

Knowledge Base for Second Language Teaching

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Framing the Issue

A knowledge base is what people know in order to do certain work; in this instance, what a person knows in order to teach learners a language that is new to them. The knowledge base of second language teaching can appear self-evident: an individual has to know the content, *what* the language is, and methodology, *how* to teach it. In this formulation of “what+how,” the knowledge base has two parts: language content (what) and teaching methodology (how). The development of the knowledge base has followed how these two parts, and the relationship between them, are defined and understood. This “what+how” formulation of content+methodology masks more complicated questions, however. For example, we need to define what it means to know a language in order to teach it: *What is content knowledge beyond the ability to use the language?* We need to investigate how that content knowledge develops over time: *Do teachers just acquire content knowledge through experience as language users or do they learn it through professional training?* And we need to understand how methodology functions in teaching: *How do teachers actually use content knowledge of language when they teach?*

Responses to these questions involve two intertwined parts: the answers themselves and the community of people who develop and accept those answers. These two parts make up the knowledge base of a profession. In language teaching, however, the relation between the base itself and its professional community is complicated by the fact that language is the central element in the base. The complication lies in the fact that language is used by many people, and those who teach it are a subset of this wider group. In the case of English, there are an estimated 800 million users of English as a first or additional language, of whom 15 million are English teachers. Both of these groups use English, but their goals differ in important ways. English speakers use the language for their own ends. Teachers of English need that knowledge and they need to know how to teach it to students in their classrooms. These twin goals of knowing the language and

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knowing how to teach it drive the central question of the knowledge base of second language teaching: *What is the connection between knowing English in order to use it and knowing English in order to teach it?*

Making the Case

There have been different ways of answering this central question. Each set of answers marks a generation in the development of the knowledge base. Like any form of evolution, each new generation responds to shortcomings in the present one, gaps that are often triggered by changing requirements in the environment. In the case of language teaching, these have been gaps in how content (what) and methodology (how) have been defined. There have been four generations in the knowledge base of second language teaching. The first generation focused on *disciplinary knowledge*; the second on methodology in *knowledge as pedagogy*; and the third on the particularities of teachers and students in *knowledge in person*. The current generation focuses on purposes in the classroom in *knowledge-for-teaching*.

Each generation has had a driving concern, which can be glossed as:

- *What is the content of language teaching (disciplinary knowledge)?*
- *How is that content “best” taught (knowledge as pedagogy)?*
- *How does who is teaching and learning that content shape what is taught and how (knowledge in person)?*
- *How do purpose and circumstance—why language is being taught—shape teaching (knowledge-for-teaching)?*

Disciplinary Knowledge (the First Generation)

Second language teaching is not an academic discipline like history or biology. Like education, it draws on several disciplines and so is often referred to as a “field of study” (Shulman, 1996). To define this field of study, second language teaching drew on two “parent” disciplines, linguistics and psychology, and also to some degree on sociology, anthropology, and the literatures of the languages being taught. Throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s, these parent disciplines fostered the development of disciplinary subfields that supported second language teaching, principally applied linguistics and second language acquisition, and also psycho- and sociolinguistics, and intercultural communication. Together these disciplinary subfields articulated the *what* of second language teaching as the content of the knowledge base.

The development of applied linguistics redefined language content from prescriptive grammar to a human capacity to generate new language structures. Similarly, second language acquisition, which was derived from first language acquisition in psychology, examined how people learned languages outside, and subsequently inside, classrooms. Each of these subfields developed its own academic and research community, which in turn contributed particular ideas to the knowledge base. For instance, by updating notions of grammar as content and

behaviorist ideas of learning as habit formation, this first generation redefined the content. However, methodology—in the form of grammar translation teaching and audio-lingual teaching—was basically taken as constant. This meant that pedagogical questions of *how* that content was taught were largely unconsidered, which led to the gap in the first generation.

Knowledge as Pedagogy (the Second Generation)

In the 1980s, this gap spurred closer attention to methodology and to *how* the content was taught. Behaviorist learning theories that undergirded audio-lingual and direct method teaching defined the goal of classroom teaching as forming “correct habits” of language use. These two methodologies advocated regular use of the target language in the classroom, which was an improvement over the preceding methodology of grammar-translation teaching. Behaviorist theories, however, left little room for pedagogical creativity or exploring personal teacher–student interactions.

The development of “innovative” methods in the 1980s featured a rich variety of classroom language teaching (Stevick, 1976) and a diversification in the knowledge base. While the first generation had a singular view of language learning as habit formation, the second generation supported pluralistic views. For example, community language learning defined language learning as developing a meaningful identity in the new language, while the natural approach/total physical response defined learning as acquiring generative language patterns, definitions that were mutually incompatible.

This emphasis on different ways of teaching languages recentered the knowledge base on pedagogy. Each methodology had its own community of users. The proponents articulated the methodology’s particular assumptions about learning and teaching as well as its pedagogy. However, different methodologies were often difficult to reconcile pedagogically, which meant that using one methodology appropriately precluded using others. This differentiation of teaching into methodological communities changed the knowledge base. Each methodology defined the content in its own way. The *how* of the methodology defined the *what* of the content, leading to competing claims about what was “effective” in language teaching.

By the end of the 1980s these competing claims had given way to a more unified view of language-teaching methodology. The “communicative revolution” consolidated the pedagogical dimension of the knowledge base around the central notion of language as “communication.” In the context of classroom practices, methodology was defined according to a single overriding goal: communicative language teaching, or CLT (Canale & Swain, 1980). Pedagogical knowledge in CLT focused on how language could be taught so that students could learn to use it to accomplish their own goals outside the classroom. Language as content was defined in terms of what students needed to do, while methodology aimed at simulating those uses in the classroom.

Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, knowledge as pedagogy moved from the rich pluralism of innovative methodologies toward the singular view of CLT.

The variety and individuality of teachers' classroom practices, which had been promoted through innovative teaching, was gradually integrated within this unified view of language as communication. This period advanced proposals for general typologies of language-teaching methods, such as Richards and Rodgers's "approach method, strategy, and technique" (1986) which was derived from Anthony's earlier proposal (1963). The frameworks, which described common features of methodologies, coalesced pedagogy around a common set of ideas and techniques. They also provided a common discourse about classroom language teaching, which unified the knowledge base in defining pedagogically what teachers needed to know.

Knowledge in Person (the Third Generation)

In advancing methodological pluralism, the second generation addressed shortcomings around pedagogy that had troubled the first. Logically there could be multiple ways to teach languages, just as there were multiple ways to learn them. CLT consolidated these methodological choices, which had been the focus of the second generation. CLT also opened up questions that shaped the third generation of the knowledge base. The premise that language teachers could choose how to teach in their classrooms, called "principled decision making" in teaching (Larsen-Freeman, 1986), raised the question of effectiveness among those pedagogical choices and decisions. Effectiveness depended on the teacher, the students, and the specific work of classroom language teaching. This pushed the *how* of methodologies in the second generation toward the particularities of teacher and students: *who* was planning, preparing, and enacting lessons for *whom*.

This focus on the teacher dominated research in teacher learning and general teacher education throughout the 1990s. New ideas, such as pedagogical content knowledge, personal practical knowledge, and situated learning, conceptualized how the individual teacher transformed content through the process of teaching it. Classroom teaching itself went beyond simply implementing methodology to incorporate reflective practice and action research. This new meta-level of activity engaged teachers in thinking about *who* they were teaching and *how*, and how this calculus contributed to learning.

This new thinking suggested a *how* of teaching that was profoundly individual and situated in the particulars of teachers, lessons, and specific students. In this sense, the knowledge base was vested in the person of the teacher as integrating these particularities, a view which had intuitive logic. Teachers were key to what happened in the classroom, therefore their knowledge and how they used it were critical to defining effective teaching. This view was widely supported in educational research by the consensus that the teacher was the central variable influencing what and how students learn. These ideas of knowledge in person expanded the community of the knowledge base to feature teachers themselves. In the third generation, teachers were no longer simply implementers of other people's ideas about what and how to teach; they were now investigators and generators of the knowledge base itself.

In second language teaching, ideas about knowledge in person were caught up in two developments: the recognition of second language teacher education as a subfield of language teaching (Richards & Nunan, 1990) and the reexamination of nativeness as a criterion for content knowledge in language teaching (Braine, 1999). The first half of the 1990s saw several important conferences and publications that established the professional community of second language teacher education as a subfield. Concepts such as teaching as decision-making, pedagogical content knowledge, and personal practical knowledge fostered research and offered invaluable tools to study how language teachers learned and how they taught. Combined with the ideas of action research and reflective practice from general education, this line of thinking repositioned classroom language teachers as full participants in the professional community that was articulating the new knowledge base.

This intense period of documenting the actual work of second language teaching dovetailed with changing ideas about the nature and ownership of English. As a lingua franca used by a majority of second language speakers, English was no longer defined as a culturally uniform linguistic version, with accompanying literatures and geographic cultures, as it had been throughout the first and second knowledge generations. It was linguistically and sociopolitically impossible to define a “native speaker” of English. Mastery depended on how and in which contexts English was being used; a speaker could master the English needed for certain tasks but not others. So language content knowledge had to be understood in terms of the user, goals, and context. In the third generation, it became clear that language content knowledge was not from the academic disciplines; it was knowledge of the people—the teachers and students—using the language.

The third generation’s focus on knowledge in person changed the knowledge base in fundamental ways. Participation was broadened to include the perspectives and contributions of language teachers themselves; the new knowledge community was more diverse and differentiated. This combined with a new understanding of English itself as the central component of the knowledge base. As a lingua franca, English is used by many but owned by none. Singular definitions of language content and of methodology appropriate to teaching that content gave way to a pluralistic understanding of language teaching in context.

Knowledge-for-Teaching (the Current Generation)

The current generation of the knowledge base of second language teaching dates from the 2000s. It reconciles the focus on the individual teacher (*knowledge in person*) with the notions of common teaching practices (*knowledge as pedagogy*). In general teacher education, a resurgence of the role of disciplinary knowledge in teaching has led to the focus in the current generation on how knowledge is being used in the classroom: knowledge-for-teaching. The argument is that knowledge in the classroom is shaped by its purpose, which is teaching. This generation combines ideas from the second generation, that content knowledge is transformed by teaching it, with close attention to the personal particularities of teachers and students in the third generation.

In knowledge-for-teaching, a confluence of factors contributes to shaping content knowledge, *what* is taught, and methodology, *how* it is taught. These factors start with *who* the teacher is and combine with *who* the students are, where the classroom is located socially and geographically, and what the curricular content is. In this fusion, knowledge-for-teaching becomes “glocal.” It blends *global* content and teaching methodologies with *local* enactment through specific lessons with particular students in their classrooms. In second language teaching, content language integrated learning (CLIL) offers a clear example. In CLIL lessons, the teacher has to understand how the curricular content, which is driven by local concerns, shapes the language content to be taught.

In developing this glocal knowledge base for teaching, proponents have focused on defining elements of the base, called “core practices,” and how those elements are used together in teaching. Teacher educators “decompose” or take the classroom knowledge apart to identify its core practices; they then design ways in which new teachers can learn to assemble these core practices to “approximate” the full complexity of teaching (Grossman et al., 2009). In English-for-teaching, for example, training uses teachers’ local classroom experiences to develop classroom English proficiency according to global measures (Freeman, Katz, Garcia Gomez, & Burns, 2015).

The focus on purpose, on *why* knowledge is being used, in the fourth generation brings together the *what* of content knowledge and the *how* of methodology in the first two generations, combined with close attention to *who* in the person of the teacher from the third generation. In second language teaching, the fourth generation points to a glocal knowledge base that reflects the global dimensions of content, what English is, and of pedagogy, in core practices that are shaped by local specifics of identity: who teacher and students are, where they are, and what is being taught.

Pedagogical Implications

There are several layers of implications in how the knowledge base of second language teaching has been developing.

Policy-Making

Although policy-making depends on the knowledge base to set teaching standards and to assess and certify teachers, licensure generally lags behind, often by one or even two generations. Teacher standards that focus exclusively on linguistic knowledge (first generation: *what*) or methodological skills (second generation: *how*) also need to articulate stages through which teachers develop this *what* and *how* and adapt them to the purposes of their teaching. Similarly, teacher assessments that only document language and methodology without reference to how these are used in particular teaching contexts offer crude measures of knowledge that generally do not predict actual classroom teaching. Performance-based assessments, particularly those that include the teacher’s own analysis, usually capture

information that is closer to the actual classroom work. Therefore, to catch up with and fully represent the knowledge base of second language teaching, policy-making needs to focus on actual teaching performance and to include how teachers make sense of what they do.

Teacher Education

There are several pedagogical implications for teacher education. First, the knowledge base is not independent of where it is being taught or learned by teachers. Universities, because they are higher-education institutions, tend to default in favor of the first two generations. Their courses and programs emphasize the *what* of discipline-derived content and the *how* of pedagogy. In contrast, alternative forms of teacher training (certificate courses, in-service development) generally focus on the context in teaching. Context is central in learning to teach. Since new teachers can only learn how *who* they are shapes *what* and *how* they teach through engaging in classroom teaching, practice-based teacher education, such as initial certificate courses, is more likely to address third-generation approaches to the knowledge base.

Research

In the first three generations of the knowledge base, research generally pursued questions and replicated investigative approaches from general education. The advent of the current generation of knowledge-for-teaching brings the opportunity for a unique research paradigm that focuses on language teaching. Knowledge-for-teaching relies heavily on disciplinary definitions of content, which are transmitted through core practices. However, recognizing that language is not an academic discipline (like history), and that it does not have content that is independent of context (like mathematics), language teaching has moved beyond disciplinary definitions. Further, acknowledging that content is in fact defined and shaped by how it is taught, language teaching has moved beyond notions of standardized teaching methodologies.

Classroom Teaching

Since knowledge-for-teaching is enacted, the person of the teacher is central. The knowledge base does not lie outside the teacher; rather, it is embodied in what the teacher does. Who teachers are and how they think about teaching are central to the current knowledge base. Therefore, teachers' abilities to examine how what they do impacts their students' learning is central to achieving classroom goals.

SEE ALSO: Natural Approach; Teacher Assessment and Evaluation; Teacher Identity; Teacher Qualifications, Professionalism, Competencies, and Benchmarks

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