

# Revisiting the Issue of Knowledge in English Language Teaching, A Revision of Literature

Reconsiderando El Tema del Conocimiento en la Enseñanza  
del Inglés, Una Revisión de la Literatura.

Adriana Castañeda-Londoño<sup>2\*</sup>  
Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, Colombia

## Abstract

In the following literature review, I set out to show an analysis of the main developments regarding the study of in-service English teachers' (IELTs) knowledge. In the first part, I trace scholarly work regarding the topic at the national and international levels. I bring up both poststructuralist and decolonial perspectives to problematize the concept of teacher knowledge base (Shulman 1987, 2005). By means of research profiling and data base search, articles and trends related to the issue of teachers' knowledge were found. The analysis suggests that there are two core trends in the study of English teachers' knowledge in Colombian publications. The first shows that there are studies which revolve around backing up the concept of knowledge base. The second one shows that few studies take up a different perspective towards the study of English teachers' knowledge.

*Key Words:* Teacher knowledge; decolonial perspective in ELT; knowledge base;

## Resumen

En el siguiente texto de revisión bibliográfica, me propongo mostrar un análisis de los principales desarrollos concernientes al conocimiento de los docentes de inglés en ejercicio. En la primera parte, realizo un rastreo de trabajos teóricos y de investigación relacionados con el tema a nivel nacional e internacional. Traigo a colación perspectivas posestructuralistas y decoloniales para problematizar el concepto de conocimiento de base desarrollado por Shulman (1987, 2005) Por medio de perfiles y búsqueda en bases de datos, se

<sup>1</sup> Received: October 18th 2018/ Accepted: April 30th 2019

<sup>2</sup> adricalo29@gmail.com

encontraron artículos y tendencias relacionados con el tema del conocimiento profesoral. El análisis sugiere que hay dos tendencias principales en el estudio del conocimiento de los docentes de inglés. La primera muestra que hay estudios que giran en torno a reforzar el concepto de conocimiento de base. La segunda muestra que muy pocos estudios involucran una perspectiva diferente acerca del estudio del conocimiento profesoral de los profesores de inglés.

*Palabras clave:* conocimiento docente; perspectiva decolonial en enseñanza de inglés; conocimiento de base.

### Resumo

No seguinte texto de revisão bibliográfica, proponho-me a mostrar uma análise dos principais desenvolvimentos referentes ao conhecimento dos docentes de inglês em exercício. Na primeira parte, realizo um rastreamento de trabalhos teóricos e de pesquisa relacionados com o tema a nível nacional e internacional. Menciono perspectivas pós-estruturalistas e decoloniais para problematizar o conceito de conhecimento de base desenvolvido por Shulman (1987, 2005) Por meio de perfis e pesquisa em bases de dados, encontraram-se artigos e tendências relacionados com o tema do conhecimento professoral. A análise sugere que existem duas tendências principais no estudo do conhecimento dos docentes de inglês. A primeira mostra que existem estudos que giram em torno a reforçar o conceito de conhecimento de base. A segunda mostra que muito poucos estudos envolvem uma perspectiva diferente sobre o estudo do conhecimento professoral dos professores de inglês.

*Palavras chave:* conhecimento docente; perspectiva decolonial em ensino de inglês; conhecimento de base.

El conocimiento es sólo una de las representaciones de la existencia.<sup>3</sup>  
José Vasconcelos

<sup>3</sup> Knowledge is just one representation of existence (Author's translation)

## Introduction

In this text I intend to develop the main theoretical tenets that support the study of in-service English language teachers' knowledges as well as provide an overview of the principal research developments concerning this topic first at the local level and then in the mainstream arena locating myself in a decolonial conceptual position.

In the first part of the article readers will find first an exploration of when, where and who has published research or theory in relation to the concept of teachers' knowledges. In the second part, I posit a decolonial standpoint in order to ground a critique of the universalizing aim of the concept of teachers' knowledge base, acknowledging my bias that no knowledge can further advance if arguments are given from the same epistemological ground that one scrutinizes. I will then move on reviewing some of the main academic works in the topic of English language teachers' knowledges and a few contributions from Colombian researchers in other areas. Afterwards, I will argue for a decolonial disciplinary ELT knowledge by bringing up traditional and critical complex standpoints towards in-service English language teachers' knowledges. At the end, I will draw some concluding remarks.

### Profiling Scholarly Work about Teachers' Knowledge.

In this article the term "profiling" is being used as suggested by Porter, Kongthon & Lu (2002). One of the aims of profiling research is to facilitate finding research trends by means of text-mining (examining numerous abstracts in databases). Some questions that are answered by means of research profiling are: how many articles have been produced in certain area? Who builds up the research community interested in the topic? Profiling is not meant to substitute a literature review. Rather it is intended to further it at the macro level by finding out tendencies and relationships beyond the few articles that can be found manually when surfing databases.

To trace research concerning teachers' knowledge, I used the bibliometric analysis provided by the database Scopus in April 2017. To do this, a time span between 1963 and 2017 was selected. Based on statistics provided by the database and information it displayed by country, number of publications and source, some conclusions were drawn. For example, in the 60s, the intellectual work concerning teachers' knowledge appears to be emergent with a scarce dissemination of 1 or 2 articles in this decade up to the mid-70s. By the end of the 70s and the 80s between 3 and 12 articles were available. The 90s showed that the articles production in the area doubled. From around 14 to 27 articles were published. In the period 2001-2010 articles publication about teachers'

knowledge increased fivefold. Finally, between 2011 and 2014 there was a steady rise in articles publication from 203 to 259.

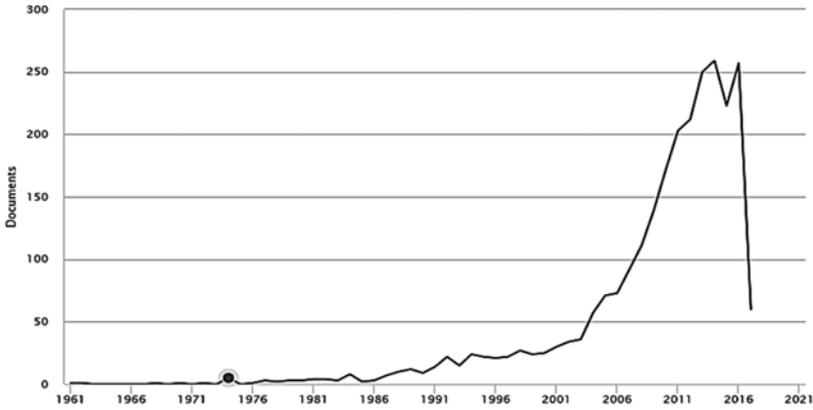


Figure 1. Source: Scopus, retrieved March 31st 2017

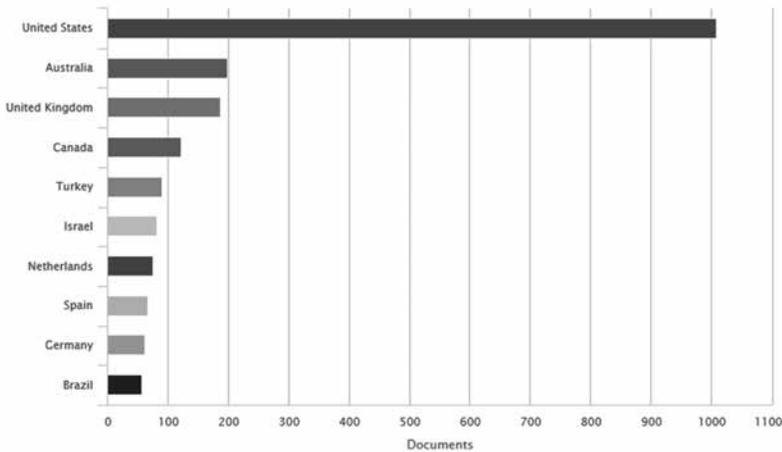


Figure 2. Source: Scopus, retrieved March 31st 2017

As for the geographical location and journals, it can be said that academic production regarding teachers' knowledge has been particularly distributed as follows: The US with more than 1000 articles, Australia and The UK with almost 200 articles, Canada with more than 100 articles, and Turkey, Israel, Netherlands, Spain, Germany, and Brazil with less than 100 publications.

If journals are ranked considering the biggest amount of documents on the subject of teachers' knowledge we have: *Journal Of Mathematics Teacher Education* (65), *Journal Of Teacher Education* (45), *Teachers and Teaching Theory and Practice* (40), *International Journal Of Science Education* (39), *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* (34), *International Journal of Science and Mathematics Education* (33), *Educational Studies In Mathematics* (30), *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* (30), *Journal of Science Teacher Education* (28), and *Research in Science Education* (28). Particularly in the English Language Teaching field, the following journals were found to have some articles regarding the topic in this way: *Tesol Quarterly* (11), *Language Awareness* (6) *Elt Journal* (3).

From this research profile, I infer that the interest towards teachers' knowledge started in the mid-80s and has increased five times after 2001. Most research has been concentrated in Math, Science, Teacher Education, and to a lesser extent in the English Language Teaching field. Moreover, the production has been mostly carried out in Anglo or European countries. This inference will come to support what I will further argue in the next parts of the text.

### **A Decolonial Perspective towards English Language Teachers' Knowledges**

Despite the word *knowledge* is singular in the English language, I use the more flexible and embracing word knowledges (Sousa Santos, 2007, 2009) along the document. By knowledges, I not only refer to teachers' experiences, theories, beliefs, actions, and skills (Díaz Maggioli, 2012) that teachers are supposed to hold but I am also considering the realm of the knowledge that has been made invisible or silenced by the Western canon of thought.

In the same way, two ideas should be clarified here –decoloniality and decolonial turn- in order to better understand the perspective, I am going to introduce. According to Quijano (2007) 'Decoloniality' exposes how European/North American ideas and peoples imposed themselves as cognitive models to be followed. Particularly, the scheme of knowledge production followed a pattern of "knowledge as a product of a subject/object relation" (p. 172) in which the subject is the European/North American while other people are the object of study –or the consumers of their knowledge as I have elsewhere pinpointed out (See Castañeda-Londoño, 2018). Quijano (2007) overtly unmasks that "only European culture is rational, it can contain 'subjects' –the rest are not rational, they cannot be or harbor 'subjects'. As a consequence, the other cultures are different in the sense that they are unequal, in fact, inferior by nature. They can only be 'objects' of knowledge or/and of domination practices" (p. 174). This author calls for a liberation of knowledge production from "the pitfalls of European rationality/modernity" (p. 177) and the recognition of the "heterogeneity of reality" (p. 177).

The Decolonial thought, for Asher (2013) is related to a communal project of critique towards the European Modernity born in Latin America that exposes the colonial effects on the Latin American cultures. Within this movement the actual birth of the modernity world system is historically located in the conquest of the Americas. The decolonial choice aims at digging into the knowledge and experiences “of those who have been on the borders of colonial modernity” (Asher, 2013, p. 833) Bhabra (2014) differentiates decolonial thought (from 1492 on) from postcolonialism (19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries) in that the former was begun by Latin American intellectuals in diaspora while the latter was begun by Middle East and South Asian intellectuals while in the same diasporic condition and using concepts from poststructuralists such as Foucault.

Drawing on Alvarado (2015), I locate myself in an epistemological decolonial ground. Thus, I bring up the fact that the academia disseminates knowledge/power relations that are rooted in the couple coloniality-modernity<sup>4</sup>. One result of this convergence is the rejection of knowledges produced in the periphery. I hope the reader does not see the next lines as patronizing but as a way to reflect on the nature of our ideas in ELT and the ways in which our voices can be heard in the broader ELT landscape with identity(ies), feelings and experiences of our own.

Ruiz Solórzano (2016) suggests having a more critical and less foreign epistemic standpoint in the development of the Latin American social sciences as current analytical frameworks fall short in accounting for the various social and cultural happenings that have historically occurred and that are currently occurring that consistently intend to globalize and homogenize the world. For Ruiz Solórzano (2016) the fragmentation of knowledge as a consequence of its institutionalization is a fact in the social sciences. This criticism can also fit in the ELT arena. Aligned with that view, I would like to make the case that in our ELT field there has also been what some scholars (E.g. Dussel, 1998; Quijano, 2008) call coloniality of knowledge. Thus, within this view, local teachers' knowledges have been made to be fragmented, stratified, or tested (González, 2009) to control their production and teachers' self-regulation. Specifically in Colombia, Noguera Ramirez (2005) backed up in Foucault (1976) suggests of pedagogy and pedagogical research as “subdued knowledges” (p. 43) because academia has failed to recognize them as such by subtle mechanisms like their dilution in other disciplines (e.g. psychology or sociology), by concealing their history within socioeconomic frames or by constructing the teachers as intellectuals controlled by knowledges produced in other disciplines.

<sup>4</sup> The concept of coloniality is used to describe the intellectual, linguistic, and economic effects that colonialism left in the planet Earth. Geographical colonialism already finished but intellectual coloniality still remains.

The ELT field as an academic discipline itself has regulated the legitimation of the “teachers’ knowledge base” concept (Shulman 1987) as a scientific discourse in our field that comes from the cognitive sciences. One difficulty with this perspective is that there is a tendency to unify the concept of knowledge. This problem stems from the European modernity and that is why, the so-called universal character of the Anglo European experiences does not leave room for other forms of knowledge, therefore, these world views turn out to be the only valid ones. This northern conceptualization is prone to be problematized in the Latin American, more specifically, Colombian periphery. For Ruiz Solórzano (2016) the current intellectual framework does not reflect the historical reality, and the “accumulated knowledge” (p. 30) does not make further sense because in the periphery, we are establishing knowledge within frames that are not ours. Consequently, other ways of knowing are not explored, understood, or allowed.

In Asher’s (2013) words “coloniality normalizes” (p.834) therefore its current hegemonic stance takes away our capability of figuring out other possible ways of seeing the world, constructing or tracing knowledge. One effect is that in-service EFL teachers may not dare to explore or conceptualize what knowledge entails for them. That is why, Zemelman (2012) cited in Ruiz Solórzano (2016) states that if we are interested in constructing knowledge we cannot just focus on recounting what has already been produced or framed within dominant discourses with universality biases. Instead, we should frame our thoughts in our various Latin American mindsets as we see reality differently. However, these claims, in real life practices scholars tend to fail to achieve such deeds. In the next section, I will outline some of such cases in the local ELT field.

By now, I would like to bring up Colombian scholar Fandiño (2013), who says that teacher education programs (TEPs) “must not see teaching as a static and prescriptive activity. Instead, they should regard it as a dynamic process characterized by reflection and change” (p. 90) Nonetheless, most scholarly work in the ELT local field appeals to Shulman (1987), Calderhead (1988), Freeman and Johnson (1998), Wallace (1991) -to name just a few scholars- for positioning their own knowledge production. As the Epistemologies of the South (Sousa Santos, 2009) put forward, there is need to spot the different colonial practices (either Portuguese, French, Iberian, British or North American). Therefore, it is my intention here to unpack some of such practices of coloniality especially those carried out in the local ELT academia. What I mean is, much academic work in ELT follows canonic patterns of thought which oftentimes validate current knowledge production from other places that may not reflect local realities.

Consequently, the continuous backup of our local intellectual work in Anglo-American or European authors, in my view, entails a lack of detachment

from the North-Colonial-Modern mindset. What this puts forward is that we are in deep need of exploring the *other* knowledge (el saber otro, Alvarado, 2015), the one constructed in this part of the world which involves a completely different episteme from those of Europe or North America. For Escobar (2007) the “saber otro” relates to what Walter Mignolo calls “un paradigma otro” which should not be understood as just another paradigm in Latin America. Escobar (2007) defines it as “another way of thinking that runs counter to the great modernist narratives (Christianity, Liberalism, Marxism)” (p. 180). This paradigm situates its research agenda in “the borders of a system of thought and reaches towards the possibility of non-Eurocentric models of thinking” (p. 180).

Within this decolonial stance, there is need to acknowledge what Freire (1997) calls the awareness that we, as human beings, are *unfinished* and if that is so we do not benefit from a universalizing, fragmented, instrumental, static view of knowledge but from unveiling *the other* knowledge, the one that has been subdued or made invisible. If, as Freire (1997) suggests, we cultivate the power to critically observe the way we exist in the world, reality and therefore knowledge, are ongoing processes of becoming; we are thus *unfinished* and so is reality.

I want to finish this section with a story. Once I heard that eagles were able to renew themselves when they turned 40 so they could live up to 70. Such a renewal was painful as they had to pluck their own feathers, knock their beak off and get rid of their talons. I marveled at the story of the eagle in its capacity to be reborn. While writing this text my memory resorted to this story to relate it to the decolonial epistemology; I actually thought of it as a metaphor that exemplified a decolonial perspective in our ELT education considering that we teachers, were “eagles” that wanted to renovate by getting rid of our deeply rooted modern and colonial ways. When I intended to document myself “scientifically” to make a good argument, my grounds to believe in the story and use it as a metaphor just vanished. To my surprise the story of the eagles was just another self-help story of strength as eagles would eventually die if they dared to remove their beaks, feathers or talons. I was astonished at my naivety. Still, this discovery made me reflect that what counts as knowledge always needs to be revisited and this is the primary intention of the next lines.

### **Contemporary EFL Colombian Thought Regarding English Language Teachers’ Knowledges.**

To give an account of the Colombian scholarly activity concerning a conceptualization of In-service English Language Teachers’ (IELTs) knowledges in the Colombian context, I looked for articles in which the topic of teacher knowledge was taken as the main area of interest. I analyzed

the titles and abstracts of 11 journals, namely: *Lenguaje* (2004-2017), from Universidad del Valle; *Matices* (2008-2015) and *Profile* (2000-2017) from Universidad Nacional; *Revista Colombiana de Educación* (2008-2017) and *Folios* (1990-2017) from Universidad Pedagógica Nacional; *How* (1997-2017) from the Colombian Association of English teachers; *Ikala* (1996-2017) from Universidad de Antioquia, *Gist* (2007-2016) from UNICA; *Colombian Applied Linguistics Journal* (2003-2017) and *Enunciación* (2006-2016) from Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, and *Paideia* (1992-2016) from Universidad Surcolombiana.

The following review of articles is about but not bound to the in-service ELT field, this is basically because scholars in other branches of education (e.g. initial teacher education, pre-service teachers, teacher education) have mainly, dealt with the issue of teachers' knowledge. In fact, the topic has been more explored in initial teacher education than in in-service teaching.

### **From Normative to Avant-garde Views of In-service English Language Teachers' (IELTs) Knowledges.**

In this part of the paper, I document two trends in the ELT academia related to In-service English teachers' knowledges. The first trend consists of comprehensive literature reviews and research papers by authors whose view regarding teachers' knowledge consider Shulman's (1987) conceptualization of teachers' knowledge base consisting of core areas such as disciplinary knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge of learners or knowledge of educational ends. The second trend is that there are also emergent research studies whose aim is to position knowledge from a different standpoint, for example from a narrative perspective.

For Pineda Baez (2002) in her theory-based article, a definition of the English teacher knowledge base is paramount, especially when it comes to evaluating "if teacher preparation programs are meeting the standards for excellence in education" (p. 9). Thus, it can be inferred that one of the reasons why teacher knowledge is important relates to a frame of external evaluation. Similarly, understanding what knowledge base entails is of interest for bettering the quality of teaching practices, the author says. In the past, she says -presumably before Shulman's model- teacher's knowledge was thought of mere learning of pedagogical and subject matter skills.

Although Pineda Baez (2002) acknowledges that a single response to the quest for teacher knowledge is problematic, she resorts to Shulman's (1987) model of knowledge base to equate different categories of English teachers' knowledge to Shulman's model. For example, *content knowledge* would relate to semantics, phonology, syntax, etc. Interestingly, she warns that teachers

must be ready to challenge this knowledge and suggests that initial teacher education is just a small part of the continuous preparation teachers should have. Regarding the concept of *general pedagogical knowledge*, the author relates it to teaching strategies, decision-making, and classroom management. *Pedagogical content knowledge* is connected to the examples, demonstrations, and means through which the subject matter (English) is made manageable which is exemplified by the author in terms of the grammar examples, the designed materials and the reading and writing skills and TESL/TEFL methods. *Curricular knowledge* would involve knowing the programs of the school scheme. *Knowledge of learners* would relate to being able to adapt teaching methods to different EFL/ESL populations and the knowledge of cognitive process students develop to learn (content reception, storage, retrieval etc.). And finally, the concept of *knowledge of educational goals and philosophical bases* does not go far beyond Shulman's own view of knowing the society expectations of the type of human being that is expected to be educated. Still, Pineda Baez (2002) does highlight that another component must be added to the teacher knowledge base and is precisely the recognition of teachers and teachers-to-be as knowledge producers through research. Even though the author positions in a normative epistemology of IELTS' knowledge, this final remark is of interest to a decolonial standpoint for ELT education in the sense that research allows finding situated meanings and practices that could not be found otherwise.

Cardenas and Suárez (2009) inquired about the origins and components of five pre-service teachers' knowledge base and the process they had followed to build it. The authors ground their work in four constructs. They are a) teacher education which refers to the whole educational process people follow to become competent teachers through academic and field work, b) pre-service teaching which the authors define as the period in which teachers-to-be will receive the knowledge they require to teach, c) teaching practice which is a period during course work in which "theory and practice come together" (p. 116) and d) knowledge base which is defined –quoting Shulman (2005) - "as the amalgam of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that underline the capacity to teach effectively" that is comprised of subject knowledge, tenets of inquiry, ability to turn content into understandable ideas for students, knowledge of learners etc. (Shulman, 2005 in Cardenas and Suárez, 2009 p. 116).

Through a phenomenological interview, journals and a survey, they found that the teachers' knowledge base resulted from first, all the involvement participants had along their lives with academic contexts (from kindergarten to university), second, reading theoretical constructs in their coursework, third, pre-service teachers' experience with real life classrooms, fourth, classmates and lectures, and fifth, partaking with their own learners. For the participants, the knowledge base is composed of language knowledge, knowledge of

students, and pedagogic knowledge. The authors concede that the concept of knowledge base by Shulman (1987, 2005) has been the founding element of other studies concerning teachers' knowledge and their own. The authors extend our understanding of how some local teachers come to build the repertoire of ideas that Shulman calls the knowledge base. However, these categorizations might have shortcomings when accounting for an analysis of how the lived experience of diverse knowledges come to interact in the social practices. In a similar vein, the experience of partaking with learners is not given a stronger value as a source of knowledge for teachers.

An exploration of five teacher educators and five novice teachers' awareness of the sources for pedagogical knowledge was carried out by Macias (2013). This author was interested in finding the ways teachers learned about the act of teaching in times in which teachers' knowledges are tested by means of students' standardized examinations. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysis of syllabi and curriculum documents of classes such as didactics, teaching practicum I, II, III, and pedagogy. The author takes the construct pedagogical knowledge from Shulman (1986b and 1987) who conceptualizes it as "teachers' accumulated knowledge about the act of teaching that serves as the foundation for their classroom behavior and activities" (Shulman 1986b and 1987 in Macias 2013 p. 100). In the literature introduced by the author, four sources of EFL teachers' knowledge are apparent. They are a) knowledge about teaching developed from the time students were at elementary or high school, b) knowledge gotten from learning to teach at coursework in the bachelor's degree, c) knowledge coming from experience, and d) knowledge taken from a research process.

The author found that for the novice participants the principal source of knowledge was their B.A degree course work. For the teacher educators, the B.A degree as well as the M.A studies were just a couple among many other sources. Novice teachers also asserted to have increased their pedagogical knowledge by observing other teachers despite the scarce opportunities the curriculum provided for those observations. The third source of knowledge considered by both novice and teacher educators is the classroom experience. The fourth source of knowledge found was the teachers' personal epistemologies. The final source of knowledge was research. Through this study, two types of knowledge are validated from previous work by Shulman (1987), namely, knowledge from experience and knowledge from research. Macias (2013) advances in the discussion of knowledge through the recognition of personal epistemologies and previous learning experiences as other sources of teachers' knowledge. If a comparison is drawn between Macias (2013), Cardenas and Suarez (2009), and Shulman (1987, 2005) one can get to see that the concept of knowledge base would not be a static category. These studies intended to find what the sources for a knowledge base were. The findings showed

different results from which I infer that the concept of base may be actually a misconception because what might entail a core or a base for some people is different from what it entails for others.

A revision of literature about knowledge and EFL teachers by Fandiño (2013) shows his main concern is to define what knowledge base is when it comes to effective teaching in the context of EFL Teacher Education Programs (TEPs). The first author cited is Shulman (1987) with his -already mentioned here- five dimensions of knowledge (content, pedagogy, curriculum, context, educational ends). Then, Fandiño (2013) focuses specifically on language teaching and refers to Lafayette (1993) to mention competence and knowledge about language, culture, second language acquisition and applied linguistics as the domains of English teachers' knowledge base. Day (1993)'s model is also cited. It concerns teachers' knowledge based on knowledge of teaching practices (preparing the lesson, managing the class), support knowledge (linguistics, sociolinguistics, and other disciplines that inform language teaching and learning), content knowledge (structural aspects of the English language). Freeman and Johnson (1998)'s conceptualization of English teachers' knowledge is also mentioned with six elements: "theories of teaching, teaching skills, communication skills, language proficiency, subject matter knowledge (specialized disciplinary knowledge), pedagogical reasoning and decision making, and contextual knowledge (educational, linguistic, policies)" (Fandiño, 2013, p. 86). Other scholars mentioned in Fandiño's review are Tarone & Allright (2005) who extended Freeman and Johnson's (1998) model with knowledge of "second and foreign language learner" (Fandiño, 2013, p.87)

As we have seen, Day (1993), Lafayette (1993), Freeman & Johnson (1998) among others are cited in Fandiño (2013) to carry out his analysis of teachers' knowledge base. These scholars in turn draw inevitably on Shulman's (1987) conceptualization of knowledge base. It could be said that ideas such as general pedagogical knowledge, subject matter knowledge, curricular knowledge, knowledge of educational contexts and learners, or knowledge of educational ends, first proposed by Shulman (1987) are tailored for the English teaching profession. If Freeman and Johnson (1998) are traced back, one can notice that although the concept of knowledge base was questioned, it did not advance much further.

Hence, although Fandiño (2013) states that teachers-to-be need to develop their own voice so that their *knowledge base improves* (my emphasis), the core conceptualizations of what teacher knowledge base is have remained almost the same since the mid-1980s. Still, Fandiño (2013) reflects that the intricate nature of EFL TEPs and the multiple factors that impact teacher knowledge make it difficult to develop a single way to prepare Colombian EFL teachers' knowledge for the various socio-cultural aspects faced in classrooms.

The author proposes to use systematic inquiry to move from mere reflective practices to help pre-service teachers “generate a voice of their own” (p. 93)

Mendieta Aguilar (2011) researched teachers’ narrative knowledge. The study aim was to find the ways in which teachers’ narrative knowledge about foreign language teaching molded and characterized the curriculum stories that existed in the classroom. Narrative interviews, concept maps, and biodata surveys were used to collect data. Three English teachers, from a private university language department, were the research participants. The author states that the interplay between life experiences, beliefs, teachers’ knowledge and the curriculum somehow affect language learning. Her findings construct the participants as being learners, teachers, and curriculum makers. Three ways were found in which narratively speaking teachers experienced knowledge. They are directly related to each research participant.

The first category unveiled three standpoints towards knowledge. The first teacher “adopted a student-centered approach to language teaching” (p.97), through which he detached from the fixed curriculum and developed his own understanding of it. This theme shows a teacher concerned with fostering communication and avoiding some textbooks meaningless activities. The second teacher “adopted a goal-oriented approach to language teaching” (p. 98) in which she intended to allow learners have interaction with thought-provoking activities that ultimately helped them reach the objectives pre-established by the curriculum. Even when having a product-oriented view, the teacher also pinpointed the tensions between a standards and testing-based curriculum given by the institution and her view that such a curriculum demands a lot in terms of content for a short time span which could hinder results. The third teacher “adopted a language-oriented approach to language teaching” (p. 99) in which the main emphasis was to develop an appropriate command of the language so learners could be successful at communicating. These three approaches to knowledge drove the researcher to characterize the first participant as an experiential and interaction-driven language teacher, the second participant as a strategic and goal-oriented language teacher and the third participant as a fun-driven and language-centered teacher.

Mendieta Aguilar (2011) concludes that the three teachers’ narrative knowledge emerged as something unique to each one, despite their membership to a particular teacher community. Their distinctive teaching, learning, and experiences had molded their knowledge and beliefs systems. Drawing on Clandinin (1985), the author suggests that personal practical knowledge is the sort of knowledge that is permeated with the experiences that build a person’s being. To this inference, she adds:

“the type of curriculum these three teachers lived and co-constructed with their students, and which they transformed with varying frequency, was

all mediated, filtered and informed by their personal practical knowledge and the external factors previously described” (p. 104)

The final salient idea coming from this study is that there is an urgent need to value, comprehend and spread teachers’ narrative knowledge because it is a fertile ground of exploration of the teaching practices.

From a decolonial perspective applied to IELTS’ knowledge, Mendieta Aguilar’s finding that narrative knowledge emerged as something unique to each teacher helps problematize a normalized view of teachers’ knowledge, namely, that there is such a thing as a knowledge base that is the same for all teachers in the world. According to this research, knowledge base would not comprise a set of general theories but much more contextualized knowledge experiences that have been made invisible because of the universalist character that the concept of knowledge base has come to have.

More recently other local authors have studied issues related to teachers’ knowledge from a different vantage point and probably advancing the understanding of teachers’ knowledge. Interested in what it is like to experience ELT in rural Colombia, Cruz Arcila (2018) used seven teachers’ narratives, field observations and interviews to see enactments of “wisdom of practice”<sup>5</sup> and “personal theories” (p. 67) of rural EFL teachers in different regions of Colombia. Through his interest in digging into teaching practices that were socially pertinent for the teaching and learning in contexts of rural Colombia, the author found at least four instances of personal theories that inform teacher knowledge in ELT, namely, teaching English through prayer, translanguaging, locally suited materials design, and multimodal literacy practices with students cell-phones and teachers’ own resources, voices, and ideas. The author wisely suggests that there may be a great number of other teaching practices that possibly constitute what can be considered the enactments of local practices of knowledge.

In a similar vein, Quintero Polo (2019) reports on his study of the transformations of general pedagogical knowledge considering tenets of critical pedagogy, research and context sensitive practices by student-teachers of an ELT major in Bogotá. With a view that pedagogy is informed by critical theory and opposed to traditional ways of approaching teaching and learning, Quintero Polo (2019) analyzes how student-teachers demonstrate they are not “transmitters of ready-made knowledge” (p. 29) by means of diaries, interviews and analysis of their research projects. The author counters the idea

<sup>5</sup> The concept of “wisdom of practice” was mentioned in Shulman (1987) as one of the sources of teacher’s knowledge. At that time, he asserted that “the final source of the knowledge-base is the least codified of all. It is the wisdom of practice itself, the maxims that guide (or provide reflective rationalization for) the practices of able teachers. (p. 11)

that knowledge should be “an external body of information for people” as this view is prone to conceptualize “the knower as separated from the known” (p, 29).

In that train of thought, he brings up the general categorization of Shulman’s teachers’ knowledge base to go beyond it and trace a view of knowledge as composed of “theories and practices activated by contextualization and the sharing of individual and collective dimensions” (p.30) Upon analysis of student-teachers research experiences and innovative practices, his findings suggest that student-teachers underwent a process of negotiation of their professional and academic selves with their own students, theory and what they experienced in real life. Pedagogy proved to be something socially constructed. Student-teachers’ qualitative pieces of research went beyond instructional practices of ELT to focusing on knowing and understanding learners a lot better and most importantly having a view of language as a vehicle for getting something else.

Decolonially speaking, the concept of knowledge base has had a universalizing aim. What I mean is that much research, as reviewed here, is intended to accommodate local teachers’ experience to the concept of a core or a base, something to anchor to. Such an intention clearly clashes with the fluctuating nature of people’s identities, evolution, and standpoints. An evidence of this argument is found in four out of seven authors reviewed in this part of the document. What is apparent here is that in some Colombian contexts, teachers’ knowledge has been investigated to validate what Shulman (1987, 2005) established. This realization invites to denaturalize this view which has started to change in recent years as reported in studies by Cruz Arcila (2018) and Quintero Polo (2019).

### **Other areas of Colombian Academia Researching Teachers’ Knowledges.**

Quintero Corzo, Torres Hernández and Cardona Toro (2011) from the Department of Educational Studies at Universidad de Caldas in Manizales Colombia, developed a teaching program and a subsequent contest framed within the premise that teachers’ pedagogical knowledge is made observable through writing as it allows to explain scattered teaching experiences. By means of writing, the teaching practices become an intellectual endeavor. Fourteen teachers of rural, urban, marginal, secondary, and university education from different parts of Caldas Colombia participated for two years in workshops, group and individual tutoring sessions to write about their pedagogical knowledge in a narrative style. The authors pinpoint that each educational setting has its own actors and teachers who commit to write their stories manage to turn their life experiences into practical wisdom. The teacher life story contest, the authors conclude, helps pave the path to fill a gap in

the Colombian academic field: “the written memory of teachers’ knowledges” (p.297). This contribution by Quintero Corzo et al (2011) invites to develop a Colombian school of thought that systematizes the knowledge production of those who work in educational settings, who might not be mainstream actors in the academic field and whose hidden knowledge could be documented.

Up to here, it was my intention to provide evidence regarding the way knowledge has been studied locally. I found most studies draw on Shulman’s model of knowledge base and very few come with another paradigm. In the following section I will make a deeper analysis of the concept of knowledge base to account for its origin, evolution and a likely deconstruction.

### **Historizing ELT Disciplinary Knowledge, A Critique of the Concept of Knowledge Base**

English teachers’ knowledge has been highly regulated epistemologically speaking. Indeed, it is a discipline that does not escape phenomena happening in general education. Postmodern critical thinker Kincheloe (2001) says that the modern view of the world infused all aspects of life and particularly education as knowledge is defined a priori. To a great extent the concept of teacher knowledge base follows this line of thought; it is an a priori category that intends to prescribe what teachers ought to know. It may entail that the act of teaching or what is required for it is generic. One wonders how the concept of teacher knowledge base has come to be what it is now. I will now attempt to historicize this matter.

Donmoyer (1996) gives us some hints at the historical roots of this concept. He says that back in 1910, educational psychologist Edward Thorndike promoted psychology as a science that could possibly unveil every human behavior and describe each educational force. In the same spirit, he explains, educational administrator Elwood Cubberly (1909) compared schools to factories and children to products. These two scholars give an account of the strong modern scientific/managerial approach given to educational problem solving and the legitimation given to the scientific method as a source of knowledge about education. (Thorndike, 1910; Cubberly, 1909 cited in Donmoyer (1996)). At that time, there was already an emerging interest in finding teachers’ knowledge base. For Donmoyer (1996) the Thorndike’s effect lasted until the mid-70s. Thus, through this time span, there was a heavy dependence on the so-called process-product paradigm whose main interest was to find teachers’ behaviors that resulted in pupils’ learning results. Donmoyer asserts that the Thorndike tradition was pervasive in influencing how research was theorized in education as its role was to find and corroborate recipes for practice and practice consisted of “systems, techniques, routines,

and standard operating procedures” (p. 96)<sup>3</sup>. This concept started to change as an emerging interest in teachers’ thoughts started. However, the search for a knowledge base did not finish there (as we will later see in this article).

Similar descriptions are found in Beyer (1987) in his chapter “What Knowledge is of Most Worth in Teacher Education?” He exposes that in the North American tradition there was, at the time of his writing, “a reliance on psychometric analyses, isolated technical competence, linear thinking and instrumental reason” (p. 19). He describes that teacher education there, was seen “in hierarchical, patriarchal, technocratic, and psychologized terms” (p.19). The hegemonic culture in the preparation of teachers fostered “positivism and technical rationality” (p.19). What Beyer (1987) calls “technocratic rationality” (p.20) is a system that is based on:

“competency-based teacher education, the testing of teachers, apprenticeship-based clinical teacher education, systems management approaches to curriculum development and program evaluation, behaviorist psychologies, and the nature of national accreditation and state licensing requirements” (p. 20)

To me, it is necessary to denaturalize this normativity because that tradition of *technocratic rationality* has had an immense influence in this part of the world where this vision of teachers’ knowledge has also been adopted. Therefore, in what follows I would like to extend this analysis to the socio-political context of educational psychologist Lee Shulman’s (1987) times in which he advanced the concept of knowledge base. It is my intention to make a clearer case on how the concept of teacher knowledge base is a product of standardization and an attempt to raise regulations of the profession more than an epistemological positioning towards what it means to teach and to know.

First, let us consider that the mid 1980s was a time of educational reform that intended to professionalize teaching *in the USA*. Shulman (1987) persuasively said that the professionalization of teaching was a way to “elevate teaching to a respected, rewarding, better rewarded occupation” (p.3) He brought up a discourse circulating at that time. It was that teaching merited professional recognition based on the idea that “standards by which the education and performance of teachers must be judged and can be raised and [be] more clearly articulated” (p.4) People who wanted the reform – Shulman says- maintained that there was such a thing as a teacher knowledge base defined as “codified, codifiable, aggregation of knowledge, skill,

<sup>6</sup> In my view, this sort of behaviorist influence has continued to exert power in subtle ways in ELT. The methods, for example, are in some way *techniques, routines and operating procedures* that delineate teachers’ actions that are supposed to end up in learning results.

understanding, technology, ethics and dispositions of collective responsibility as well as a means for representing and communicating it” (p.4). Shulman (1987) criticized them for not clarifying what that meant saying:

“The rhetoric regarding the knowledge base, however, rarely specifies the character of such knowledge. It does not say what teachers should know, do, understand or profess that will render teaching more than a form of individual labor, let alone be considered among the learned professions” (p.4)

Hence, it is in this context in which Shulman crafts an argument regarding content, character, and sources for a knowledge base of teaching that suggests, according to him “an answer to the question of the intellectual, practical and normative basis for the professionalization of teaching” (p.4) Framed in his locus of enunciation as a cognitive psychologist the work he did was tied to two projects, one of implementing a national board of teacher assessment and one of systematic observation of how novice teachers learned to teach. Within these parameters, Shulman (1987) asserts that:

“Cognitive psychology research contributes to the development of understanding how the mind works to store, process, and retrieve information. Such general understanding can certainly be a source of knowledge for teachers just as the work of Piaget, Maslow, Erickson or Bloom has been and continues to be” (p. 11).

In this sense, I align with critical pedagogue Kincheloe (2001) when he reflects upon the fact that psychology has been summoned to say what teaching should entail and basically the act of teaching is not in the hands of the teachers. Instead the *scientific management* of teaching is left in the hands of outside experts, like Shulman who observed how experienced and novice teachers learned to teach in order to formulate standards. This results in the teacher saying nothing about his/her teaching and how to judge its results but being the object of study. Contemporary scholar of Shulman, Tom (1987) highlighted an underlying assumption of their epoch by reformers like the Holmes group<sup>7</sup>: “if only more research-derived knowledge were given to teachers, their performance would be dramatically improved” (Holmes group executive board, 1986 cited in Tom 1987, p. 9). However, Tom (1987) argued that “a more useful source of such knowledge than discipline-based study is a teacher’s own inquiry into his or her classroom activities and experiences” (p.9). Still, this other approach did not resonate at that time.

<sup>7</sup> Schneider and Hood (1994) describe The Holmes group as an American network of university deans which intended to carry out reforms in teacher education through research in the eighties. One of their intentions was to make teaching a profession and one of its reports asks for strict standards to enter and leave teacher preparation programs. At that time, the group was criticized for being elitist and lacking substantial impact in their research.

Kincheloe (2001) explains that during the Reagan and Bush periods of presidency (1980-1993) “teachers’ hands are tied and exercise no control over the curriculum. They leave the system [that is the undergrad school] without having been educated. School was intellectually irrelevant. Standardization turns out to be cognitive anesthesia” (p. 22) Still, even though Shulman (1987) acknowledges that “the great danger occurs... when a general principle is distorted into prescription, when maxim becomes mandate” (p. 11) it turned out that his model did become prescription, at least, in what concerns the ELT field.

Freeman and Johnson (1998) attempted to re-conceptualize the construct of knowledge base by transcending the historical and theoretical tenets of the 70s and 80s. They recognize the conditions under which the concept of teacher knowledge base was to be reformed. The authors recall that in the 80s, there was concern regarding the absence of an academic base for language teaching. The same that had been happening in general education. They explain that classroom inquiry was intended to establish efficient teaching actions, appropriate students’ results and classroom exchanges that derived in effective language learning backed up “in teaching skills, or modeling effective teaching behaviors” (p. 398). I think there was a regime of truth which established that teachers lacked a knowledge base so that the implementation of standardization had a legitimization in English teaching as well, despite attempts made in the 80s to see teaching and learning as social, interpretive constructions prone to change as those of Clandinin (1986) cited in Freeman and Johnson (1998).

Even though the authors propose a shift from a behavioral to a constructivist view, the concept of knowledge base prevails. In fact, Freeman and Johnson (1998) appointed language teacher education to be responsible of defining what the knowledge base should be in ELT education. In that sense, they say that the judgments teacher educators make regarding knowledge management (e.g. content, pedagogies) reveal teacher educators’ conceptualization on how people learn their profession and they can define “what is worth knowing and how it is best learned by those individuals who seek to become part of the profession” (p. 403) still again under the assumption that decisions made by teachers should consider effective outcomes: “teacher educators must examine and assess these choices and decisions against the effectiveness of the outcomes they engender” (p. 403) Consequently, the concept of efficacy remains with the label “teaching effectiveness”. These ideas entail that it is the academy the one that defines what knowledge base is; it the one holding the power to determine it. In short, the knowledge base continues to mask an intention to police English teaching moving from one discipline to another but keeping the objective of effectiveness and the static concept of base.

In my view, indeed, it is relevant to develop a new relation to knowledge. In that sense, I agree with Freeman and Johnson (1998) when stating that the

TESOL area has not keenly intended to outline its ways of knowledge. I would add that most of them are borrowed from cognitive psychology<sup>5</sup>. Cochran-Smith & Lytle (1993) suggest that good teachers do not need to turn into experts of a knowledge base but stand in a position of analysis of their own knowledge and seeing students as knowers as well. This premise is based on the assumption that:

“Teachers can only come to know how to teach and how to learn from teaching by being attentive to the classroom interactions... knowledge generation is both the purpose of teaching and the subject of her own research” (p. 47).

In this view, it is teachers and students who, within the classroom, outline what knowledge is. Kincheloe (2001) states that “psychological models of cognition overlook the matter of critical power, of the capacity people have to detach from tacit presuppositions, discursive practices, and power relations” (p. 38). Therefore, he proposes different ways of knowing from a critical pedagogy perspective. Kincheloe (2004) wonders what types of knowledges professional educators should possess in times when teaching is a profession constantly at risk of being deskilled. Teachers may be waving between fads, which without solid foundations, to understand past and present socio-cultural theories and advances, they could not develop an identity of their own. His locus of enunciation is that of a critical complex vision of teachers viewed as knowledge producers targeting the development of more coherent answers to what it implies to know and the moral duty behind that act. His “meta-epistemological” (p. 51) perspective aims to rethink the challenged concept of a “knowledge base for education”(p.51) Within this view, there is the recognition of different types of knowledges of education “including but not limited to empirical, experiential, normative, critical, ontological, and reflective-synthetic domains” (p. 51). The author points out that teaching is preeminently an epistemological act. Munby and Russell (1996) cited in Kincheloe (2004) argue that teaching “depends on, is grounded in, and constitutes knowledge”.

Thus, teachers should develop empirical knowledge that underscores observation as a source of knowledge but more importantly they should have the awareness that research is situated, and researchers do have ideologies, disciplinary knowledge, and experiences that restrict their studies. Similarly, the knowledge produced is constructed and fragmented and does not seek universal validity. For him, “in a critical complex perspective there is not certain

<sup>5</sup> This is so from mainstream northern ELT epistemology and in the South, we are still aligned with that view. Thus, the work in the South is even harder to accomplish when it comes to develop an ELT knowledge of our own as we would need to dialogue with both cognitive psychology/mainstream/colonial views on in-service language teachers’ knowledge and southern perspectives towards ELT.

knowledge about: what subject matter to teach; the proper way to develop a curriculum; the correct understanding of students or the right way to teach” (p. 52). Such knowledge is always elusive. Similarly, teachers’ experiential knowledge is believed to be paramount.

A second kind is called by Kincheloe (2004) normative knowledge about education. It relates to “what should be” (p. 55) concerning the moral and ethical conduct of teacher educators and teachers. Normative knowledge aims to have demanding colleges/schools/departments of education and schools of various kinds. This knowledge is not randomly formed but coherent with power relations, social objectives and cultural/historical settings. Of course, the concern for moral and ethics, Kincheloe explains is grounded, for instance, in his experience with social justice research in which colleagues asked him to offer empirical proof of the validity of those worries. Thus, moral and ethical assumptions are to be examined and deliberated and actually exposed in the academic arena.

The third kind of knowledge proposed by Kincheloe (2004) is critical knowledge about education. It revolves around “the political/power-related aspects of teacher education and teaching” (p. 56). This sort of knowledge problematizes how the curriculum –knowledge selection, means to deliver information, ways to construct understanding, evaluation- are not apolitical. It is in straight antagonism to positivism that conceives of curriculum as pre-established knowledge to be given to learners. This sort of knowledge unmasks the role of education colleges in power relations derived from governmental intervention in the college life and the concealed intent to make education respond to ideologies such as neoliberalism and human capital. In a similar vein, there is an interest in unveiling how the categories of gender, class, or ethnic origin develop along the educational processes.

Another type of knowledge proposed by this author is an ontological one. It entails the ways teachers see themselves as teachers and as learners, especially what they feel they require to learn, where they must study it, the way in which this happens, and how these actions characterize their teacher persona. Here there is the underlying assumption that: “if teachers hold power to produce their own knowledges, then they are empowered to reconstruct their own consciousness” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 58).

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The final type of knowledge is named experiential knowledge about education. The importance of these sort of knowledges cannot be downplayed. Their epistemology is knowingly different from empirical or academic knowledges but develop relations with other knowledges already mentioned here earlier on. They come out of the unexpected experiences that occur while teaching. Such disruptions in the established order force the practitioner to restructure his/her understanding of the situation. “Critical complex

practitioners learn to improvise and develop new ways of dealing with the new circumstances, new modes of action” (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 59).

Through this perspective, it can be seen here that a conceptualization of knowledge cannot solely rely on cognitive perspectives such as the ‘knowledge base’. Other realms of the human condition should also be considered, and other definitions and ways of perceiving knowledge should come into play.

### **A concluding remark**

I constantly experience having stepped in arenas that do not represent a comfort zone in the sense that since my undergraduate school, I have been infused by colonial thought in ELT and paths to detach from such a world system are uncertain, unknown and underexplored. While reviewing literature, I realized that my own knowledge of the Latin American academia, particularly the Colombian one was scarce and thus I had to commit to investigate my own roots to fully embrace a decolonial spirit.

In this review, it was my intention to show different local academic developments and how ELT mainstream colonial authors have become the tenets of what knowledge means in the local ELT profession. I would like to finish quoting Steinberg (2015) as she best summarizes the spirit of this manuscript: “TEFL educators must understand the conditions and effects of knowledge production, while engaging in knowledge production themselves” (p. 17) This is specially the case here considering that in order to produce knowledge that represents the local realities, there is need to reflect how knowledge production has historically happened. There is need to inquire how English language teachers experience knowledge with a perspective that gives them voice as intellectuals who have been silenced (Apple, 2006). That way, we could possibly overcome abyssal thinking (Sousa Santos, 2007) that has policed the boundaries of what is considered teachers’ *knowledge* and has decided what the *true* procedures, practices, contents, models, and discourses should be like in English Language Teaching grounding the ELT epistemology in a static framework. It seems to me that teachers’ knowledges have historically been conceptualized from a modern vision of a fixed canon of one single knowledge-base and there is a myriad of reasons for the need to de-naturalize such a view.

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**Author**

**\*Adriana Castañeda-Londoño** is an English teacher educator. She holds a M.A Degree in Applied Linguistics to the teaching of English and is currently pursuing her PhD degree in Education at Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in Bogotá Colombia. Her research interests are related to teacher education, particularly, poststructuralist, postcolonial and decolonial debates about ELT education.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8360-4528>

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