Reconceptualizing the Knowledge-Base of Language Teacher Education

DONALD FREEMAN
School for International Training

KAREN E. JOHNSON
Pennsylvania State University

Moving beyond the historical and theoretical traditions that have defined teacher education in TESOL over the last quarter century, in this introductory piece we argue for a reconceptualization of the knowledge-base of ESOL teacher education. Essential to this reconceptualization is the premise that the institutional forms and processes of teacher education frame how the profession responds to the basic sociocultural processes of learning to teach. As such, our teacher education practices constitute our professional self-definition. We argue that the core of the new knowledge-base must focus on the activity of teaching itself; it should center on the teacher who does it, the contexts in which it is done, and the pedagogy by which it is done. Moreover, this knowledge-base should include forms of knowledge representation that document teacher learning within the social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it occurs. Finally, we believe the knowledge-base of language teacher education needs to account for the teacher as a learner of teaching, the social context of schools and schooling within which teacher-learning and teaching occur, and the activities of both language teaching and language learning. This tripartite framework calls for a broader epistemological view of ESOL teacher education, one that accounts for teaching as it is learned and as it is practiced; we argue that it will ultimately redefine how we as teacher educators create professionals in TESOL.

In assembling this special-topic issue of TESOL Quarterly on English language teacher education, we recognize that we have embarked on a complex undertaking. Whereas the teaching of English has been central to TESOL’s mission since the association’s founding in 1966, research on language teacher education has been noticeably missing from the professional discourse. A search of the TESOL Quarterly cumulative indexes from 1980 to 1997 reveals that only 9% of the
featured articles are listed under the topic *teacher preparation*. These critically low numbers in the premier refereed journal in the field of TESOL are evidence of problems not of access but of emphasis in what are considered critical understandings in this field. Even if one argues that many published articles conclude with some sort of pedagogical implications for language teachers, in most cases these ramifications do not focus specifically on the preparation and continuing professional education of ESOL teachers. Thus, we argue that teacher education has been much done but relatively little studied in the field. But as an activity it is arguably the foundation of what is done in language teaching.

Whether teachers enter their classrooms with formal professional training or simply on the basis of their command of English, they embark on a process of learning to teach. *Teacher education* is the formal label given to this learning process. It describes the sum of various interventions that are used to develop professional knowledge among practitioners. As such, teacher education undergirds the definition of how we as teacher educators create professionals in our field.

To date, much of the work in language teacher education has been animated more by tradition and opinion than by theoretical definitions, documented study, or researched understandings. More than a decade ago concerns were raised about the lack of theoretical frameworks to serve as a basis for language teacher education programs (Bernhardt & Hammadou, 1987; Freeman, 1989; Richards, 1987; Richards & Nunan, 1990). At that time, the bulk of the classroom-based research on language teaching sought to describe effective teaching behaviors, positive learner outcomes, and teacher-student interactions that were believed to lead to successful L2 learning (see Chaudron, 1988). As in general education, the predominant view of language teaching had traditionally been based on a scientifically derived conception of teaching supported by empirical investigations that either operationalize learning principles, rely on tested models of specific teaching skills, or model effective teaching behaviors (Freeman & Richards, 1993). Moreover, the assumptions that have underlain the practice of language teacher education have focused more on what teachers needed to know and how they could be trained than on what they actually knew, how this knowledge shaped what they did, or what the natural course of their professional development was over time.
REVIEWING RECENT HISTORY1

The traditions of language teacher education also find their roots in the legacy of general educational inquiry over the past quarter century (see Freeman, 1996a; Johnson, 1995). Prior to the mid-1970s, research in general education sought to describe teaching as a set of discrete behaviors, routines, or scripts drawn from empirical investigations of what effective or expert teachers did in practice. Generated within the process-product paradigm, this research looked for the quintessential teaching behaviors that could be linked to specific learning outcomes and argued that these teaching behaviors, if carried out effectively and efficiently on a widespread basis, would ensure student learning (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974). Attempts to legitimize the teaching profession were based on the assumption that when more research-driven knowledge was provided to teachers, their teaching performance would improve (Holmes Group, 1986). Teacher education programs generally operated under the assumption that teachers needed discrete amounts of knowledge, usually in the form of general theories and methods that were assumed to be applicable to any teaching context. Learning to teach was viewed as learning about teaching in one context (the teacher education program), observing and practicing teaching in another (the practicum), and, eventually, developing effective teaching behaviors in yet a third context (usually in the first years of teaching). Thus, arguably, the true locus of teacher learning lay in on-the-job initiation into the practices of teaching and not in the processes of professional teacher education.

Although few would wholeheartedly denounce the role of process-product research in the improvement of teaching, many argue that it both ignores and devalues the individual experiences and perspectives of teachers. Instead it creates an abstract, decontextualized body of knowledge that denies the complexities of human interaction and reduces teaching to a quantifiable set of behaviors (Smyth, 1987). Moreover, what constitutes teachers' knowledge is determined not by teachers themselves, or even by partnered or participatory examinations of their work, but by researchers who, in an effort to improve the scientific respectability of their work, view teaching as discrete behaviors, distance their conclusions about teaching from the contexts within which it occurs, and ignore the individual perspectives and understandings of the teachers who carry out the very teaching practices that they have studied (Woods, 1987).

---

1For a more complete discussion of the last three decades of research in teacher cognition and learning as it bears on language teaching and teacher education, we refer readers to Freeman (1996c).
In the mid-1970s a new body of research began to emerge that worked to describe teachers’ thoughts, judgments, and decisions as the cognitive processes that shaped their behaviors (see Jackson, 1968; Shavelson & Stern, 1981). Teachers were taken as thoughtful people who made rational decisions about what to do in their classrooms; these decisions were based on many sources of contextual information as well as on principles of learning and teaching. Whereas researchers had shifted their attention from watching what teachers did to asking teachers why they did what they did, the teachers themselves, their individual perspectives and experiences, remained secondary in the process (Freeman, 1996c). The impetus in research continued to lie in uncovering conceptual models of teacher thinking that could be used to educate novice teachers “to perceive, analyze, and transform their perceptions of classroom events in ways similar to those used by effective teachers” (Clark & Peterson, 1986, p. 281).

In the late 1970s, this field of research, which had become known as teacher cognition, began to explore the actual thought processes that teachers engaged in as they planned and carried out their lessons. Interestingly, researchers found that teaching could not be characterized simply as behaviors that were linked to thinking done before and during the activity (known as preactive and interactive decisions) but rather that the thought process of teaching included a much wider and richer mental context. Instead, ethnographic and second-order investigations of practicing teachers in actual classrooms showed them constructing explanations of their own teaching and highlighted a certain amount of messiness that seemed inherent in the ways in which they thought about and carried out their work (Elbaz, 1983; Lampert, 1985).

By the mid-1980s, an emergent view of teaching had begun to highlight the complex ways in which teachers think about their work as being shaped by their prior experiences as students (Lortie, 1975), their personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), and their values and beliefs (Pajares, 1992). More recently, the notion of work context has been recognized as central in shaping teachers’ conceptions of their profession (Kleinsasser & Savignon, 1992; Rosenholtz, 1989). The bulk of this research argues that what teachers know about teaching is largely socially constructed out of the experiences and classrooms from which teachers have come. Furthermore, how teachers actually use their knowledge in classrooms is highly interpretive, socially negotiated, and continually restructured within the classrooms and schools where teachers work (Bullough, 1989; Clandinin, 1986; Grossman, 1990).
EMERGING RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS

Lagging behind by almost a decade, language teacher education has begun to recognize that teachers, apart from the method or materials they may use, are central to understanding and improving English language teaching (Freeman, 1991; Johnson, 1992; Prabhu, 1990; Richards & Nunan, 1990). This shift in focus is due, in part, to the way in which researchers and practitioners in language teacher education have begun to recast conceptions of what language teachers are, what language teaching is, and how language teachers learn to teach (see Freeman & Richards, 1996; Richards, 1998; Woods, 1996).

Drawing on work in general education, teacher educators have come to recognize that teachers are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with theoretical and pedagogical skills; they are individuals who enter teacher education programs with prior experiences, personal values, and beliefs that inform their knowledge about teaching and shape what they do in their classrooms. As Kennedy (1991), director of the U.S. National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, wrote, “Teachers, like other learners, interpret new content through their existing understandings and modify and reinterpret new ideas on the basis of what they already know or believe” (p. 2). We as teacher educators have thus come to recognize that much of what teachers know about teaching comes from their memories as students, as language learners, and as students of language teaching. We now know that teachers’ beliefs about teachers and teaching are instrumental in shaping how they interpret what goes on in their classrooms. And we admit that teachers’ beliefs and past experiences as learners tend to create ways of thinking about teaching that often conflict with the images of teaching that we advocate in our teacher education programs. In sum, we as teacher educators now acknowledge that prior knowledge is a powerful factor in teacher learning in its own right, one that clearly deserves our attention and study if we mean to strengthen and improve, rather than simply preserve and replicate, educational practice.

We now recognize that learning to teach is affected by the sum of a person’s experiences, some figuring more prominently than others, and that it requires the acquisition and interaction of knowledge and beliefs about oneself as a teacher, of the content to be taught, of one’s students, and of classroom life. We therefore have to acknowledge that the process is a socially negotiated one, because teachers’ knowledge of teaching is constructed through experiences in and with students, parents, and administrators as well as other members of the teaching profession. We recognize this learning process as normative and lifelong; it is built out of and through experiences in social contexts, as learners in classrooms and schools, and later as participants in professional programs.
Because we as teacher educators see teaching as much more than a set of discrete behaviors or routines that make classrooms run more smoothly, solutions no longer lie in the search for the most effective teaching behaviors or the best methods (see Prabhu, 1990). Rather we now accept that what may be effective in one classroom with one group of students may not be with another. We recognize teaching as more than the accumulation of research knowledge because it is evident that giving more research knowledge to teachers does not necessarily make them better practitioners. Learning to teach is a long-term, complex, developmental process that operates through participation in the social practices and contexts associated with learning and teaching.

Although these reconceptualizations are now at play, we question their impact on the current practices of language teacher education (Johnson, 1996a, 1997). We suspect that many language teacher education programs continue to operate under the assumption that they must provide teachers with a codified body of knowledge about language, language learning, and language teaching; expose them to a range of teaching practices or methodologies; and provide a field experience in which they are expected to apply their theoretical knowledge in actual classroom settings. Moreover, we suspect that, particularly due to the nature of the North American university and of professional preparation for education within it, the knowledge-base of language teacher education often remains compartmentalized in separate course offerings, continues to be transmitted through passive instructional strategies, and remains generally disconnected from the authentic activity of teaching in actual schools and classrooms. In shifting the conception of teaching from a behavioral view of what people do when they teach languages to a constructivist view of how people learn to teach, we hope to recast the conversations in TESOL about the preparation, licensure, evaluation, and mentoring of teachers in the profession.\(^2\)

We argue that learning to teach is an a priori process with which teacher education must articulate. We further contend that the field must better document and understand teacher learning for teacher education to be more effective. In this special-topic issue, we thus propose to reconceptualize teacher education as the form of institutional response to how people learn to teach; we thus open it to closer scrutiny. Such responses to teacher learning are myriad, as the contributions in this special-topic issue suggest, and only begin to give voice to what language teacher educators and language teachers do in their professional worlds.

\(^2\)Here we echo the findings, in the U.S., of the National Commission on Teaching for America’s Future (1996); see also Darling-Hammond (1998).
TEACHER EDUCATION, PROFESSIONAL SELF-DEFINITION, AND FORMS OF KNOWLEDGE

Underlying this variety of exposition is an even more basic issue, however. If readers accept our premise that the institutional forms and processes of teacher education mark the profession’s response to the basic sociocultural processes of learning to teach, then it follows that teacher educators must find, in these forms and processes, the elements of their professional self-definition. If teacher education practices are the institutionalized professional responses to what ESOL teachers need to know and be able to do in various contexts around the world, and if, for example, most MATESOL programs in North America require participants to study methods and materials, phonology, morphology, syntax, applied linguistics, and theories of second language acquisition (SLA) (Reid, 1995/1996), then it would follow that these subject matters are being defined de facto as the key elements of the knowledge-base of TESOL as a profession. It should further follow that teachers thus prepared are more effective in supporting their students’ language learning than those who are not. In contrast, if teacher education practices in the field of TESOL were to regularly include experienced teachers as mentors to novices during field experiences or school-based programs and professional development school structures in which classroom teachers and university personnel collaborated to deliver training, or distance-learning designs that created virtual communities of teachers, for example, then these pedagogies would imply a different understanding of the professional process of learning to teach. Put another way, the choices and decisions we as teacher educators make about the content, pedagogies, and institutional forms of delivery in teacher education reflect our conceptions of how people learn to do the work of teaching in this profession. They define what is worth knowing and how it is best learned by those individuals who seek to become part of the profession. And teacher educators must examine and assess these choices and decisions against the effectiveness of the outcomes they engender.

This argument is both a political and an epistemological one. From the standpoint of professional positioning, teacher education involves political choices. Decisions about what teachers should know, how they should learn it, and how their knowledge and competence should be assessed both stem from and create social recognition and value for their work.3 This is particularly the case in the field of TESOL, in which the

3See, for example, the U.S. national professional Standards for Teaching English as a New Language, developed by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (1997), as well as the many and diverse U.S. state licensure standards and the national standards being articulated in many countries (e.g., Australia and South Africa).
subject matter—the English language—is an accident of birth and geography for some individuals while it is learned as content by others. This fact allows the economic markets of educational delivery in many contexts to create the artificial and professional divisive construct of the native-speaking teacher. We believe that the better we as teacher educators understand and define what English language teachers need to know beyond the subject matter itself, the sooner we can move away from the current situation in many educational markets: If you speak English, you can teach it. To achieve these political ends, epistemologically, we ask teacher educators must pay attention to how we define the forms of knowledge on which we base the profession. To date, the field of TESOL, and indeed language teaching generally, has not actively pursued and defined its own forms of knowledge. Instead, the field has depended on the familiar forms of research and documentation of its parent disciplines in the social sciences (Freeman, 1998). This has created a somewhat conservative hegemony of forms of social science research in the creation of knowledge in the field. These forms have largely failed to penetrate the domain of the classroom and thus remain largely dysfunctional to teachers themselves (Clarke, 1994).

In this special-topic issue, we have purposefully introduced forms of knowledge representation that are new to TESOL Quarterly. In including accounts of best practice, for example, we promote accounts of forms of teacher education that are grounded in particular contexts and theoretical approaches and that show promise of relevance to other settings. As a form of knowledge that documents teacher learning, these best-practice accounts are not meant to become exercises of importation or the basis on which to promulgate techniques. Rather, we see them as situated accounts of local responses to particularly sited sociocultural issues in teacher learning. Their aim is to raise questions of social, cultural, and institutional context to a new level in discussions such that these questions may become the focus of understanding rather than simply locations in which an activity takes place. Accounts of best practices thus illustrate quite well U.S. writer Eudora Welty’s injunction that the general resides in the particular.

We have included conceptual analyses as another form of knowledge. This, too, has been a purposeful choice through which we hope to highlight the intersection of the political and the epistemological in how teacher education responds to teacher learning. The authors of these conceptual analyses draw on their professional work and research, particular histories, and personal experiences to identify and analyze specific issues in their contexts and practices as teacher educators. They map out the terrain of an issue and a conceptual response to it so that choices and positions may be more clearly identified. Underlying this approach to articulating knowledge are the assumptions that teacher
education responds to the demands of teacher learning and social environments in complex ways and that these responses are not neutral and technicist; they are essentially positions of value.

A PROPOSAL FOR THE KNOWLEDGE-BASE OF LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION

Taken together, the forms of knowledge representation in this special-topic issue are intended to open up a wider discussion of how the field of TESOL defines the knowledge-base of language teacher education. We believe that this is as much a practical discussion as it is a theoretical argument, that it may lead to as many political consequences as implementation issues, and that it is ultimately the stuff of professional self-definition. In closing this article, we propose a map of what we believe this knowledge-base should entail. Our proposal is an epistemological framework that focuses on the activity of teaching itself—who does it, where it is done, and how it is done. Our intention is to redefine what stands at the core of language teacher education. Thus we argue that, for the purposes of educating teachers, any theory of SLA, any classroom methodology, or any description of that English language as content must be understood against the backdrop of teachers’ professional lives, within the settings where they work, and within the circumstances of that work.

Our intention is not to pit one epistemological framework against another. By arguing in favor of personal and social context, we do not mean to ignore conventional notions of theory or to replace them simply with knowledge of and from practice. Rather, we seek a broader epistemological framework that is more connected to the activity of teaching itself and within which both conceptual knowledge (known as theory) and perceptual knowledge (known as practice) (Kessels & Korthagen, 1996) are highlighted, valued, and experienced so as to inform and reform teachers’ practices.

This proposal is, in effect, our professional position. Readers can thus locate the articles that follow in this special-topic issue on this map, which, we hope, will stimulate further discussion about how the field of TESOL defines and carries out teacher education.

What Must the Knowledge-Base Account For?

The knowledge-base of language teacher education responds to a deceptively simple question: Who teaches what to whom, where? We argue that this question poses three broad families of issues that the
knowledge-base needs to address: (a) the nature of the teacher-learner; (b) the nature of schools and schooling; and (c) the nature of language teaching, in which we include pedagogical thinking and activity, the subject matter and the content, and language learning. Taken together, these domains outline a systemic view of the knowledge-base that emphasizes their constant and critical interdependence, as illustrated in Figure 1. This view stands in contrast to the binary distinction between subject matter and learners on which most discussions of language teaching and language teacher education have been based (Celce-Murcia & McIntosh, 1979; Oller & Richards-Amato, 1983; Widdowson, 1978). In such conventional frames, methodology is seen as the bridge between the subject matter and those who are learning it, thus creating a basically transmission view of language teaching and learning.

We believe that the three domains that we propose, which we abbreviate here as the teacher-learner, the social context, and the pedagogical process, more accurately and appropriately capture the complex terrain in which language teachers learn and practice their craft. We contend that research in language teacher education, as well as proposals to modify or improve teaching and prescriptions for what language teachers should know and be able to do, needs to be framed within this tripartite systemic
framework for the knowledge-base. To elaborate each of three domains, one can ask several questions: How is the domain defined? What elements make it up, and what are its parameters? What is known about the domain itself and in relation to the other two domains? How are they systemically interconnected? How do the domains, separately and as a system, create the sociocultural environment in which people learn to teach and in which they carry out their work as teachers? These questions, among others, then help to shape a general research agenda that can elucidate the knowledge-base of language teacher education. To begin a response to these questions, we turn now, briefly, to each of the domains in turn. Readers may find it helpful to refer to Figure 1 as they read the sections that follow.

The Teacher-Learner

In defining the knowledge-base, one must recognize that language teacher education is primarily concerned with teachers as learners of language teaching rather than with students as learners of language. Thus teacher education focuses on teacher-learners (Kennedy, 1991) as distinct from language learners. However, this simple yet crucial shift in emphasis has often been disregarded in the field. It is clear that classroom language learning is an extremely complex process and that language students learn from many sources within that environment, among which the teacher is one element (see Allwright & Bailey, 1991). In the push to understand this complexity, however, teachers are often overlooked, and they are portrayed as conduits to students rather than as individuals who think, and are learning, in their own right. Correcting the view of who the learner is in this process is a critical conceptual step. The knowledge-base of language teacher education must account for how individuals learn to teach and for the complex factors, influences, and processes that contribute to that learning.

The somewhat disparate research on teacher learning can be organized around four foci: (a) the role of prior knowledge and beliefs in learning to teach (e.g., Bailey et al., 1996; Johnson, 1994; Lortie, 1975); (b) the ways in which such teaching knowledge develops over time and throughout teachers’ careers (e.g., Berliner, 1986; Genburg, 1992); (c) the role of context in teacher learning (e.g., Britzman, 1991); and (d) the role of teacher education as a form of intervention in these areas, particularly in changing teachers’ beliefs about content and learners (e.g., Freeman & Richards, 1996). This research agenda is a young one, however, particularly in the field of TESOL. There are clearly great and useful possibilities for inquiry into, and understanding of, the antecedents, processes, environments, and impacts of teacher learning in
language teaching. Fundamental to this work, however, is the notion that teacher-learners and their learning processes can only be adequately documented or understood if the sociocultural contexts in which these processes take place are explicitly examined as part of that research process.

The Social Context: Schools and Schooling

It is the notion of context that we want to capture in the second domain: schools and schooling. This domain argues that an understanding of schools and schooling as the social and cultural contexts for teacher learning is critical to establishing an effective knowledge-base. We draw a distinction between schools and schooling because we see it as a useful point of entry into this domain. In schools, the focus is on the physical and sociocultural settings in which teaching and learning take place. In schooling, the focus is on the sociocultural and historical processes, of which teaching is one important part, that take place in the settings of schools. Because, for purposes of research and implementation, we locate schools in present time and space, they can be seen as synchronic contexts. In teacher education, we look at schools and classrooms as the places in which teacher-learners carry out their work: They test out theory in practica, they are socialized into teaching in their first years on the job, they receive in-service education often in and through the school, and so on.

On the other hand, schooling as a sociocultural context is generally diachronic; it gains value and meaning for participants through time. The process of schooling draws on many constructs. There is, for example, Lortie’s (1975) concept of the apprenticeship of observation, which marks teachers’ socialization as students throughout their school careers as a major influence on their teaching. Another construct is Denscombe’s (1982) notion of the hidden curriculum as the sociocultural norms and values emphasized by schools, which is a major influence on what teachers accept as usual and normal in their classrooms (Zinn, 1995). Still another is the relationship among home, community, and school expectations and definitions of subject matters and learning process, as in the much-studied case of literacy practices (e.g., Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983). It is the combination and integration of these synchronic and diachronic views, captured in the notions of schools and schooling, that create a rich, complicated, and textured view of the sociocultural contexts in which teacher learning takes place. We believe that capturing this terrain is critical to articulating the knowledge-base.

We would make two further observations about schools and schooling as sociocultural contexts in this regard. First, it is critical to recognize
that schools are powerful places that create and sustain meanings and values (e.g., Lightfoot, 1983; Sizer, 1983). Therefore, it is misleading to see them merely as settings in which educational practices are implemented, as is often done in teacher education designs. The commonplace notion of the practicum, in which teacher-learners practice what they have learned in their university-based professional training, is an example of this misperception (Johnson, 1996b). Instead, in our view, schools and classrooms function as frameworks of value and interpretation in which language teachers must learn to work effectively. They are the sociocultural terrain in which the work of teaching is thought about, carried out, and evaluated. Studying, understanding, and learning how to negotiate the dynamics of these powerful environments, in which some actions and ways of being are valued and encouraged whereas others are downplayed, ignored, and even silenced, is critical to constructing effective teacher education.

To address this domain it will be necessary to determine which aspects of the nature of schools and schooling are particularly germane to the knowledge-base of language teacher education. This area of study is hardly neutral, however, which is our second observation. Rather it is often colored by debates over access, power, and whose knowledge counts, and over the role of education in sustaining or altering the prevailing values and social order (see Apple, 1986). By including schools and schooling in the knowledge-base of language teacher education, we are recognizing that language teaching cannot be understood apart from the sociocultural environments in which it takes place and the processes of establishing and navigating social values in which it is embedded. We are also acknowledging that, insofar as it sustains or critiques schools as environments of value and schooling as a process of valuing, teacher education is indeed a political undertaking. Thus we would argue against approaches that see language teacher education in purely neutral and technicist terms and that do not engage teacher-learners in issues and dynamics of the sociocultural context of schools and schooling (see Zeichner & Liston, 1996). These environments and processes shape in critical ways what language teachers can do, which leads us to the third domain, language teaching itself.

The Pedagogical Process: Language Teaching and Learning

The third domain in the knowledge-base of language teacher education is the activity of teaching. Whereas most proposals for the knowledge-base put the specific activity of teaching de facto at the core (e.g., Reid 1995/1996), we argue otherwise. Clearly, any understanding of teaching must be anchored in examinations of learning and learners.
However, teaching as an activity cannot be separated from either the person of the teacher as a learner or the contexts of schools and schooling in which it is done. Each domain is contingent on the other two, as Figure 1 indicates. Thus we include teaching third in this analysis to emphasize this interrelationship and our belief that the knowledge-base is therefore broader than it has heretofore been construed.

Discussions of teaching in the knowledge-base generally fall into the categories of grounded and a priori. In the grounded category are analyses of language teaching that start with the activity as it is practiced in classrooms; thus they are grounded in the phenomenon itself (see Glaser & Strauss, 1967). There are unfortunately very few such studies. There are many reasons for this dearth of research, but we believe it has to do primarily with the challenge and complexity of studying classroom language teaching and learning as it is actually lived and experienced by its protagonists. To unpack this complexity, we suggest that it may be useful to distinguish between content, which we define as the teachers’ and the students’ perceptions of what is being taught in a lesson or course, and the subject matter, which is the professional or disciplinary perception. Thus content and subject matter are distinct yet convergent versions of the same phenomenon in much the same way that ethnographers speak of emic and etic views of a situation, event, or phenomenon. Similarly, one can examine first- versus second-order data of teaching and learning that expose the rich territory that lies between what the participants perceive and believe and what they do (Marton, 1981). These approaches can begin to illuminate the heart of language teaching itself, which is a normative and descriptive undertaking. Defining the knowledge-base in this way has political ramifications, however. It means acknowledging existing practices, in all of their less-than-desirable aspects, and trying to understand why those practices happen as they do (Freeman, 1998).

In contrast, discussions of the knowledge-base of language teaching have been dominated by a priori claims and exhortations that aim to establish the disciplinary antecedents of the activity of teaching. Almost two decades ago, Strevens (1976), Spolsky (1978), Kaplan (1980), and Stern (1983) proposed various frameworks or models of the relationship between language teaching and the various disciplines on which it is historically based. However, there is a substantial amount of theory and research, both in general education and in TESOL, that can serve as a basis for distinguishing disciplinary knowledge, as an a priori construct, from an emerging understanding of what language teachers do, as a grounded normative description. For example, in general education, Shulman (1987) argued for a distinction between pedagogical content knowledge and disciplinary content knowledge (see Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1989). Schön (1983, 1987) asserted that basic differences
exist between professional knowledge-in-action and the application of a priori solutions, which he called technical rationality. Schön's work in particular precipitated a major shift in teacher education and research on teaching that has emphasized teachers coming to understand their own thinking through reflective practice (e.g., Richards, 1998; Richards & Lockhart, 1994). We feel justified in separating the disciplinary discussions, which are fundamentally epistemological in nature, from the descriptive, research-based enterprise of establishing a knowledge-base for language teacher education.

Readers may notice that, thus far in our discussion of language teaching, language learners and language learning/acquisition seem to be noticeably absent from our exposition of the knowledge-base. Although it is clearly critical for teacher-learners to know and understand something of how individuals learn languages both inside and outside the classroom, it is also important to recognize the relative place of this knowledge vis-à-vis successful teaching. Here we make three points that may be somewhat controversial given the strong disciplinary roots of TESOL and ESOL teacher education in applied linguistics. First, we believe it is important to acknowledge that SLA is itself a constructed view of language learning, by which we mean that it is subject to its own epistemological claims, counterclaims, and methodological arguments. In general, due perhaps to its roots in L1 acquisition and cognitive psychology, the field of SLA has viewed language learning from an individualist perspective. Thus, until recently, the field has not examined language learning from the standpoint of socially negotiated, constructivist processes that may be at play. Broadening the view from an individual to a social one affects how language learning is defined as an epistemological process and how language learners are defined ontologically. These moves have led to considerable debate within SLA (see Firth & Wagner, 1997, and responses in Modern Language Journal, 81[3], 1997).

For whatever reasons, language teachers have largely been bystanders to both these definitional debates and to the SLA research community. This is perhaps ironic, as their classrooms offer arguably the main sites for an applied science of language learning, and, as we have argued, teachers are principal players in those classrooms. From our point of view, and drawing on research on the development of teaching knowledge (e.g., Freeman, 1996b; Shulman, 1987), a social constructivist view of language learning would seem to interface more directly with the nature of classroom language learning. This leads to our second point. Because the research knowledge per se does not articulate easily and cogently into classroom practice, much current knowledge in SLA may be of limited use and applicability to practicing teachers. We do not intend this statement as a slight to SLA theory and research or as a minimizing of language teaching; rather it is meant as an observation

RECONCEPTUALIZING THE KNOWLEDGE-BASE
about the differences between research and teaching knowledge as these epistemologies are now constructed. This area has been one of enormous discussion and debate (Kennedy, 1997; in TESOL, e.g., Hamp-Lyons, 1998). To address this disconnection, one set of proposals has centered on broadening the current parameters of what counts as research-based knowledge to include a wider variety of paradigms and practices. If successfully accomplished, such inclusion could transform the nature of research knowledge in TESOL by drawing the work of classroom practitioners more fully into the conversations (Freeman, 1998).

This then links to our third and final point. We believe that teachers must understand their own beliefs and knowledge about learning and teaching and be thoroughly aware of the certain impact of such knowledge and beliefs on their classrooms and the language learners in them (Johnson, in press). We believe that teachers must be fully aware of and develop a questioning stance toward the complex social, cultural, and institutional structures that pervade the professional landscapes where they work. And we believe teachers must be able to articulate, to themselves and to others, the highly situated and interpretative processes involved in both language teaching and language learning as they occur in the teachers’ own instructional contexts. This drive to understand oneself and the impact of one’s work on others lies at the core of the activity of teaching; it is the wellspring of reflective practice, classroom inquiry, and ongoing professional development (e.g., Stevick, 1998). We see a risk if, through teacher education, language educators encourage teacher-learners to substitute received knowledge for this fundamental need for cogent analysis and self-understanding within the social, cultural, and political contexts and consequences of language teaching and language learning.

CONCLUSION

The knowledge-base of language teacher education for which we have argued here falls somewhere between the specificity of what Larsen-Freeman (1990) called a theory of second language teaching, which includes knowledge of language learners, learning, and pedagogy, and the breadth of Stern’s (1983) T1 type theory, which positions language teaching within its larger social and disciplinary milieu. We take the establishment of such a knowledge-base as primarily a descriptive enterprise, simultaneously grounded in teachers’ classroom practice, their learning and professional lives, and the sociocultural contexts in which they work. For such a knowledge-base to serve the profession pragmatically, as opposed to politically, we believe it must address teaching as it learned and as it is practiced. Doing so will mean examining the nature
and experiences of language teacher-learners throughout their careers, from the time they first participate in the practices of schooling (see Johnston, 1997). This will mean examining schools and schooling as contexts of that participation both in and over time. Synchronic examination will help explain more about schools as communities of meaning that shape language teaching and learning. Diachronic examination will shed light on the formative nature of schooling and how those meanings develop and are sustained through them. And it will mean understanding the activity of language teaching through the perspectives of the protagonists, to feature centrally their experiences and beliefs about the content (as opposed to subject matter) and the learning-teaching process.

To thus articulate this knowledge-base, we as teacher educators must begin with the activity of language teaching and learning; the school and classroom contexts in which it is practiced; and the experience, knowledge, and beliefs of the teacher as a participant. However, insofar as teaching and what is taught are inseparable, we must also understand what makes our teaching language teaching. This will undoubtedly involve discipline-derived understandings from applied linguistics, SLA, psychology, and curriculum development, among other areas, in a deeper examination of our subject matter—language—as it becomes classroom content. Through grounded examinations of language teaching within the broader framework of teacher-learner, contexts of schools and schooling, and the pedagogical process will emerge a deeper understanding of how language teachers teach and their students learn. These understandings can rightfully then provide the foundation of language teacher education in TESOL.

THE AUTHORS

Donald Freeman is Professor of second language education at the School for International Training, where he directs the Center for Teacher Education, Training, and Research, a research and development unit in language teacher education. His research focuses on teacher learning and change in systemic contexts.

Karen E. Johnson is Associate Professor of speech communication at The Pennsylvania State University, where she teaches in the MATESL program. Her research focuses on teacher learning in language teacher education and the dynamics of communication in L2 classrooms.

REFERENCES


RECONCEPTUALIZING THE KNOWLEDGE-BASE


---

**Erratum**

In Bruce Davidson’s Forum contribution, “A Case for Critical Thinking in the English Language Classroom” (Vol. 32, No. 1, p. 119), the author’s affiliation should have read *Hokusei Gakuen University*.

We regret the error.