



ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at <http://www.journalcra.com>

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL
OF CURRENT RESEARCH

International Journal of Current Research
Vol. 11, Issue, 01, pp.330-333, January, 2019

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.33791.01.2019>

RESEARCH ARTICLE

KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS USED BY NICARAGUAN ENGLISH TEACHERS IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 20th October, 2018

Received in revised form

16th November, 2018

Accepted 14th December, 2018

Key Words:

Nicaraguan English Teachers' Knowledge Base, English Teaching Skills, EFL Teachers.

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Citation: Angel M. Dávila and Erika V. Espinoza. "Knowledge and skills used by Nicaraguan English teachers in the EFL classroom" *International Journal of Current Research*. 10. (12). 76770-76772

ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study investigated the types of knowledge and skills that 10 Nicaraguan English teachers applied in the EFL classroom. Data were gathered using one-shot semi-structured interviews. Findings revealed English teachers' knowledge and skills were contextualized and changed over time due to students, the teaching milieu, the curriculum, learning goals, and so forth. The results showed that 100% of participants agreed that English teachers should possess native or native-like English proficiency, content knowledge, knowledge of learners, assessment knowledge, teaching skills, communication skills, lesson planning skills, material development skills, knowledge to evaluate learning materials, and academic writing skills. Another interesting finding was that 50% of participants, non-native English speakers, believed that a powerful tool that allowed them to be better teachers was their own experience as language learners. This research suggests that pre-service teachers and novice teachers have to learn to learn and get used to adapting and transforming their knowledge based on where they get to teach, what they get to teach, and to whom they get to teach. Also, universities should offer professional development opportunities for in-service teachers taking into account findings of current research to further develop their knowledge to provide high-quality teaching and learning processes.

INTRODUCTION

This study falls into the field of EFL teacher education. Specifically, it centers on understanding the knowledge and skills English teachers used in the EFL classroom. As knowledge base is concerned, in general education, Shulman (1987) was one of the first proponents to present a knowledge base framework for teachers. He said that teachers and educators should possess knowledge of educational contexts, learners, educational ends, general pedagogy, curriculum, subject knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. As for EFL and ESL teacher education, researchers and educators have said that language teachers must have at least six types of knowledge, for instance, content knowledge (Day, 1993; Moradkhani, Akbari, Ghafar Samar, and Kiany, 2013; Richards, 1998), Theories of Teaching (Day, 1993; Lafayette, 1993; Moradkhani *et al.*, 2013; Richards, 1998), Language Proficiency (Lafayette, 1993; Moradkhani *et al.*, 2013; Richards, 1998), Contextual Knowledge (Freeman and Johnson, 1998; Lafayette, 1993; Moradkhani *et al.*, 2013; Richards, 1998), Pedagogical Knowledge (Day, 1993; Freeman and Johnson, 1998; Moradkhani *et al.*, 2013; Richards, 1998), Teaching Skills (Day, 1993; Freeman and Johnson, 1998; Lafayette, 1993;

Moradkhani *et al.*, 2013; Richards, 1998), and communication skills (Richards, 1998). As can be seen, language teachers' knowledge has been studied a lot. However, since no specific studies were found about this topic in the existing body of research in the country where this study took place, we believed that it was still necessary to conduct research to explore the professional knowledge of EFL teachers. Consequently, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological investigation was to understand and describe the lived experiences of ten Nicaraguan EFL teachers regarding their knowledge and skills, mostly, the knowledge and skills that they used more often in the EFL classroom. The research problem was informed through three research questions, namely, 1) what types of knowledge and skills do Nicaraguan EFL teachers possess? 2) How do they build their knowledge and skills? and 3) What types of knowledge and skills do they frequently use in the EFL classroom? The literature reviewed about language teachers' knowledge was utilized as a conceptual framework to inform this work of inquiry. In the next section, we explain the methodology followed to carry out this study.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Context: We carried out this phenomenological study in a language center at a private university in Nicaragua. We chose this research site purposefully. According to Creswell (2013, 2014), the advantage of purposefully chosen research sites is that meaningful data can be collected to inform the proposed research problem and questions. We decided to conduct this research in this target university because it had one of the top English programs in the country.

Research Participants: According to Hycner (1985), in phenomenology the phenomenon under investigation guides the study. That is why to carry out this qualitative phenomenological investigation, we used a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2013, 2014) to select our sample. In total, ten English instructors participated in this research, five native speakers and five non-native speakers. We first asked for permission to collect data in the chosen university, and then we recruited participants via consent forms. They were informed about the purpose of our study and that they could withdraw at any time if they wished to do so. None of the ten participants recruited withdrew from the research.

Research Design: This study followed a qualitative phenomenological research design. According to Moustakas (1994) and Van Manen (1990), the purpose of phenomenology is to examine lived experiences about the phenomenon under investigation. That is why we chose this research approach because the purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon defined here as the lived experiences of ten English teachers regarding the knowledge and skills they possessed as EFL teachers; most importantly, the knowledge and skills that they frequently used in the EFL classroom. To gather and analyze data, we used the Interactive Model of Qualitative Data Analysis (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, 2014), which consists of four steps: 1) data collection, 2) data condensation, 3) data display, and 4) conclusions drawing/verification. Three research questions were investigated, specifically, 1) what types of knowledge and skills do Nicaraguan EFL teachers possess? 2) How do they build their knowledge and skills? and 3) What types of knowledge and skills do they frequently use in the EFL classroom?

Data Collection Instrument: We used a one-shot semi-structured interview protocol. To Lichtman (2013), semi-structured interviews allow researchers not to improvise regarding the questions to be asked to inform the research questions. Additionally, it gives them room for probing if needed. The interview protocol had ten total items, five to inform each research question. The major results are presented and discussed in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to research the lived experiences of ten English teachers about the knowledge and skills they possessed as EFL teachers; also, it sought to find out which of those knowledge and skills they used more in the EFL classroom.

Nicaraguan EFL Teachers' Knowledge and Skills: Findings showed that Nicaraguan EFL teachers possessed fifteen types of knowledge and fifteen kinds of skills, as shown below.

Knowledge

- Native or native-like English proficiency
- Academic writing knowledge
- Didactic knowledge
- Content knowledge
- Assessment knowledge
- Knowledge of learners
- Knowledge to evaluate learning materials
- Course and material development Knowledge
- Knowledge of language acquisition related disciplines
- Pedagogical knowledge
- Educational technology Knowledge
- Knowledge of second language learning and teaching research
- Research publication knowledge
- Knowledge of the national education system
- Knowledge about professional development

Skills

- Native or native-like English listening proficiency
- Native or native-like English speaking proficiency
- Well-educated academic writing skills
- Well-educated academic reading skills
- Communication skills
- Teaching skills
- Lesson planning skills
- Classroom management skills
- Course and material development skills
- Learning material evaluation skills
- Technology related skills
- Skills to adapt to different learning milieus
- Teamwork skills
- Skills to work independently
- Intellectual humility

Sources of knowledge of Nicaraguan EFL teachers: When participants were asked how they constructed their professional knowledge, they mentioned that their knowledge and skills came from different sources. These sources were, for instance, the coursework taken in their teacher education programs, their teaching practicum, published research, vicarious learning from their professors and coworkers, their EFL teaching experiences in different learning milieus such as elementary school, high school, university level, and in the target language center where they taught both general communicative English and academic English to pre-university students. This is supported by the following direct quote from the data: Well, I've developed my knowledge in different ways, like, in my bachelor's degree, seeing my teachers teaching, how other teachers teach, and, of course, from my almost ten years of teaching in primary schools, in high schools, and here in this university. And from reading, you know, books, pedagogical magazines, articles, and so on. These findings were supported by existing research as it was found that language teachers build their knowledge base from different sources such as their bachelors' degree, observing their professors teaching, published research, and from teaching (Arıoğul, 2007; Macías, 2013; Moradkhani *et al.*, 2013; Poynor, 2005; Richards, 1998; Tsui, 2003). Additionally, the five non-native English teachers said that a

key source that had helped them shape their EFL teaching knowledge and skills was their own experiences as English learners. They stated that sharing their students' native language and having experienced the process of learning English allowed them better understand the learning difficulties their students faced. Consequently, that knowledge permitted them to create lessons and independent study plans to make their students' English acquisition process more effective. Support to these findings can be appreciated in the following direct excerpt from the data, "... ah, something else that has helped me a lot to make my students learn is because I speak Spanish; I'm from here; and I understand how they feel, I mean, I learned English. And I know how English and Spanish work". Existing research agreed with these findings as it was said that prior language learning experiences allow teachers to be more effective in the classroom (Faez, 2011; Lima, 2012; Macías, 2013). Pursuing this further, the five native English speaker instructors said that not being able to speak Spanish, their students L1, sometimes prevented their teaching from being effective, mainly, when teaching beginning students or when teaching academic writing, for instance, they did not know how to explain students that some language structures from Spanish cannot be transferred directly to English.

Furthermore, the results demonstrated that all participants concurred in that their professional knowledge was not static. It changed based on the characteristics of the teaching environments where they taught, the characteristics of learners, the curriculum, goals of the programs, learning material availability, their teaching experiences, the complexity of the subjects they taught, and the general education ends established in the national education system. That is the use of those fifteen kinds of knowledge found in this study were implemented and adapted to meet the expected learning objectives established by the target institution as well as objectives implied in the scenarios in which students were expected to use the English language such as study and work. These results were supported by the quotation shown next:

...yes, well, English teachers need to know about a lot of things, like, your English has to be really good; the more native you are in all skills, the better; knowing how to write academic essays and papers is important; good accent and pronunciation; need good teaching skills. But, you know, sometimes it's easier to teach, but sometimes you need to learn new things. I'm always learning to teach.

These results were supported by existing research as it was said that teaching is a permanent learning process for teachers because it requires constant reasoning about what works and what does not work in the EFL classroom (Macías, 2013; Moradkhani et al., 2013). It means that in this process teachers' repertoire of knowledge and skills has to be used and adapted as teaching and learning are planned and delivered.

Knowledge and Skills Frequently Used in the EFL Classroom: This study found that the target participants acknowledged that even though all types of knowledge and skills mentioned before were important to be an English teacher, there were some kinds of knowledge and skills they applied more frequently in the EFL classroom. For example, they said that all English teachers must possess and demonstrate the following skills: native or native-like English proficiency in all four skills; native or native-like

pronunciation and intelligible accent; good communication skills; academic writing and reading experience; course and learning material development; lesson planning skills; understanding the use of English related disciplines such as morphology, phonology, semantics, and pragmatics to teach English; a high command of content knowledge; language learning oriented assessment knowledge, and good teaching skills. Published research have shown similar findings about the types of knowledge and skills that language teachers must have (Day, 1993; Freeman and Johnson, 1998; Macías, 2013; Moradkhani et al., 2013; Richards, 1998).

Conclusion

This study concluded that the knowledge and skills that Nicaraguan English teachers used in the EFL classroom changed over time, and it was contextualized to the teaching settings in which they taught. It was also found that the main commonplaces that determined how their professional knowledge should be adapted and transformed were, for example, learners, the teaching environment, the curriculum, learning goals, their teaching experiences, courses they taught, and learning materials availability. Additionally, this research concluded that knowledge and skills such as native or native-like English proficiency, content knowledge, knowledge of learners, teaching skills, communication skills, lesson planning skills, course and material development skills, and knowledge to evaluate learning materials were vital for EFL teachers. Lastly, it was found that one of the types of teaching experiences that non-native EFL teachers valued a lot was their own experiences as English learners. However, they highlighted that this knowledge was more effective and meaningful only if their students shared their same first language.

In the same line of thought, native English speaker teachers recognized that not speaking their students' L1 intervened sometimes with the effectiveness of their teaching, mainly when teaching beginning EFL learners. This study has some pedagogical implications. For instance, Nicaraguan universities need to create professional development opportunities in their language centers or English departments for their in-service teachers. Furthermore, universities preparing language teachers should include in their curricula courses to develop those knowledge and skills found in this studies like this one as well as coursework to prepare pre-service teachers with critical thinking skills, so they can learn to adapt to different teaching scenarios. Finally, if possible, EFL departments should create Spanish courses for native speakers of English, so they can acquire that language, which may benefit them in two ways: they would experience learning a second language, and they might use Spanish as a teaching tool when teaching beginning students in EFL contexts. Future research about this topic should focus on more rigorous research designs, for example, experimental quantitative studies to examine EFL teachers' knowledge from other perspectives.

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