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Epistemological Domain Versus Classroom Practice**

**Epistemological Domain Versus Classroom Practice in the Didactics of English**

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### **Abstract**

In order to analyze the upgrading needs of English teachers of Esmeraldas, a qualitative-quantitative research was carried out with a sample of 14 English teachers, of different schools in the mentioned city, who attended the course The Didactics of English, designed and taught in the PUCE Esmeraldas for two weeks, in the year 2018. The analytical-synthetic and hermeneutic methods were used with the techniques of survey and observation. The results revealed that the teachers were aware of the importance of English language teaching, but they had limited knowledge about theories, techniques, and methods to carry out this important process. However, the results disclosed that some teachers were able to use some methodologies for English language teaching even though they did not have theoretical instruction about that. This meant that some teachers, who did not receive didactic instruction, had experiential knowledge by daily teaching.

**Keywords:** English teaching, Didactics of English, theoretical instruction, experiential knowledge

### **Resumen**

Para analizar las necesidades de mejoramiento de los profesores de inglés de Esmeraldas, se realizó una investigación cualitativa-cuantitativa con una muestra de 14 profesores de inglés, de diferentes escuelas de la ciudad mencionada, que asistieron al curso The Didactics of English, diseñado y enseñado en PUCE Esmeraldas durante dos semanas, en el año 2018. Los métodos analítico-sintético y hermenéutico se utilizaron con las técnicas de encuesta y observación. Los resultados revelaron que los maestros eran conscientes de la importancia de la enseñanza del idioma inglés, pero tenían un conocimiento limitado sobre teorías, técnicas y métodos para llevar a cabo este importante proceso. Sin embargo, los resultados revelaron que algunos maestros pudieron usar algunas metodologías para la enseñanza del idioma inglés a pesar de que no tenían instrucción teórica al respecto. Esto significaba que algunos maestros que no recibían instrucción didáctica tenían conocimiento experimental mediante la enseñanza diaria.

**Palabras clave:** Enseñanza del inglés, Didáctica del inglés, Instrucción Teórica, Conocimiento Experimental.

### **Introduction**

#### **Epistemology**

Elmabruck (2012) states that “Epistemology raises questions pertaining to how we know what we know, and what is the nature of knowledge. In the Hutchinson Encyclopaedia, epistemology is defined as a branch of philosophy that examines the ‘nature of knowledge’ and attempts to determine the limits of human understanding. Central issues include how knowledge is derived, and how it is to be validated and tested” (p.2).

From a philosophically oriented perspective however, epistemology is concerned with the kinds of knowledge of social reality we hope to gain in our quest for truths about the world; it also discusses the various ideological approaches and explanatory strategies we adopt in searching for, and for claiming to know, the substance for this reality (Avis, 2002).

As a branch of philosophy, Epistemology presumably underpins the development of knowledge, individuals' understanding of knowing and human behaviour and practice (Bromme, Kienhues, & Porsch, 2010). As a factor predicting individuals' behaviours, epistemological beliefs refers to "how individuals come to know, the theories and beliefs they have about knowing, and the manner in which such epistemological premises are part of and an influence on cognitive process of thinking and reasoning beliefs about the processes of knowing and the nature of knowledge ((Hofer & Pintrich, 1997, p.435).

Epistemological beliefs, (EBs) then, trickle down into the teaching profession and affects pedagogy, teachers' behaviour, interactions with students, regulations and students' processing, learning strategies, problem solving and academic performance (Chan, 2010).

### **The teachers' epistemology of practice**

Referring to professional language teacher education, Wallace (1991) mentions to two types of trainee knowledge: Received knowledge and the knowledge that trainees learn in practice, or knowledge-in-action.

The 'received knowledge' or theoretical knowledge, is the one which trainee 'receive' almost without proof or questioning as commonly accepted truths. This knowledge includes language teaching terminology and connected concepts, theories and approaches to language teaching, related research findings, prerequisite language teaching skills such as reasonable fluency, intonation, pronunciation, the ability to read phonetic transcription and so on. (p.14-15)

The 'knowledge-in-action' is what trainees learn through practical activities, when they apply their received knowledge in classroom situations and then make a reflection on their experience. It may also occur when they observe other experienced teachers. Then teachers and trainee teachers continue to 'reflect' upon their practice in order to improve and continually develop their teaching skills. 'Experiential knowledge' is then the term used for knowledge attained through this cyclic process of practice and reflection: 'reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action' (Schön, 1983).

### **The process of reflective practice**

Wallace (1991) designs a model showing the developmental process of teachers' knowledge, in which he makes emphasis on the fact that teachers seldom get into professional training with blank minds, because they have been exposed to the practice of their profession. So this author emphasises on critical thinking in his model, outstanding the need teachers have to reflect on their received knowledge and experiential knowledge.

The diagram for the 'Reflective practice model' has been reproduced with some adjustments from Wallace (1991) for clarification purposes.

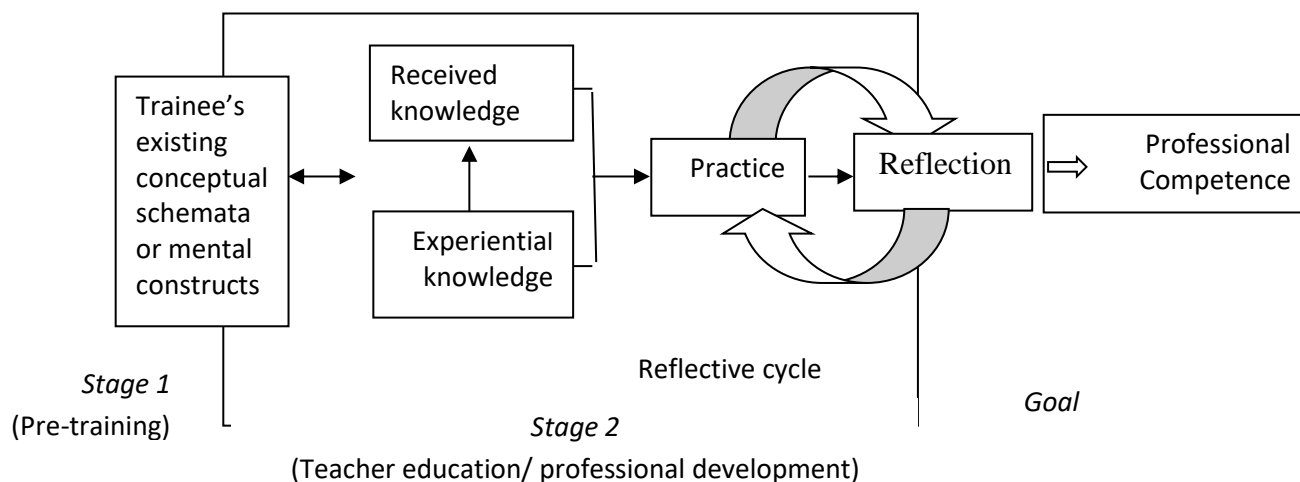


Figure 1: Reflective practice model

### The Sociocultural Approach to Language Teaching

Received knowledge or Experiential knowledge are developed by teachers in their social interaction in the language classroom. Both types of knowledge become important mediators for teaching.

Lantolf (2000), quoting Vygotsky states:

The most fundamental concept of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated. In opposition to the orthodox view of the mind, Vygotsky argued that just as humans do not act directly on the physical world but rely, instead, on tools and labor activity, which allows us to change the world, and with it, the circumstances under which we live in the world, we also use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate our relationship with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of these relationships (p. 1).

In this theory, different factors of how society plays a role in the development of individuals are found. It can be said that this theory emphasizes the interaction between the progress of people and the culture in which they exist. It implies that human learning is in great measure a social process.

### The Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky (1978) states that the Zone of Proximal Development is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). This adult guidance, which may be given by the English teacher, is crucial for students' English language communicative competence.

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### Method

A descriptive qualitative and quantitative investigation was carried out with 14 English teachers who attended the course English Didactics, in the Pontifical Catholic University of Ecuador Esmeraldas Campus, in the academic year 2018.

The methods used were analysis and synthesis, which were very important to analyse the main theories and synthesise the most important information. The method of hermeneutics was also used to interpret the information obtained.

The techniques of observation and survey were used, with a guide and a questionnaire with open and close questions as instruments to gather the information.

The data were processed manually and taken to figures using the Microsoft Excel programme.

### Results

In relation to the type of knowledge teachers use in class (Figure 1), only the 60% of teachers under the training programme had previous knowledge about theories of language teaching, such as The Socio-Cultural Approach to Language Teaching and Methodological Approaches to language Teaching. The 40 % showed that they only had knowledge about language teaching by classroom practice, what means experiential knowledge.

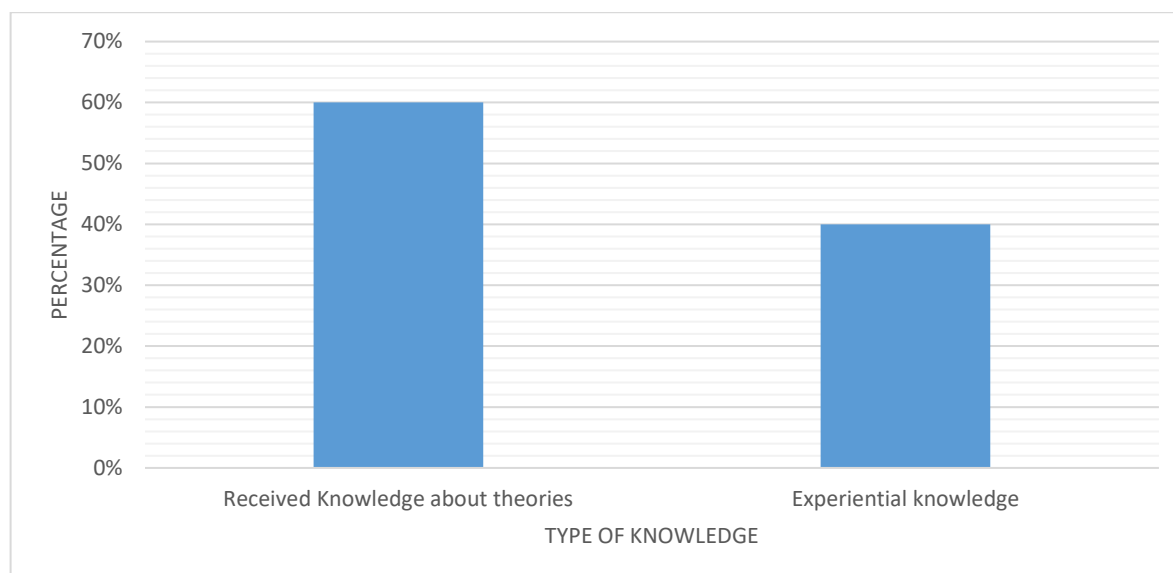


Figure 1. Comparison of types of knowledge

The 40 % of teachers who only had experiential knowledge stated that they had been teaching English in different school levels in Esmeraldas for more than 6 years.

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When analysing the teaching methods that were used by the teachers who did not receive knowledge (Figure 2), the results revealed that they used the most useful ones, being The Total Physical Response and the Communicative Approach to language teaching the more highly used. It is important to make emphasis on the fact that to identify the methods used, the investigator did not mention the name of the method, but the characteristics of it.

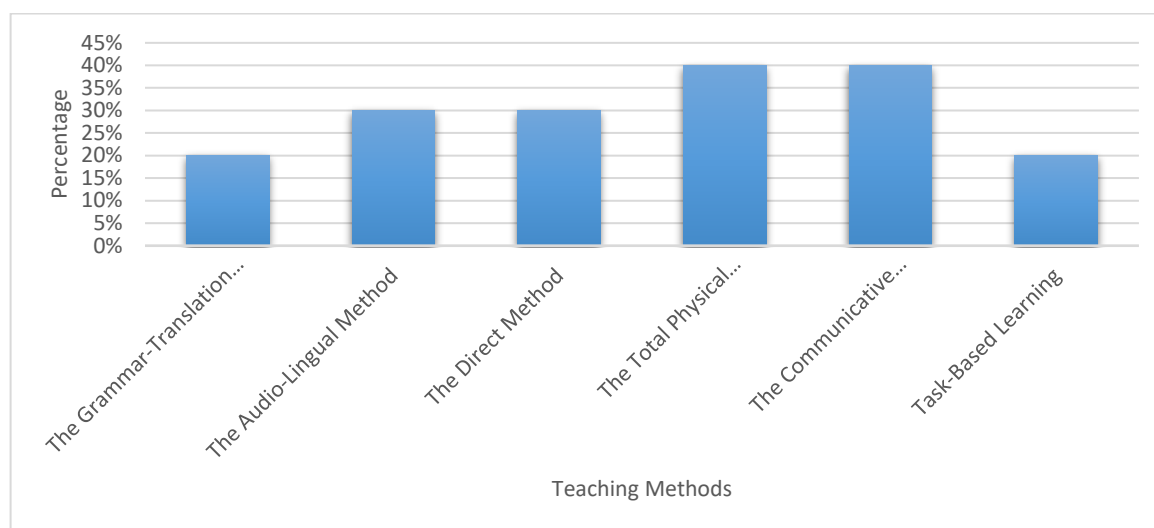


Figure 2. Teaching methods used by teachers without received knowledge

According to the use of the teaching methods either the teachers with received knowledge or teachers without received knowledge (Figure 3), used them in class, but the teachers from the first group made a wider use of them. Most of the teachers in both groups stated that they usually use a mixture of all methods, what means an eclecticism in teaching methodology.

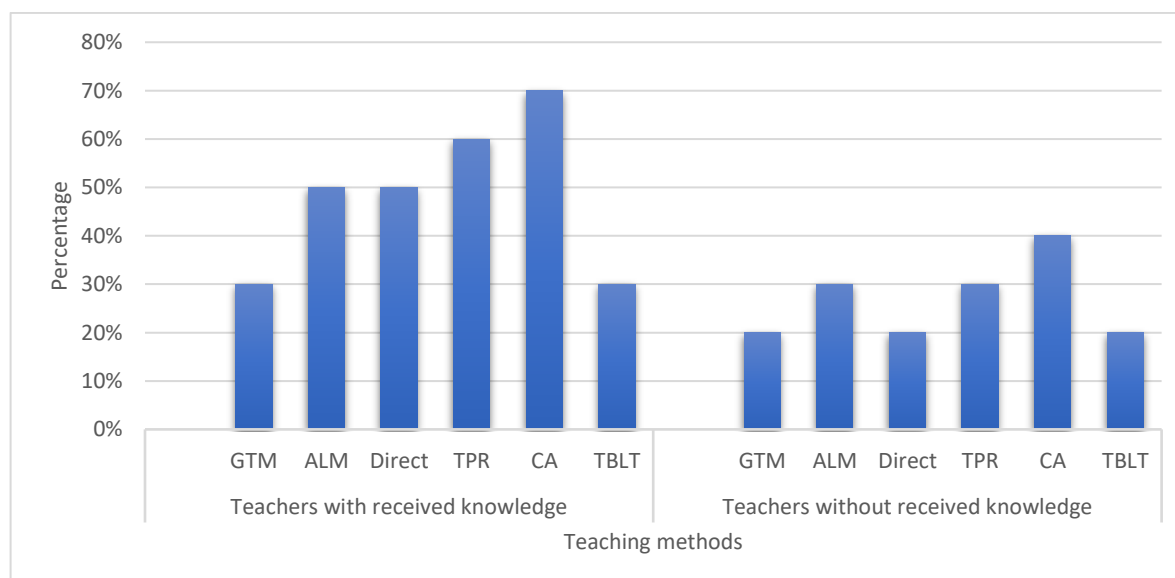


Figure 4. Teaching methods used by the two groups

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During the upgrading course taught, teachers were asked to demonstrate the use of practical teaching activities. It was observed how all of them organized the students in pairs or groups for the activities; but some of them stated that they rarely did that because they teach English in very large classes, of 32 students or more. Therefore, in this case, they used repetitions, which is a technique of the Audio-Lingual method, and grammatical explanations, which has to do with the Grammar Translation Method.

The teachers without received knowledge showed lack of knowledge of the theory of the Socio-Cultural Approach to Language Teaching, as well as of the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development. They did not know the fact that the techniques and materials for language teaching, as well as the book, the teacher and some students, come to be mediators for the students to go from what they can do by themselves to the zone of potential development, crossing the Zone of Proximal Development, as it is stated by Vygotsky in his theory, with the help of mediators. However, they stated that they knew how important materials and techniques for language teaching are by their daily practice in class, what means Experiential knowledge about the use of this theory.

**Discussion**

Despite of not having received knowledge about language teaching, in the activities developed in the course, the 40 % of teachers were able to organize pair work and group work activities because they considered that in this way language learning was better. They did not know by theory that language is learnt first in the interpsychological sphere, in social interaction, and then in the intrapsychological one, in the mind of the speaker, as Vygotsky pointed out in his Socio-Cultural theory, but they knew the role of social interaction by teaching practice.

The teachers in the group who did not have received knowledge used the principal language teaching methods. Even though they did not have a complete theoretical instruction about them, they had an experiential knowledge acquired by daily practice in the teaching-learning process.

The results of this investigation coincide with the ones found by Wallace (1991) and (Schön, 1983) concerning the importance of practice and reflection for improving professional development, thus making the English language Teaching-Learning process better.

**Conclusions**

When teachers do not have received knowledge for language teaching, they could be benefitted by classroom practice and reflection, what gives them an experiential knowledge.

With experiential knowledge, teachers may make critical reflections about the teaching learning process and get a knowledge-in-action based on constant reflexion. This may improve their teaching methodology and develop their professional competence.

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