An exploration of Colombian EFL teachers' knowledge base through teachers' reflection

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***Abstract**: This article reports on a qualitative, descriptive-interpretative study carried out in the M.A. in Applied Linguistics to TEFL at Universidad Distrital in Bogotá. It describes both the way the knowledge base of five in-service teachers has been constructed and the elements that articulate it. Data were collected during a period of seven months through journals and interviews. The findings show that teachers' knowledge base is the result of life experience and educational process. The components of knowledge base that teachers favored were content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge and the knowledge about their role, their students and the teaching context. The study thus indicates that the knowledge base of language teacher education should not merely be founded on the knowledge provided during professional training; it should also be understood against the backdrop of teachers' language learning stories and instructional practice experiences, and within a particular sociocultural milieu.*
***Keywords**: knowledge base; reflection; EFL classroom; language teacher education; teaching practice.*

Research in which teachers share their stories may result in 'a humanizing and democratizing of knowledge.'
(Beyer apud Golombek, 1994, p.406)

Introduction

This research project intends to tackle the issue of English language teachers' knowledge base (henceforth KB). *Teacher education* is the general field of knowledge in which this proposal can be set. As a concept teacher education "describes the sum of various interventions that are used to develop professional knowledge among practitioners" (Freeman; Johnson, 1998, p.398). Generally, studies center their attention on the way pre-service students construct their knowledge and professional selves as teachers, but there has been little exploration on the views and ways in-service teachers account for their knowledge base, especially in Colombia. Due to this fact, I became motivated to conduct the present study. As a foreign language teacher, I am

convinced that by being aware of the way we have constructed our KB, we can inquire as to what, how and why we do what we do in our teaching contexts. This can be a big step to make teaching a more reflective practice and, therefore, to improve teaching and learning processes.

First, I describe the problem and the research questions that are at the core of this research experience. Second, I present the main constructs that underlie the study. Third, I outline the research design, including the type of study, the context and participants as well as the instruments and data collection. Finally, the conclusions, implications, and suggestions for further research are examined in terms of teacher education.

Research problem

The source of teachers' knowledge base has always been a matter of interest, but as Freeman and Johnson comment (1998), teacher education has focused more on what teachers need to know and how they could be trained than on what they actually know, how this knowledge shapes what they do, or what the natural course of their professional development is over time (p.398). The way knowledge is constructed and the elements that comprise a teacher's KB constitute the core of this study. In the field of teaching English as a foreign language, teachers' KB is an area which has been neglected (Freeman, 2000a). It is necessary to develop a coherent research agenda for discovering how teachers think and work (Shulman, 1987; Richards; Lockhart, 1994; Freeman, 1996a, b; Gatbonton, 1999; Johnston; Goettsch, 2000; Borg, 2003; Mullock, 2006).

In this sense, this paper purports to advocate the formulation of a research agenda to guide inquiry in language teacher education, especially in Colombia. Although there have been studies that address issues related to teachers' professional development (González, 2000; González et al., 2002; González; Quinchía, 2003; González; Sierra, 2005, Piñeros; Quintero, 2006), few have directly discussed the matter of knowledge base. This research report intends to promote discussion in the academic community regarding teachers' KB construction and development. Understanding the complexities inherent to teachers' KB and its sources and

characteristics provides more information about language teachers' activity; and gives insights that can be useful to examine current policies in language teaching (e.g. construction of standards for language teachers – see Johnson and Erion, 1991) and professional development programs.

The first research objective that grounded this proposal was to identify the ways in which five in-service teachers had built their KB. The second objective aimed at describing the components the teachers considered as part of their KB. Taking into account these objectives, I posed two main questions:

What do in-service teachers' reflections tell us about their knowledge base construction?

What components of knowledge base call teachers' attention when reflecting upon their teaching experience?

I will now address the grounding constructs that underlie this study.

Teacher education and teachers' knowledge base domain

Current policies for the teaching profession demand that practitioners have a high level of proficiency regarding the several areas that integrate the teaching-learning process. Teachers need to meet the challenges of helping themselves and their students to grow linguistically, socially, emotionally and intellectually (Hudelson, 2001).

However, due to time and life-related constraints, rarely are teachers able to account for their decisions in relation to their professional life. Hence, the challenges they are confronted with and the actions they take toward their students are generally uninformed. It is at this point that KB becomes significant for teachers to characterize their profession. In the next part, I will address the concept of knowledge base and how reflection and reflective teaching have an impact on the understanding of it.

Giving an appropriate definition to teachers' KB is still a difficult task due to the different dimensions of teacher education that it embraces. The term was primarily regarded as the basic skills required for teaching. It referred to subject matter knowledge and the implementation of pedagogical strategies (Pineda, 2002). Thus, Teacher education programs sought to provide teachers with

discrete amounts of knowledge, "usually in the forms of general theories and methods that were assumed to be applicable to any teaching context" (Freeman; Johnson, 1998). Wallace (1991) introduced the term *professional competence* to talk about the minimum requirements for the exercise of a profession. Other authors like Colton and Sparks-Langer (1993), Johnson (1999), and Crookes (2003) mentioned the terms professional knowledge base or professional knowledge to refer to the sources for teachers' professional, personal and social views, as well as values which are relevant to teaching.

In a seminal proposal, Shulman (1987) went beyond the knowledge of the subject matter and the pedagogical component. This author's KB model is made up of the following six categories: content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of the learner and knowledge of educational goals and their philosophical bases. Pineda (2002) elaborates a diagram to illustrate the different components of knowledge base proposed by Shulman:

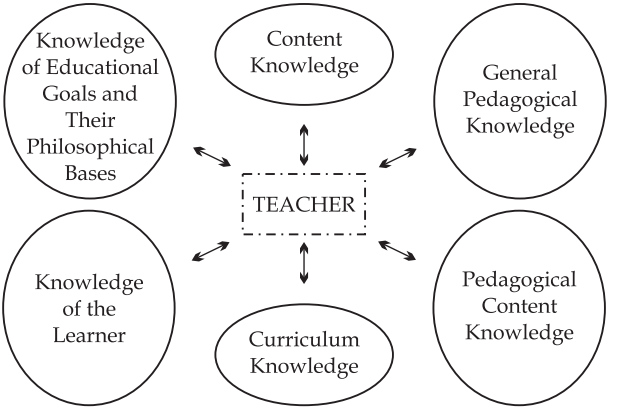

Figure 1 – Knowledge base categories. Taken from Pineda, 2002.

The first category, content knowledge, has to do with being knowledgeable about subject matter. In the context of EFL teaching, content knowledge is what teachers teach. The second, general

pedagogical knowledge is explained as the general set of methodologies and strategies that the teacher needs in order to carry out the teaching activity. The third, pedagogical content knowledge, refers to the "broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization" (Hudson, 2002, p.46).

The fourth category, curricular knowledge, is described as the teachers' acquaintance of the curricular program of the school and how they make use of it to favor their students' teaching-learning processes. The fifth, knowledge of the learner, refers to the teachers' engagement with the students' processes, considering their physical, psychological and cognitive characteristics. The last component of Shulman's model refers to knowledge of educational goals and their philosophical bases. This component implies that teachers inquire about the educational system principles and the social expectations they are required to sort out as educators.

Some other authors such as Wallace (1991), Colton and Sparks-Langer (1993), Richards (1994), Freeman and Johnson (1998), Johnson (1999), and Tsui (2003) discuss similar frameworks for the knowledge base of language teacher education. For instance, Wallace presents a reflective model of education professional development. According to the author, in order to achieve *professional competence,* a teacher has to go through two stages. The first one is represented by the trainee's existing *conceptual schemata (*or *pretraining knowledge* as stated by Gutierrez, 1996), which means the prior knowledge a person holds before engaging in a teacher education program. Similar to the notion of *conceptual schemata*, Lortie (1975) and more recently Bailey et al. (1996), Johnson (1999), and Borg (2004) have used the metaphor of the *apprenticeship of observation,* to describe "the phenomenon whereby student teachers arrive for their training courses having spent thousands of hours as schoolchildren observing and evaluating professionals in action." (Borg, op. cit., p.274).

The second stage is made up of *received* and *experiential knowledge* (Keith Richards, 1994, has defined this last concept as *craft knowledge*). The former deals with facts, data or theories which are associated with the study of a particular profession. The latter implies the knowledge acquired during practical experience or professional action. Both types of knowledge interact in a continuous process of reflection or in a *reflective cycle.*

Another salient proposal to conceptualize the knowledge base of language teachers was introduced by Freeman and Johnson in 1998. Also considered as a seminal work in the area of teacher education, the authors advocate for an understanding of knowledge base where the core should be the activity of teaching. In this vein, a framework for KB of language teacher education should entail a focus on who does the teaching activity, where it is done, and how it is done. The first domain of the model intends to represent teachers as learners of language teaching rather than as learners of language. It argues that research on teacher learning can spin around the following: a. the role of prior knowledge and beliefs on learning to teach; b. the ways in which such teaching knowledge develops over time and throughout teachers' careers; c. the role of context in teacher learning; and d. the role of teacher education as a form of intervention in these areas (p.407).

The second component of the model addresses the notions of school and schooling as social and cultural contexts that are critical for teacher learning and the construction of knowledge base. Here schools are represented as teaching settings or synchronic contexts; whereas schooling, being diachronic, accounts for historical and socio-cultural processes that are staged in a classroom. The last domain of the model of knowledge base of language teacher education is the pedagogical activity. Freeman and Johnson (1998) include within this domain the issues related to teachers' pedagogical thinking and their teaching activity, the subject matter and content, and, finally, the language learning process. The interaction among these elements should permit the emergence of knowledge in order to deeply understand how language teachers teach and how students learn. To conclude, the authors' proposal claims for the exploration of knowledge base from a grounded perspective; therefore, it ought to examine in an interwoven manner the activity of language teaching learning, the contexts of schools and schooling, and the teachers' pedagogical processes.

The role of reflection in teachers' knowledge base

The models proposed for categorizing teachers' KB are underscored by one significant aspect: reflection. Pineda (2002) and Freese (1999) assert that teachers' persistent reflection becomes a determinant factor in building and consolidating their teaching knowledge. With respect to reflection, Dewey (1938) defined

reflective thought as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p.118). Reflection draws upon the act of questioning or revising what a person believes, his/her understanding of things and, as such, this action will build knowledge and generate autonomous professional development (Schön, 1983, 1987; Wallace, 1996; Richards; Lockhart, 1994; Farrel, 1998; Johnson, 1999, 2002).

In the field of language teaching, teachers engage in reflection on their pedagogical actions. Henke (1995) cites Giroux (1988), who believes that reflective teaching entails using the wealth of opportunities a teacher has on a daily basis to explore, question, frame, re-frame, and challenge systematically his/her own teaching under a holistic view so as to be able to interpret and make informed choices. Reflective teaching practices must take into account the source of teachers' belief systems and interpretative frameworks which can inform how they evolve, develop and change during their professional growth (Richards; Lockhart, 1994; Johnson, 1999; Gebhard; Oprandy, 1999) and how they have built up their KB (Golombek, 1998; Tsui, 2003).

Methodology

This research follows the principles of a qualitative, descriptive-interpretative study. In qualitative research, the researcher describes and attempts to interpret and understand the meanings given to a social reality or a phenomenon under study without the intervention of an experiment or artificial treatment (Seliger; Shohamy, 1990; Bonilla-Castro; Rodriguez, 1997; Taylor; Bogdan, 1987). In view of this, the design proposed for this study allowed me to interpret teachers' experiences, anecdotes and reflections in order to delve into their KB. On the other hand, as a descriptive-interpretative study, this research aimed at presenting a detailed account of the particular phenomenon examined; it used descriptive data to "develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support or challenge theoretical assumptions prior to the data gathering" (Merriam, 1998, p.38). Overall, this research orientation allowed the researchers to analyze data grounded in the context itself.

Participants and setting

The investigation was carried out in the M.A. Program in Applied Linguistics to TEFL of Universidad Distrital, in Bogotá. It involved seven participants:[1] five first semester students – four women and one man – between the ages of 22 and 45, and two female professors[2] between the ages of 33 and 50. The participants had different teaching experiences: Liz and Elizabeth had taught for around seven years; Pez and Yesid were starting their fourth year in the teaching profession, whereas Elaine had been teaching for 15 years. The two professors, Mrs. Zapata and Blanca had around 20 and 11 years of teaching experience, respectively. The five teacher participants were selected at random from a group of 13 master's degree students who had signed a consent form expressing their willingness to participate in the study. The professors, who were teaching two of the seminar courses (Introduction to Applied Linguistics and Critical Applied Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition) that the students were taking, agreed to participate in the study.

As a second year-student in the M.A. program, I decided to choose this milieu because I had observed that the reflective processes fostered in the different subject matters of this institution could set the context for an exploration on the students' knowledge base. Additionally, this setting granted some advantages for the study, in connection to the heterogeneity of the population (the participants differed in their educational backgrounds, ages, work sites, teaching experiences, etc.), which made the data collected diverse and rich. Another issue that guided me to undertake this research was that its findings might contribute to teachers' development programs such as masters' programs and other courses offered to in-service teachers.

Data collection

Data were collected over a period of seven months, from May to November, in 2004. As a non-participant observer (Cohen;

[1] Pseudonyms have been used for the participants in this study.

[2] The professors had another status in the sense that their participation mainly aimed to enlarge and delve into the information that the five teachers provided. Through this paper, I will use the term teacher or teachers to refer to the five participants as well as the term professor or professors to refer to the two professor participants.

Manion, 1995), and based on the line of inquiry of the research, I decided to employ data collection instruments which provided experiences, anecdotes, questions, concerns, expectations, and reflections from the participants. To this end, I gathered information through the collection of the journals the students were writing –on a weekly basis- as part of their course assignments in the two seminars they were taking (see Appendix A). The journals provided teachers' summaries and reflections on the readings assigned; as such, they set the context for the participants to establish connections between their daily teaching practice and the theory or teaching experiences they read about.[3] The aim of gathering the journal entries was that of identifying descriptions that could inform their KB construction or the elements that made it up. Needless to say, the topics or readings assigned were not directed towards these aspects and this fact to some extent explains why this instrument did not render significant information for the purposes of my inquiry. I will have occasion to return to this point a little later in this paper.

During the period in which I collected the journals, I carried out semi-structured interviews with the five teachers following the principles of phenomenological interviewing (Appendix B). A phenomenological interview is composed of three phases. The first segment consists of the interviewer finding out about the background and some historical events of the respondent. The second segment concentrates on concrete details of the participants' present experience. During the third segment, the participants are asked to reflect on the meaning of their experiences and the impact that reflection has had in the different dimensions of their lives. For the purpose of this research, I developed the first two phases in one interviewing session; the last phase was carried out at the end of the data collection process. In his discussion about this kind of instrument, Seidman (1991) explains that a phenomenological interview aims at making the interviewees tell their stories and in this way reconstruct the microcosm of their consciousness. In other words, it encourages the respondents to create meaning out of their experiences. This data collection technique was useful, first, to

[3] The teachers were required two develop two sections for their weekly journal. In the first one, they had to summarize the reading, and in the second they needed to reflect on the reading.

delve into aspects found in the journals about the interviewees' professional biographies and their KB development which required deeper exploration and, second, to triangulate information (see Merriam, 1988; Seliger; Shohamy, 1990; Allwright; Bailey, 1994; Freeman, 1998).

The last step of the data collection process was a semi-structured interview held with each one of the two professors (see Appendix C). They were interviewed with the purpose of knowing more about the students' journal writing experience and the insights they could render as regards the students' knowledge base.

Data analysis

The data analysis was based on the grounded approach (Strauss; Corbin, 1990), which intends to "build rather than test theories and provides the grounding, constructs the density and develops the sensitivity and integration to generate rich, tightly-woven explanatory theory that closely approximates the reality it represents" (p.57). Considering this approach, I scrutinized the data using color coding technique (Strauss; Corbin, 1990) to search for salient themes and patterns as well as to establish data and methodological triangulation. I decided that rather than creating mini-cases or portraits for each participant, I would try to find commonalities that cut across the journals and the transcriptions of the phenomenological and semi-structured interviews. Consequently, relations among the concepts were determined and some categories came to light, as I will discuss in the following section.

Results and discussion

Having analyzed the data based on the research questions, I found that two categories emerged. The first one was named *Building knowledge: an ongoing process* and the second one was called *Decision-making within a polyphonic interaction*. In Table 1, I present the two questions and the categories and subcategories that emerged from the data analysis. Next, specific detail and support will be shown in order to discuss the analytical orientation proposed in Table 1.

Table 1 – Categories emerging from the data analysis

Research questions	Categories	Sub-categories
What do in-service teachers' reflections tell us about their knowledge base constructions?	1. Building knowledge: an ongoing process	1.1. Footprints in the sand 1.2 A bridge between theory and practice
What aspects of knowledge base call teachers' attention when reflecting upon their teaching experience?	2. Decision-making within a polyphonic interaction: the orchestra	2.1 Deciding what to play 2.2 In search of how to play 2.3 A performer, an audience and a stage

Building knowledge: an ongoing process

In order to answer the first question posed from the outset of this paper – *What do in-service teachers' reflections tell us about the teachers' knowledge base?* – I established the category called *Building knowledge: an ongoing process*. The analysis of teachers' voices revealed that the construction of their KB was a never-ending process. In other words, it was a lifelong process that started from the moment they set out on their pedagogical journey. One recurrent word in the teachers' discourse was "process". For instance, in the following excerpts, I noticed that what makes up a teacher and his/her knowledge is part of a continuous process of construction:

> I have felt really happy and I have learned a lot and I see that my processes are improving. (First interview, Yesid)[4]

> […] the teacher was born with that quality […] and step by step through the [sic] time he goes through a process of shaping. (Third interview, Pez)

In regards to the development of teachers' KB, Pez affirms:

> […] he or she has to be in a continuous process of innovation, in a continuous process of knowing what are the new strategies, the new approaches, the new tendencies […]. (Third interview)

[4] Notice that one female participant chose the pseudonym Yesid (traditionally a male name) to be used in this report.

Yesid talks about the knowledge she has acquired and implies that she is involved in certain processes – of professional growth – which, according to her, are improving. Pez more explicitly states that becoming a teacher and acquiring the knowledge required for this profession is an ongoing process that is achieved through time, step by step. This ongoing process was enriched by all the critical people and experiences that had formed part of their lives before deciding to become teachers; and afterwards, as pre-service and in-service teachers. In sum, KB is a lifelong learning process built of and through experiences in social contexts, as learners in schools and as participants in professional programs (Freeman; Johnson, 1998; Golombek, 1998; Johnson, 1999; Gatbonton, 2000; Johnston; Goettsch, 2000; Borg, 2003; and Mullock, 2006)

This first category can be encapsulated in two subcategories developed by the researcher: 'footprints in the sand' and 'a bridge between theory and practice', which will be further discussed in the following sections.

Footprints in the sand

This metaphor has to do with the critical people and experiences that left a mark on the participants' life and that were influential for them to construct their KB and their personae as educators. It involved the experiences they had gone through during their life, especially when they were school students, then university students, and after that, as practitioners. Edge (1996) shares this idea when maintaining that teachers' identity and professional growth are enhanced not only by their personal narratives but also by the paradoxes and experiences lived throughout their working life. This category supports Richard and Lockhart (1994); Smith, (1996); Woods (1996); Bailey et al. (1996); Golombek (1998); Gatbonton (2000); and Mullock's (2006) contention that life and pedagogical experiences shape and help teachers construct a set of visions and beliefs about their profession. Beliefs, values and knowledge are not static constructions; on the contrary, they are the product of continuous influences of people, learning and teaching experiences in different moments of the teachers' life. It is in this sense that these constructions or footprints which are not static might be washed away by the tides of new experiences which may produce changes in their knowledge base and views on life.

Different people contributed to the teachers' knowledge base construction. People such as relatives, friends and/or colleagues took part in their knowledge building; nevertheless, it was the group of former teachers who influenced more what the participants had become. Research carried out by Gutierrez (1996) indicates that the way "teachers think about their work is related to the influences that teachers bring with them, shaped by years as 'teacher watchers.' (p.71). This finding shows that teachers indirectly take part in students' choices, to wit:

> I liked him as an English teacher and I respected him very much and I started liking English because of him […] that is the reason why I studied English, because I liked that subject. (First interview, Elaine)

> But why I decided to study English? Because, there I had three very, very good teachers. (Third interview, Pez)

These samples indicate that the participants acknowledged the paramount role their former teachers played in their becoming teachers. Elaine as well as Pez believed that their decision to become teachers was influenced in part due to the image left by their former teachers. But more important is the fact that the participants were attracted by three aspects which contributed to the building of their KB: *their former teachers' personalities, knowledge, and methodologies*. These aspects were sources for the construction of the perceptions or beliefs that underlay their actions in the classroom. This supports Richards and Lockhart's assertion (1994) that teachers' belief sources come, in part, from the adoption of knowledge or understanding that was held by their teachers in connection to English, learning, teaching, methodology, the curriculum, and language teaching as a profession. Here is an excerpt to exemplify the claims mentioned above:

> R: Who was the teacher that you could say you have taken a lot from?
> Pez: From Zulma Buitrago, Carlos Granados.
> R: What things?

> Pez: […] the ways of doing an oral exercise, the ways of doing a writing exercise, the ways of correcting a paper, the ways of giving a class, the ways of doing a warm up […]. (First interview)

This sample shows that Pez relied on some knowledge he acquired from some teachers he considered important during his college days. Accordingly, part of his KB is presented as a set of practices adopted from other teachers who had left a mark on his life. In order to explain this behavior, I will draw upon the concept of dialogism pointed out by Bakhtin (Holquist; Emerson, 1992) and Todorov (1981) to make a connection and assert that the interrelation between two persons establishes a subjective interaction; in other words, between two subjects. Both subjects interact and indirectly influence each other; thus, the subjectivities of the participants, in this case the teacher and the student, interact and, due to this, both can learn, adopt, adapt or copy from each other depending on each one's interests or needs.[5]

Broadly speaking, in many ways teachers teach as they were taught (Goodlad, 1983 in Knezevic; Scholl, 1996; Johnson, 1999). Therefore, the knowledge constructed through the participants' critical experiences during their educational process articulates their knowledge base. Knowledge then, as indicated by Dewey (1938), is the product of the practitioners' experience. The word *experience,* as one of the catalysts for knowledge construction, entails both the concepts of process and time. The meaning the teachers grant to the word experience coincides with one of the outcomes of some studies about L2 teachers' professional knowledge carried out by Woods, (1996); Golombek (1998); Johnson, (1999), among others, who report that teachers' responses and understandings in their classrooms are mediated by their previous experiences.

[5] We might infer that the subjective interaction established between Pez and his previous teachers entailed a process of adoption, adaptation, construction or reconstruction of knowledge from the moment he lived the experiences he is describing in the sample, and the moment he started to implement the methodological aspects he observed in his teachers classes. Pez s behavior can be related to what Basil Bernstein (1990, 1998) declared in the sense that teachers take others pedagogical discourses and create a relation of transmission and selective acquisition among them. In other words, teachers refocus, recontextualize and introduce new internal orders to the knowledge they have acquired from others.

A bridge between theory and practice

Another source for teachers' KB construction was the way they articulated the knowledge given by theory and the knowledge acquired through their experiences as students and teachers. This can be seen in the following excerpts by Liz and Blanca:

> It would be important to think about [sic] students are acquiring new knowledge, and our job, is to study how this acquisition occurs […], taking into account theories that describe the important factors involved in this process. (Journal, Liz)

> I found that some of them really wrote deep and made connections between the theories, they did insights in the papers and their current practices. (Interview, Professor Blanca)

In the first sample, Liz comments on the importance of monitoring students' learning processes on the grounds of theory. Just as the other participants, Liz sees the relevance of connecting theory to practice not only to improve her teaching practice, but also to contribute new tools to her KB. Similarly, Blanca observed that teachers were connecting theoretical knowledge to the experiences they were going through in their classes. She noticed such connections in the journals the teachers wrote and the reflections they made during her classes in the master's program. Reflection was an important catalyst for teachers to connect theory to practice. In this regard, reflection can lead to a recognition and articulation of professional knowledge which indicates the interweaving of theory and practice which will shape the practitioners' teaching practice (Dewey, 1938; Wallace 1991, 1996; Richard; Lockhart, 1994; Gutierrez, 1996; Farrel, 1998; Loughran, 2002; and Tsui, 2003).

The reflective activity, based on the teaching reality and the theoretical knowledge held by teachers, prompted some kind of change in teaching contexts. For example, the participants of this study, referring to the readings they had done in their classes, mention that through their reflections they were not only establishing relations between practical and theoretical aspects but also figuring out ways to introduce changes in their classes. For instance, Yesid mentioned the following: "I have tried to adapt, to

implement those insights [from theory] into my daily practice, […] so reading about the theory, and trying to adapt ideas of those theorists in my own setting, for getting better results to see my practice…" (Third interview). She was implementing some changes thanks to the connections she was making between cooperative learning and the teaching context of her classroom. This action implies that she was making more informed decisions in order to produce changes in her teaching contexts. The teachers were grounding their decisions on their personal and pedagogical experience and knowledge as well as on the theory they were reading. Yesid established these theoretical-practical connections as a way to generate a better working environment and facilitate learning in her students.

In short, the different experiences, people and links between theory and practice that had an impact on the participants' knowledge base construction (at different times in their lives) attest to their KB as not being the result of a specific period of their life, persona or experience. It supports the contention that the articulation of KB of language teacher education is a lifelong process in which several dimensions are juxtaposed (Freeman; Johnson, 1998).

Decision-making within a polyphonic interaction: the orchestra

Through answering the first research question of this study, the teachers' discourse determined that KB construction is the product of an interactive or dialogic process. Similarly, the exploration of the elements of the teachers' KB showed that in a given teacher, a group of voices coming from different sources encounters a way to be channeled into pedagogical actions. The teacher, thus, becomes a director of voices. Drawing on the participants' understanding of teaching as made up of several interactive voices that are directed by the teacher, I decided to answer the second main question: What elements of knowledge base call teachers' attention? by using another metaphor. In this metaphor, teaching resembles the functioning of an orchestra. In an orchestra there are directors and many other musicians whose musical instruments are voices that need to be in tune in order to produce a good melody. By the same token, we can say that a teacher plays the role of a director and that the musical instruments s/he uses are the different voices or *sources of knowledge* necessary to carry out the pedagogical tasks.

The music of an orchestra is a polyphony of sounds which needs to establish a dialogue among its different instruments. Likewise, we can say that the knowledge used in a classroom is made up of a polyphony of voices or *sources of knowledge* that establishes a dialogic interaction and constitutes the teaching activity. This dialogic interaction entails a reflective teaching exercise which, according to Richards and Lockhart (1994), will guide teachers' decision-making processes in their teaching settings. The voices of this polyphony are the components of the teachers' knowledge base which embraces the following three dimensions:

1 Deciding what to play

One of the components of teachers' knowledge base is acquaintance with the subject matter or content knowledge (Shulman, 1987; Wallace, 1991; Golombek, 1998; and Grossman et al., 2005). A teacher, like a musician, needs to decide what s/he is going to play or, to put it differently, what his/her subject matter will be. In the case of foreign language teachers, English constitutes the subject matter due to the fact that they are expected to teach issues related to the language itself like grammar, reading, writing, and so forth. For the participants, the subject matter knowledge was mainly conceived as the language proficiency and its role in the classroom:

> If you are an English teacher you have to know English […] you have to manage the language. (Second interview, Liz)

According to the teachers, this component of their KB is not the cornerstone of their teaching, but a matter of concern since a good command of language is an important requirement as part of their activity. This is expressed as follows by Liz in one of her journals: "Many of our teachers perform English in a very good level of proficiency which is important…" However, for her language proficiency was not the only requirement for teaching: "To plan an activity with a clear purpose can be more effective than just speak [sic] English fluently." In general, teachers considered the content knowledge as a relevant component of their knowledge base. This issue is consistent with research developed by Ingram

(1992) in Australia; Gonzalez et al. (2002); and González and Quinchía (2003) in Colombia, who observed that teachers' language proficiency is a prerequisite for high standards in a determined program.

2 In search of how to play

Coming back to the metaphor proposed to explain the articulation of the components of teachers' knowledge base, we can see that an orchestra does not only need to know *what* to play but also *how* to play appropriately. In the same sense, a teacher, in his/her search for his/her students' progress, strives to find the tune for his/her teaching orchestra to play suitably; in other words, there is a concern about how to teach. One of the main interests of the participants lay in how they carried out their classes or, in other words, the methodological component or pedagogy (as defined by Colton and Sparks-Langer, 1993). They were interested in methodological aspects having to do with techniques, strategies, methods and approaches as a relevant component of their KB. Alejandra and Liz called attention to the value of methodology as follows:

> […] important events in my professional growth […] when I had the opportunity to learn a lot about especially methodology […]. (Third interview, Alejandra)

> Our main concern as English teachers is what and how to teach a second language. (Journal, Liz)

Alejandra and Liz, as well as the other teacher participants, shared this common interest about their actions in their current teaching contexts. Every time they encountered new methodological trends, they started shaping and reshaping their teaching beliefs in connection with how to perform in their classrooms. I concluded, therefore, that what the teachers did in their classes was partly due to the beliefs and values that were the product of their educational experience (Mullock, 2006; Gatbonton, 2000; Golombek, 1998; Smith, 1996; Woods, 1996; Edge, 1996; and Richard; Lockhart, 1994) and, within this educational experience, their experience as teacher practitioners played a significant role in building up their pedagogical knowledge.

3 A performer, an audience and a stage

A teacher, compared to a musician who stands or sits in front of an audience, needs first to be sure what his/her role is; second, s/he has to know whom s/he is going to play to, and third, s/he is expected to be acquainted with the setting where s/he is going to perform. For the participants engaged in this study, the knowledge about these three aspects was intertwined and worked as a one piece, integrated component of their KB. The following sample illustrates that this teacher is aware of her role as a pedagogue; moreover, it emphasizes the importance of taking into account the students' characteristics and the teaching context:

> The good one [aspect] is that we have the chance of doing an excellent work [sic] in our classroom […], we need to encourage them [the students], to take into consideration their peculiarities and learning environment. (Journal, Yesid)

Teachers hold a vision as regards their role as pedagogues and their profession in today's society. Such awareness can be associated with the "principle of modeling" articulated by Bailey et al. (1996), which refers to the enactment of a teaching philosophy that teachers build over time. In the present study, this philosophy encompassed the duality of teachers vs. educators. In order to illustrate this aspect, two classifications were proposed based on the participants' own voices. The first one was called educator: a promoter of the humanistic side of education; and the second one was named a teacher: a good knowledge giver.

In general, the participants considered that their role had more to do with that of an educator. They thought that an educator dealt more with the human nature of students. Alejandra and Pez state it in the following transcription:

> An educator is a person, who cares more about the person instead of the subject. (Third interview, Alejandra)

> [...] my way of viewing life and the way of viewing myself teacher (sic) [is] as an educator […] I'm talking about, not the methodology but the way in which a teacher can carry out his or

> her profession, in a better way and rather than just staying in a classroom and teaching tenses, and teaching grammar rules and no more. (Third interview, Pez)

They viewed the conception of "educator" as one step beyond the pure instructional dimension. Their role had to do with shaping students' lives, not only academically or intellectually, but also humanistically. In agreement with the pedagogical view of Wink (2000) and Shor and Freire (1987), the participants perceived themselves as emancipators that were empowered and could empower students. Thus, this conception is in agreement with the tenets of critical pedagogy which is "founded on the conviction that schooling for self and social empowerment is *ethically prior* to a mastery of technical skills" (McLaren, 2003, p.188). In essence, they aimed at giving students tools to become social beings with values and capacities to live in a community.

By contrast, the second classification named teacher: a good knowledge giver, described the traditional role of the teacher; that is, the person who centered his/her teaching on the subject matter and whose main role was that of an information giver. It did not mean that it did not take into account the humanistic side, but there was more emphasis on content knowledge as can be noticed in Elaine and Yesid's answers when they were asked about the role and the requirements for a person to be a language teacher:

> […] to be a teacher …, I don't need to speak English I need to know a few words and a few sentences to take them to the class and ask my students to repeat and write…, that's why I say it's so different to be a teacher and to be a good teacher, so to be a good teacher you need to take, to manage and to master the language as much as you can, and be so careful not to teach mistakes […]. (Third interview, Elaine)
>
> Be aware of the role of the [sic] language that it is basically for communicating ideas, thoughts, feelings; also be aware of the importance his/her attitude is gonna play when his or her students decide to study in a professional way an L2, so you have to encourage them, to make them love the second language. (Third interview, Yesid).

In short, the discourse of these two teachers strongly favored the aspect of subject matter as being central in their role as language teachers. Although they acknowledge that there are some other

issues which need to be borne in mind, they focus their teaching activity primarily on the development of linguistic skills in contrast to the other participants of this study who consider that rather than starting from students' cognitive 'needs' – usually following prescribed teaching-learning agendas – they plan their pedagogical actions on the grounds of students' emotional, spiritual and affective necessities. This recurrence of the ideal situation, in which teaching a class centers on the subject knowledge to be acquired, uncovers the incessant tendency to maintain teaching practices in which teaching continues to be viewed generally as a means of delivery of subject matter.

The other aspects mentioned at the beginning of this section were the knowledge that teachers need to have about the student population, and the context that they are dealing with. If we think of a teacher as the director of an orchestra, we will see that s/he needs to know where and to whom s/he will be playing. Anthropological, ethnographic, psychological and sociological studies have demonstrated that the physical and social environment have a direct impact on a community and the way that community symbolizes the world (Sapir, 1974; Duranti, 2000; Goodwin; Duranti, 1992; Fishman, 1982; Brislin, 1993).

Based on this assumption, the knowledge of the students' context will open the doors for teachers to access the way they symbolize, understand, apprehend and learn about the world. To such an effect, reflective teaching processes must be a core activity in order to know a great deal about the students and the communities. Only in this way can teachers provide and support authentic opportunities for learning.

The teachers argued that it was not enough to know about students' physical, psychological and cognitive characteristics. They asserted that it was necessary to move beyond the classroom boundaries and evaluate all the social, cultural, geographical, economical and political factors that intervene directly or indirectly in the educational processes. In this regard, Alejandra said that a teacher has to ask himself/herself the following:

> Who is the person I am teaching? Who are those people?, what do they need from me?, how can I help them to be better people, better human beings […]? (Third interview, Alejandra)

Similarly, another participant stated:

> The intention of "bilingual" schools […] must be complemented with research that takes into account our own necessities and context in order to avoid cultural and identity problems […]. (Journal, Liz)

The questions posed by Alejandra as well as comments made by Yesid validated the idea that the knowledge of students is mediated by the recognition of socio-cultural phenomena that go beyond the classroom boundary. The point of departure for this recognition, as evidenced in the data, was the setting. The participants seemed to undertake the process of getting to know their students on the basis of the contexts they worked in. Up to a point, they drew on their experiences as teaching practitioners and constructed conceptions about the place where they had taught or were at the moment teaching as well as the kind of student population bound to those contexts.

The issues highlighted in this category by teachers to some extent connect to the three domains of knowledge base for teacher education proposed by Freeman and Johnson (1998), to wit: the teacher as a learner, the social context and the pedagogical practice. Although the participants' understanding did not evidence all the dimensions that outline the domains these authors discuss, the findings of this study show that there seems to be a general agreement on the necessity to conceptualize and promote reflection on these domains for the construction and development of a framework for KB. In line with these authors' model, this research experience revealed that the teachers undertook the approximation to their KB origins and its components, on the first hand, departing from the nature of their experiences as language teacher-learners throughout their careers; and on the other hand, through the examination of their contexts of school and schooling and the exploration of the foundations for their pedagogical decisions.

Conclusion

The outcomes of this research yielded some conclusions in order to account for teachers' KB. In line with research conducted

by Breen et al. (2001), the construction of teachers' knowledge bases consists of a continuous process that involves teachers' experiences which take place in and out of the classroom during their whole educational process. The framework of what teachers do in their classes is partly due to beliefs that are constructed, acquired or modified at different moments of their educational life (Wallace, 1991; Richards; Lockhart, 1994; Woods, 1996; Gatbonton, 2000; Johnston; Goettsch, 2000; Borg, 2003; and Mullock, 2006). In this line of inquiry, the knowledge base of a teacher is articulated by the interaction between his/her pre-training knowledge (Gutierrez, 1996), the teacher education knowledge ("given knowledge", Wallace, 1991), and how this knowledge connects and interacts with his/her teaching activity.

This research experience allowed me to conclude that the participants give value to technical aspects like the content and methodological aspects. However, at the same time, they grant a great deal of importance to other issues that have more to do with the humanistic sphere of education: knowledge and awareness of their own role, their students and professional setting. Teachers seem to be looking for a balance between the technical dimension of teaching and a more social and humanistic view. They see themselves as providers of knowledge as well as agents of social change

One of the aspects that caught my attention while listening to the participants was the paramount position they conferred to the knowledge and awareness of their role as pedagogues. Looking back at educational theory and research on teachers' professional development, we find that teachers' professional self-perception has been disregarded (Freeman, 1996b; Freeman; Johnson, 1998). Teachers' knowledge has mainly been studied from an etic (outsider) rather than an emic (insider) perspective; only a few, relatively recent studies have examined the ESL teacher knowledge from the teachers' perspective (Donmoyer, 1996; Freeman, 1996b, 2000a, b; Freeman; Johnson, 1998; and Golombek, 1998). This study has contributed to enrich the "emic" perspective since the teachers' voices were the main source to articulate their understanding of KB. Clearly, their voices have led me to consider that teachers' professional self-perception plays a significant role in the construction of their KB. This is in agreement with Serna (2005),

who claims that the development of a personal and professional self-understanding is fundamental for teachers' professional growth. Summing up, KB does not only take place on the ground of the external realities teachers face, but also includes a variety of intricacies that belongs and depends on teachers' inner selves.

Implications and suggestions for further research

The long way along the territory of this exploration has rendered some implications that will undoubtedly shed light on other similar research experiences in the teaching education field. Namely, it is important to take into account that the data were collected in the context of the M.A in Applied Linguistics. In doing so, aspects such as journal writing and the reflective processes were encouraged and facilitated in deference to the role of the institution. However, it is important to acknowledge that in regards to the journals, the way the participants developed their writing did not always help find ample information to enrich the emergent categories identified in the phenomenological interviews. One of the constraints was that most of the journals consisted of lengthy summaries with little space dedicated to the reflection section or that reflections seemed to be an extension of the summary section; therefore, the teachers' voices were not easily found. Further research experiences may encourage teachers to develop reflective skills and furthermore prompt them to connect what they read and the reflections they make on issues about knowledge base. Due to the particular features of the setting and participants, and the role of the instruments, it is noticeable that this study examines a broad and complex topic that demands more research to be carried out at different levels, with different settings and different populations.

In view of the fact that beliefs based on prior educational experiences emerged as a central role influencing the types of decisions the teachers make (Wallace, 1991; Richards; Lockhart, 1994; Smith, 1996; Woods, 1996; and Johnson, 1999), there is the need to explore more broadly the dynamics about the way beliefs are built, their source, and how teachers cope with them in their teaching practice. Moreover, in identifying teachers' beliefs, values and knowledge bases, one might find the supporting columns of their professional identity or philosophy of teaching (see Hubbard; Miller, 1999; Crookes, 2003; Block, 2007). Thus, in what ways

teachers' identity and KB interact and interrelate in language teacher education need to be explored.

Teachers' KB cannot be framed into a static and finished model (Shulman, 1987; and Freeman, 2000b). It "is critical to recognize that no single research formula will suit its study" (Freeman, 1996b, p.373). It is necessary to consider it as a dynamic phenomenon due to the array of dimensions that interact within it. In consequence, policy-makers, pre-service teachers, along with teacher educators, need to start setting an epistemological agenda that encompasses the dynamism of knowledge base components and their place in foreign language teaching/learning. And this task will mean understanding the profession of language teaching through grounded examinations of its participants, contexts and pedagogical processes (Freeman; Johnson, 1998).

Research on teachers' knowledge base and its further definition and organization might call for changes in the polices for curriculum design in FL teaching training programs as well as professional development programs (Strom, 1991; Freeman; Johnson, 1998). These institutions sponsoring these programs might enrich them if they take into account that teachers' KB is not only the product of what they give to students, but also the result of the students' previous experiential and educational processes. In such frames, integrating students´ autobiographies and language learning histories must help describe more accurately and properly the complex terrain in which teachers acquire and make use of their craft (Bailey et al., 1996; Woods, 1996; Golombek, 1998; Johnson, 1999; and Crookes, 2003). I believe that the role of teacher education programs would be that of continuing a process of knowledge construction on the basis of what student teachers bring to a training program, and the necessities and problems they may face in their professional practice.

Another issue to consider is to what extent it is possible for programs of preservice and in-service teachers to ground their curriculum on established and essential KB standards. Strom (1991) argues that an agreement on this matter implies a serious deliberation in the academic community regarding the types of knowledge required and the relationships among the categories identified, the conceptual frameworks for organizing and using knowledge, and the modes of inquiry used in creating and validating knowledge in the field. Even though this study is clearly limited, it

outlines these dimensions and represents an attempt to develop a research agenda on teachers' knowledge base in the Colombian teaching context.

Finally, the results presented in this article are intended to advocate for more inquiry in the field of educational research; above all, in regards to KB. Delving into teacher thinking might raise, as expressed by Freeman (1996b), several questions related to the conceptual framework and the appropriate research methodologies to address language teachers' knowledge base. Even though there are still many unsolved queries about the "unstudied problem" (Freeman, 1996b), studies like this one, focusing on sharing teachers´ stories, can provide new insights for a broader comprehension of teacher education.

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Título: *Explorando a base de conhecimentos de professores colombianos de EFL por meio da reflexão docente*

Resumo: *Este artigo apresenta um estudo qualitativo de base descritivo-interpretativa, realizado no mestrado em Linguística Aplicada ao Ensino de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira da Universidade Distrital de Bogotá. Descreve a maneira pela qual a base de conhecimento de cinco docentes foi construída, bem como os elementos que a articulam. Os dados foram coletados durante um período de sete meses por meio de diários e entrevistas. Os resultados demonstram que a base de conhecimento dos professores é resultante da experiência de vida e do processo educacional. Os componentes preferidos da base de conhecimentos foram o conteúdo, o conhecimento pedagógico geral e o que eles sabem sobre sua função, seus alunos e o contexto do ensino. O estudo indica que a base de conhecimento*

da formação do professor de línguas não deve se apoiar apenas no que ele aprende durante o treinamento profissional; ela deve ser entendida também no contexto das narrativas dos professores sobre o aprendizado linguístico e as experiências da prática instrucional, dentro de um contexto sociocultural específico.
Palavras-chave: *base de conhecimentos; reflexão; sala de aula de EFL; formação do professor; prática de ensino.*

Appendix A: Sample of Teacher's Journal: Alejandra

REFLECTION

Application of Psycholinguistic Research to the Classroom

By Stephen Krashen

Krashen states that the goal for theoretical and applied research is to improve the teaching practice. Even though it is warned that the use or implication of research results is not always possible or immediate on teaching practice, teachers should consider those hypothesis and decide if they can have any impact on the teaching environment. That is what teachers have been doing recently. Many methodologies are based on those theoretical assumptions. But as those methodologies did not function very well. Krashen blamed teachers of the misinterpretation of those theories and the methodologies base on them. That is why I would like to analyze how the five hypotheses about second language acquisition could guide and enlighten my classroom teaching practice.

The acquisition/learning Hypothesis highlighted the difference between "Acquisition" and "Learning". They are different processes as a result can not turn into acquisition. So my students are learning the language and will never be able to acquire it in the classroom setting unless I get them engaged in meaningful interaction with second language. Those meaningful interactions should be communicatively enough to let them focus their attention in the solution of the task without consciously worrying about the language form. For example, during the presentation stage of topics in my classes I usually present the grammar structure, and then, during the control and semi-control stages I push them to practice the grammar taught and finally they are allowed to practice freely. But what if the class structure is changed and it begins with the free practice about the lesson topic and students are let to state their idea freely. Maybe that is a step forward acquisition even in the classroom…

Appendix B: Sample of Piece of Transcription

July 21, First interview with Liz

1- R: Ok so first of all. I would like you to remember about your experiences at school at elementary school and tell me what it was like when you were…
2- LIZ: When I was in primary school?
3- R: (nods head)
4- LIZ: Well, it was really nice ah my experience in primary … I think it was very cool because the school was two blocks from home
5- R: ____uhum____
6- LIZ: and my mother was teacher in that school and that was a very good advantage at the school=
7- R: and how old were you?
8- LIZ: how?
9- R: old were you?.
10- LIZ: Oh, I, well, I was like six years old, so I started in a first grade and my mom was the teacher. She was the person who taught me how to read and how to write, and after that, all my teachers were the colleagues of my mom, so that experience was very nice. Another important aspect was that we were living in the neighborhood so all of us were neighbors, all of us, even the teachers because most of the teachers ah bought houses in that neighborhood, it was Floralia.
11- R: Floralia?
12- LIZ: Yes, so that's why when the neighborhood was built at the same the school was built as well so for that reason people who lived over there were people who were interested in studying in that school, that's why ==
13- R: You were the first year in first grade with your mother and after you stayed with some other teachers, did you notice any difference?
14- LIZ: Ahm, no, basically no difference. I think my mom was very objective with the education we received because she was my mom but she was the same strict and everything I was like other students. Well, it was like that I think, and with the other teachers was, I think very special as well because they were my mom's friends so … I think, you can't avoid thinking about you as normal student, no! You are a daughter of your colleague, but eh despite of the fact that it was apparently different, I think it was not different umm my teachers were friends at home and were friends at school as well.
15- R: Good, how do you remember yourself when you were at that age?

16- LIZ: I think, I was very active, I was an sport kid (sic) yes, I really enjoyed the dancing, sports I was always participating in those activities like the dance festival, I don't know, basketball team, the shows, you know in the xxxx like that all the time and I was recognized at school many times because of that…

Key symbols in transcriptions
R: researcher
LIZ: participant
X: incomprehensible item (word)
xxxx: incomprehensible item beyond
word length
…: pause
—: incomplete word
[ ]: uncertain transcription
(( )): uncertain gloss
( ): comments
__ ___: speech overlap
==: sudden interruption:
1,2,3-: entry number

Appendix C: Sample of the Protocol for Professors' Audio Recorded Interview

AN APPROXIMATION TO TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE BASE THROUGH TEACHERS' REFLECTION

1. One of the dynamics of last semester was the work on reflective journals. How did you get acquainted with this methodology?
2. What do you consider the features of a reflective journal are?
3. Can you describe the procedure you used to implement the journal writing process with your students last semester?
4. How did your students react and perform under these dynamics during the classes?
5. What did you find in the journals that you read?