.

With specific reference to subject-matter as encompassing English Language, language skills, Linguistics and other subjects devoted to the study of language, the participants believed it essential due to some of the reasons quoted below:

- 'To learn how to use the language correctly' (P1)
- 'You have to know what you're teaching' (P12)
- 'Mastery of the language is absolutely necessary to be a model' (P10)
- 'Basis of our teaching' (P3)
- 'This is what we actually teach: English' (P13)
- 'Teachers should have a good command of the language because it's our specialisation' (P6)
- 'Very important to know and handle What we teach' (P14)

These quotes reflect, following Robert (1998), that teachers must have knowledge of the system of the English language and be competent users of it since they will be models for their learners (Barnes 2002: 199). Some participants remarked knowledge of the language, aspect which shows their concern for professionalization, as Ball (2008: 404) and Widdowson (2002: 79-80) suggest, while others stressed language proficiency. It is interesting to note, however, that none of the participants referred to both aspects as equally important.

On the other hand, we also find cultural knowledge which was realised in the programmes respondents completed, through subjects such as English Literature and English History among others. Most respondents' justifications for the percentage allocated to this sub-strand or source of knowledge could be grouped under two categories: cultural knowledge, and language improvement. Those participants who emphasised the first category expressed:

- 'There's more than grammar and phonetics' (P1)  
 'We teach English AND its culture' (P10)  
 'To be critical thinkers and appreciate art' (P11)  
 'Language as a whole includes culture' (P13)

It is interesting to discover that some participants added a cultural understanding in the picture, that is, they saw the need to integrate communicative competence with cultural competence or awareness since through the teaching of English they also transmit values and cultural knowledge of the people whose L1 is English.

Those who adopted views related to the second category said:

- 'To improve our vocabulary' (P2)  
 'To use new topics to put language in use' (P9)  
 'To enrich the knowledge of the language' (P14)

In the cases above, participants opted for stressing the importance of subjects which worked towards language improvement despite of the fact that their main aim was content related to literature or history. In other words, although cultural knowledge was appreciated by some respondents, it was seen as functional in terms of proficiency in language competence.

In general, the stress on content knowledge, that is, knowledge of English and culture, is vital in a context where English is a foreign language (Berry 1990; Curry 1994) and where the teacher could be the only source available to experience the language. Because of these limitations or context features, teachers feel they must be a good model of the language since they are, to some extent, the representatives of English and the best possible example of communicative competence in a context where English is a foreign language in terms of status (Carrier 2003). This concern could add extra pressure on teachers and make them disregard other aspects equally important in their role as teachers. Because of this need to receive more language input, it is that participants expressed the necessity to have more subjects which use English as medium of instruction. In other words, not

only do they consider content knowledge as the most salient component of the knowledge base, but they also insist on more language exposure.

### Conclusions and Implications

The considerations posited above could also be interpreted as follows. Participants may believe that, in the light of what Llurda (2006) suggests, language proficiency might allow them to succeed in their career advancement, such as, teaching at higher levels or more prestigious institutions in their contexts. Also, knowledge of the language may be seen as directly proportional to higher self confidence in a teaching situation or when interacting with colleagues. Therefore, participants felt that content knowledge was a determining factor in teacher education and professional development.

These findings, the whole focus in fact, seems to present only what is positive about ILTE as regards content knowledge. Though the findings per se are not revealing, they could be interpreted as a warning when national guidelines or official documents which set the base for ILTE programme design restructure the knowledge base at the expense of the content knowledge component. This implies that educational authorities, programme designers, and trainers need to work more to enhance this type of knowledge by emphasising collaborative work, which, in turn, will add more cohesion to the programmes run. This study may also show that even though teachers believe in the necessity of improving the pedagogical knowledge in the base, they assert that they cannot teach what they do not know. In other words, to know the 'how' without the 'what' may be fruitless in ELT in contexts where English is a foreign language.

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**Appendix: Question 4 with participants' answers.**

4. Thinking about your teacher training programme. Did these items make a positive influence in your education as a teacher? Tick according to level of agreement.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Partly agree	Partly disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
a- Learning English Grammar and Phonetics.	14	0	0	0	1	0
b- Learning Linguistics.	9	3	1	0	2	0
c- Learning Literature.	12	3	0	0	0	0
d- The way trainers taught me a b c above.	4	5	4	0	0	2
e- Feedback from trainers.	4	3	7	0	0	1
f- The way trainers taught Methodology and Professional Practice.	4	0	5	0	5	1
g- The way the practicum was organised.	2	3	5	0	4	1
h- The theoretical aspect of Methodology.	4	4	4	1	0	1
i- Taking final exams (written and oral).	7	3	2	0	3	0
j- The practical aspect of Methodology.	6	4	4	0	1	0
k- Learning Culture, History and Geography of English speaking countries.	5	6	2	0	2	0
l- Working on my own.	8	4	2	0	1	0
m- Observing classes.	7	5	3	0	0	0
n- The practicum.	8	3	3	1	0	0
o- Learning Methodology.	7	4	2	0	1	1
p- Feedback from other student-teachers.	7	6	2	0	0	1
q- Studying Second Language Acquisition.	8	5	1	0	0	1
r- Working collaboratively.	8	6	0	0	0	1
s- Learning general pedagogy and psychology.	5	7	1	0	0	2
t- Learning theories of education in general.	2	7	4	0	0	2
u- Reading about how to teach skills, grammar, pronunciation...	8	2	3	0	1	1
v- Writing assignments, papers.	8	4	2	1	0	0
w- Making presentations.	10	3	1	0	0	1
x- Evaluating and designing material.	10	3	0	1	0	1