The Role of EFL/ESL Teachers’ Idiosyncratic Knowledge Base in Their Professional Development in the Postmethod Premise

Mossa. Sohana Khatun
Northern University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

The present paper examines an EFL/ESL teacher’s potential in generating and developing his/her own knowledge base and theories of teaching and learning independent of the knowledge base manufactured by the “experts” in those fields. It also makes an effort to pave the way for them to go beyond the edge and advance towards an innovation that deviates from simple, certain, controlled and established ways of teaching and conducting researches towards complex, uncertain and less-controlled ones. It scrutinizes how instead of simply testing, “idealizing and reifying” the traditional, already established literature, an EFL/ESL teacher takes it as a point of departure in order to develop their own framework based on their practical experiences. The readymade professional theories and pedagogies are mostly generalizations—sometimes overgeneralizations—of the patrons of certain ideology to privilege a certain political or cultural group to place it over others. This usually sets barrier to an individual teacher’s professional development since they are often set back from “theorizing what they practice and practice what they theorize” denying his/her idiosyncratic knowledge base that is convincingly capable of helping him/her grow professionally. It also leads to denying the teachers’ and learners’ socio-politico-cultural faiths that mold up a person as a whole. However, this paper also recognizes the traditional knowledge base as the ground for individual teachers to leap off and advance towards innovation.

Keywords: idiosyncratic knowledge base, postmethod, professional development

Introduction

Obtaining relevant higher degrees certainly is the initial stride, but there are numerous other channels through which a language teacher can develop or grow professionally. Some of them are self directed while some others are external. Conducting researches, keeping journals, collaborating with peers, attending training sessions, workshops, seminars, conferences and symposiums, reading latest books and journals, forming groups and forums are some of the measures a language teacher can take for professional development. However, none of them can be an effective venture towards professional growth unless the teachers actively participate in all or any of the above measures. That said, to play an active and interactive role, it is mandatory that the teachers possess a certain level of knowledge of teaching and learning, especially when it comes to formulating one’s own theories, strategies, pedagogies and philosophies.

The purpose of the present study is to scrutinize the role of ESL/EFL teacher’s idiosyncratic knowledge base in their professional development in relation to the postmethod era. It contends that expert and
experienced teachers must possess “a rich and elaborate knowledge base” and the “ability to integrate and use” that knowledge to grow professionally and make teaching an effective enterprise. It examines the different types and sources of teacher knowledge base, and also illuminates on the ways it develops. Considering the differences between methods and postmethod pedagogy, it sees the postmethod as the platform where the views regarding the importance of EFL/ESL teachers’ idiosyncratic knowledge base can be reconceptualized. Keeping the teachers at the focal point, it takes into account 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. (Freeman & Johnson, 1998, p. 397).

The study is based on the belief that teachers’ existing knowledge base and their understanding about the learners and their socio-cultural contexts, substantiated by practical classroom experiences, have convincing and plausible potential to provide sustainable frameworks for pedagogies for teaching and learning EFL/ESL. These pedagogies should flow “from the understandings and knowledge in the minds of teachers by personalizing and individualizing their teaching practices” (Carrington, Deppler, & Moss, 2010, p. 1). The whole process is assumed to turn them into experienced teachers at the end of the day.

Numerous definitions of professional development can be found that more or less see it as an ongoing learning process in which teachers primarily aim at how to teach in accordance with the expectations and needs of the students (Hismanoglu, 2010, p. 990). It implies that the learners are at the centre of any language program which inevitably ascribes on the teachers an autonomous role since it is the teachers who understand the expectations and needs of the students best. It dismantles the educator/teacher hierarchy and put them in a privileged position so that instead of being undiscerning consumers of theories and principles devised by experts, EFL/ESL teachers can formulate their own built upon their idiosyncratic practical knowledge base that will ultimately result in their professional development. This is remarkably feasible in the Postmethod era as it equips teachers with necessary tools and frameworks to devise individual strategies by assigning an autonomous role of decision makers to them (Kumaravadivelu, 2017, 1st IML International Conference).

Futility of Experts-created Knowledge Base or Methods

Given that there are certain shortcoming in the traditional methods and methodology, teachers often deviate or want to deviate from those and feel the need to formulate their own. The conventional methods give rise to controversy because:

Methods are Mostly Generalizations

The most sustaining allegation against the conventional methods is that they over generalize teaching and learning contexts. Tudor (2003) maintains that methods often overlook the facts that learners are not “simply” learners any more than teachers are “simply” teachers; teaching contexts, too, differ from one another in a significant number of ways (p. 3). He continues that even if the context is the same, “it cannot be assumed that all participants will share the same perceptions and goal structures, particularly during periods of change when social groupings and ideologies are in a state of flux” (Tudor, 2003, p. 7). Kumaravadivelu (2003) finds similarities between methods and technicist approach in that they both promote “a rigid role relationship between theorists and teachers” (p. 9). The territory of formulating theories and methods is considered a very sophisticated one treaded only by the recognized theorists in the respective field while teachers are seen as the ‘consumers’ of those theories who try and test them through practical application.
...theorists conceive and construct knowledge, teachers understand and implement knowledge. Creation of new knowledge or a new theory is not the domain of teachers; their task is to execute what is prescribed for them. (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 9)

Methods seem to ignore that every teaching and learning situation is unique. They also fail to recognize the numerous unpredictable variables of different situational needs and demands. According to Kumaravadivelu (2003), there is not a single idealized method that can predict all the variables even in a single teaching or learning situation. He sees methods as “predominantly top-down exercise” where “the conception and construction … have been largely guided by a one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter approach that assumes a common clientele with common goals” (p. 28). It is the teachers, not the theorists, who come into contact with the real teaching and learning situations every single day. The teachers understand very well that the task of teaching is dynamic which cannot be entertained by any static constant performers like methods.

Teachers know that their task is hardly outright. They recognize that the capacity to feel and interact with the fluctuations of each class is the key to effective teaching. It is perhaps for this reason that practising teachers sometimes express certain skepticism about the confident generalizations put forward in the theoretical corpus. They know that each class is unique and that the teacher must learn to respond to this uniqueness, whether it corresponds to an ideal picture of what a classroom should be or not (Tudor, 2003, p. 8).

Clarke (1994) explains it further where methods are condemned to “ignore institutional, political, contextual and social restrictions teachers face” (as cited in Can, n.d., para. 6). His observation falls in line with McMorrow (2007) who considers methods as “unrealistic” as they “are drawn from one set of circumstances and thus, cannot fit perfectly in different situations” (as cited in Can, n.d., para. 6).

Methods Propagate Certain Ideologies

Along with overgeneralization, methods are also condemned for patronizing certain ideologies that privilege one social, political or cultural group over the others. Kumaravadivelu (2003) points out that the producer/consumer relation between the theorizers and the teachers “is said to have resulted in the creation of a privileged class of theorists and an underprivileged class of practitioners” (p. 18). While elaborating the technicist view, he warns that:

The primacy of empirical verification and content knowledge associated with the technicist view of teaching overwhelmingly privileges one group of participants in the educational chain—professional experts! They are the ones who create and contribute to the professional knowledge base that constitutes the cornerstone of teacher education programs. (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 8)

In his presentation of the issue of conventional methods, he has examined them from several dimensions and realizes that in its scholastic dimension, “methods ignore local knowledge and emphasizes Western knowledge” while in its cultural dimension, methods consider language teaching as culture teaching emphasizing “monoculturalism”, which create employment opportunities worldwide for native speakers of English making them privileged (as cited in Can, n.d., para. 8).

In a similar manner, Shohamy (2006) unmasks the hidden agenda of conventional methods which is completely unknown to the public. Hidden agenda refers to the:

...way that language, with its open, dynamic and fluid nature, is manipulated for political and ideological agendas, turning it into a closed, fixed, stagnated, pure, hegemonic, standard and oppressive system. This phenomenon is not known to the public ... The term ... also refers to affecting and perpetuating language politics through a variety of mechanisms. (as cited in Kilickaya, 2007, p. 259)
Shohamy also warns against the value-ridden instrumental nature of methods that tinker with ideological assumptions about social relations and cultural values (as cited in Kilickaya, 2007, p. 262).

**Teachers Have No Voice or Choice**

Savignon (2007) advocates for the inclusion of local classroom teachers in curricular innovation which in turn would pave a way of recognizing teachers’ ability to contribute to the whole act of theory formulation (p. 211). However, we find a different picture here. In the process of any theory formulation, teachers’ choice and voice are often absent. Language “teachers don’t seem to have any voice in what to teach and how to teach it” (Fat’hi and Behzadpur, 2011, p. 241). Unlike the “political and educational authorities, the management or administration of teaching institutions, clients, sponsors, parents, and many others” who are involved in the process, the teachers live through practical classroom experiences, and “are well aware of the complexity of their task”. However, “it is often within frameworks set up by these actors that teachers have to live out their tasks in the classroom” (Tudor, 2003, p. 2). Methods prescribed by the experts de-skill a teacher by limiting the scope of exploiting their own practical experiences. Referring to Pennycook (1989), Tasnimi (2014) warns against the ideological nature of methods which pamper the economically and culturally powerful institutions of the society that eventually strips teachers off their role as actual teachers and allow the intrusion of “institutional control over classroom practice.” (para. 6). In a similar tone, Kumaravadivelu (2003) cites Kinkeloe (1993) who recognizes that “the act of selecting problems for teachers to research is an ideological act, an act that trivialized the role of the teacher” (p. 19).

While discussing methods in terms of teacher training programmes, Tasnimi (2014) echoes Kumaravadivelu in that methods involve a “top-down approach in which the best way to teach is suggested, teaching behaviors are modeled, and prospective teachers’ mastery of discrete pedagogic behaviors is evaluated” (para. 24). He quotes Kumaravadivelu in this regard where he calls this position a hopeless one and asserts that student teachers should not be seen as clean slates:

Prospective teachers embarking on formal teacher education programs bring with them their notion of what constitutes good teaching and what does not, largely based on their prior educational experience as learners and in some cases, as teachers. Their minds are anything but atheoretical clean slates. (as cited in Can, n.d., para. 24)

In order to establish an equilibrium between the educators and student teachers, the ‘voices and visions’ of the teachers are pivotal in any such program which can be achieved through dialogue and interaction between the two groups. “In other words, student teachers’ value, beliefs and knowledge should be considered as an integral part of the learning process” (as cited in Can, n.d., para. 25). Clarke (1994) explains why this is not mostly the case suggesting that “theorists are rarely language teachers themselves leading to the impression that teachers are less expert than theorists” (as cited in Can, n.d., para. 7). Such discrepancy leads to ignoring the teachers’ already existing knowledge base and creating a barrier against professional growth and change.

**Emergence of Postmethod**

To put an end to the search for a “one-size-fits-all” method, post-method appeared in the scene. In fact, it emerged as a reaction against the steadfast rigorous approach of methods with the hope that it would liberate teachers from the ‘grip’ of methods. Unlike the top-down process of methods, postmethod prescribes bottom-up approach so as to recognize teachers’ contribution in the field of language teaching, and thus “refigure the relationship between the theorizer and the practitioner of language teaching” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 33). As
opposed to the “professional theories of pedagogy” generated by the theorists, it entitles the teachers-practitioners to constructing “location-specific, classroom-oriented innovative strategies” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 33). In order to fit the ever-changing needs and demands of the global learners, innovation is inevitable. The static and rigorously fixed nature of methods scarcely leaves any room for innovation. It is postmethod that adjusts itself with changes and provides scope for necessary innovations. Freeman (1991) identifies in methods the tendency of ignoring teachers’ already existing knowledge and experience gained from their student-lives that are acknowledged by the postmethod. It deviates from the methods in that it makes way towards teacher autonomy:

...postmethod condition, however, recognizes the teachers’ potential to know not only how to teach but also how to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula, and textbooks. It also promotes the ability of teachers to know how to develop a critical approach in order to self-observe, self-analyze, and self-evaluate their own teaching practice with a view to effecting desired changes. (as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 33-34)

Kumaravadivelu’s (1994) principled pragmatism highlights yet another dimension of postmethod where the focus is shifted to actual immediate activity of teaching. It attempts at examining the teachers’ capability of shaping and reshaping classroom learning through “self-observation, self-analysis, and self-evaluation” (p. 1). Above all, postmethod do not consider teachers as passive consumers of the methods. Unlike controlled perimeter set by methods, postmethod gives teachers the freedom to utilize their critical faculties. Similarly, Akbari (2005) asserts that:

The postmethod condition is a more democratic approach to language teaching profession since it assigns a voice to practitioners and respects the type of knowledge they possess. In addition, it is a liberatory move which gives teachers more autonomy and confidence in the decisions they make in their classes. (as cited in Fat’hi & Behzadpur, 2011, p. 242)

**Scrubinizing Teachers’ Potential in Developing Own Language Theories**

No mind is blank. It is quite impossible for a teacher to teach without having some kind of belief about and philosophy of teaching. However, in most cases they are either oblivious of this fact or held back from admitting or recognizing it (Khatun, 2010, p. 157). Teachers gather knowledge from a number of reliable sources that make them adequately capable of designing idiosyncratic theories of teaching and learning about every discipline. There is a distinct discrepancy between the two facts that on the one hand, teachers are encouraged to conduct researches while on the other, they are never given the authority to employ their research findings in formulating new individual theories, or even experimenting the freshly manufactured theories. In fact, a language teacher gathers diverse knowledge prior to and throughout their teaching career that equip them with sufficient expertise to perform the job of a theorist. Kumaravadivelu (2003) affirms that language teachers face “challenges and opportunities for a continual quest for subjectivity and self-identity” more than those of any other disciplines (p. 36). They know how to confront several challenges such as improving their language proficiency, teaching in diverse contexts, implementing classroom-based research, having access to professional development and networking (Moncada & Ortiz, 2000, p. 88). Fandiño (2013) presumes that such challenges ask them to be able to integrate knowledge about language, pedagogical practices, learning theories, and educational contexts. (p. 83). Echoing Kelly (1955), Williams and Burden (1997) refer to this personal “construct” as the foundation on which teachers “make their own sense of, and have understandings of, people and events” (as cited in Gnawali, 2008, pp. 69-70). This sense and
understanding function as the incentive to make them act as decision-makers. If transformation is to take place, teachers are required to readjust their knowledge base which will help tune in the old perceptions with the recent ones and to forge a ground to be shared by other practitioners.

**Types of Teacher Knowledge**

Before further clarification, we need to obtain some general idea about the true nature of teacher knowledge. Faez (2011) defines teachers’ knowledge base in ESL as “the expertise, understanding, awareness, knowledge, and skills that L2 teachers need to possess in order to be effective teachers” (as cited in Fandiño, 2013, p. 87).

To understand how teachers reach the point of a sustainable knowledge base, it is crucial to illuminate on the types of teachers’ knowledge. Different scholars have advocated for different sets of classification for teachers knowledge. Roberts (1998) proposes six types of knowledge: content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, curricular knowledge, contextual knowledge and process knowledge. (as cited in Troudi, 2005, p. 5). Drawing on Kaur G., Yuen and Kaur S.’s (2011) overview of the literature, Fandiño (2013) asserts that content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge are the two types of knowledge that an effective teacher has to master: “The former refers to the knowledge a teacher should possess in the subject itself while the latter refers to the teaching and learning of subjects and their curricula” (p. 84).

When talking about teachers’ knowledge, Fenstermacher (1994) makes a distinction between formal knowledge and practical knowledge. For him, formal knowledge is based on literature derived from research about effective teaching. On the other hand, practical knowledge is generated by teachers as a result of their “every day experimentation and reflection within the classroom context and as such it is personal, situational and tacit” (as cited in Fandiño, 2013, p. 85). With reference to Shulman and Fenstermacher’s proposal, Polyzou and Postlethwaite (2000) suggest that teachers’ subject knowledge and curriculum knowledge are essentially formal forms of knowledge; their pedagogical subject knowledge is essentially practical knowledge and their knowledge of student learning and educational contexts may be an amalgam of both. (as cited in Fandiño, 2013, p. 85). Fandiño (2013) has presented a precise overview of the types of different knowledge proposed by a range of scholars in the following table (p. 87):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Overview of knowledge base of L2 teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge base in second/foreign language</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lafayette (1993)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language proficiency,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilization and culture,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language analysis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Day (1993)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogic knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogic content knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Richards (1998)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theories of teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication skills and language proficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject matter knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pedagogical reasoning and decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextual knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Freeman and Johnson (1998)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher as learner of language teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools and schooling as historical and sociocultural contexts for teacher learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher's pedagogical thinking about teaching, the subject matter and its content and the language learning process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tarone and Allwright (2005)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The second/foreign language learner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The learner learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on second language acquisition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, Shulman (1986) has broadly categorized teacher knowledge into two general types—content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. In this paper, these two categories will be especially emphasized. Let us have a brief introduction to them:

**Content Knowledge**

According to Shulman (1986), content knowledge is “the amount and organization of knowledge per se in the mind of the teacher” (p. 9). It goes beyond saying that the knowledge of the English language and its system makes a teacher more confident than ever. According to McCarthy and Carter (1994), “TESOL teachers need to have a good working knowledge of the English language, its system, (e.g., syntax, phonology, and lexis) and how people use it” (as cited in Troudi, 2005, p. 7). Yao, an interviewee in Zhang’s (2007) research study went to the extent of believing that in spite of being dedicated, enthusiastic and hardworking, “the teacher can’t teach his class well without solid content knowledge” (p. 95). It emphasizes the fact that along with how to teach, what to teach is also important. Having a strong linguistic knowledge base is essential to help students comprehend content or subject matter both in understanding and writing. In order to grasp the content of content knowledge, teachers need to go “beyond knowledge of the facts or concepts of a domain. It requires understanding the structures of the subject matter…” (Shulman, 1986, p. 9). He does not forget to clarify that although content knowledge is essential, “it plays a decidedly secondary role in the qualifications of a teacher” (Shulman, 1986, p. 5). Kumaravadivelu (2003), similarly, criticizes the operation of content knowledge in that it might throw the teachers into a maze where they will find them entrapped in the same phenomena that they are trying to break free from. Scrutinizing the nature of content knowledge, he reminds that:

In the behavioral tradition, the primary focus of teaching and teacher education is content knowledge that consisted mostly of a verified and verifiable set of facts and clearly articulated rules. Content knowledge is broken into easily manageable discrete items and presented to the teacher in what might be called *teacher-proof* packages. Teachers and their teaching methods are not considered very important because their effectiveness cannot be empirically proved beyond doubt. (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 8)

Nevertheless, Troudi (2005) suggests that content knowledge can be useful if it is infused with critical approach. It is supposed to inspire the teachers to reexamine their existing knowledge of English and how it can serve the global world. This can also provide the English which “reflects its changing nature and the cultural and ethnic varieties of its speakers” (p. 9). In spite all the criticism, the fact that content knowledge occupies a certain portion of teacher knowledge base is unassailable.

**Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

The second type of knowledge, according to Shulman’s (1986) classification, is pedagogical content knowledge “which goes beyond knowledge of subject matter per se to the dimension of subject matter knowledge for teaching” (p. 9). He defines pedagogical content knowledge as the knowledge of how the most common topics can be taught with the strongest demonstrations and explanations so that the learners can easily understand them. To get the most of it, teachers must equip themselves with multiple effective strategies that they can attain from their previous knowledge and continuous practice. In addition to students’ age and background, their existing knowledge and proficiency level are very crucial in this case to decide which strategy helps to simplify a topic the most. Shulman (1986) explains that this particular knowledge is essential for teachers because in most cases, learners’ previous knowledge is not reliable (p. 9). A cognizant combination of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge can be useful on the condition that equal attention is
Sources of Teacher Knowledge

Our next scheme is to identify the different sources of teachers’ knowledge. This is utterly evident that the teachers’ previous education and their individual experiences of classroom teaching are two common sources of their personal knowledge base. Kumavadielu (2003) asserts that teachers may gain this “theoretical knowledge either through professional education, personal experience, robust commonsense, or a combination” (p. 17). Additionally, Grossman (1990), Richards (1998) and Tsui (2003) mention two other sources of teachers’ knowledge: disciplinary background and teacher education (as cited in Zhang, 2008, p. 13). At any rate, scrutinizing the sources of teachers’ knowledge base is worthwhile as it affects the future methods to be adopted to acquire further knowledge and frame their perception of teaching.

Teachers’ existing experience helps them to understand the nature of teaching. This might be even more helpful for novice teachers who do not receive any formal training. However, sheer knowledge is considerably unworthy unless it is substantiated by practical experience. Putting the acquired knowledge in practice can make the teachers more confident and assured. Grossman (1990) and Tsui, (2003) perceive that “teachers consider actual teaching experience to be the most important source of knowledge about teaching” (as cited in Zhang, 2008, p. 14). This can be further improved through yet another source of teacher knowledge- i.e. teacher education. Assessing teachers’ previous knowledge through classroom practice often reveals the lack or gap that can be filled in with further education. Attending teacher training programs and courses are likely to have strong effects on developing teacher knowledge base.

Nevertheless, other scholars suggest some variations to the above sets of classifications and their sources. While researching ways of vocabulary instruction in EFL, Zhang (2008) alludes to Fenstermacher (1994) and Kennedy (1999) who offer two different sets of classification. Fenstermacher’s paradigm (1994) consists of formal and practical knowledge. He defines formal knowledge as “knowledge for teachers…produced by the researchers” that can be gained from the researches done by experts (as cited in Zhang, 2008, pp. 13-15). On the other hand, practical knowledge, according to him, is the knowledge of teachers generated by the teachers themselves where the practicing teachers are the sources. Following a similar trail, Kennedy (1999) distinguishes expert knowledge from craft knowledge on the ground that expert knowledge is produced by the “experts”, while craft knowledge derives from the teachers’ craftsmanship, i.e. teaching experience (as cited in Zhang, 2008, p. 16). The indisputable fact is teachers who are fortunate enough to go through all the above-mentioned stages can reach a solid foundation of teacher knowledge.

Ways to Develop Teacher Knowledge

That securing the sources more or less leads teachers through the paths of developing teacher knowledge is obvious. Fandiño (2013) reports the view of Richards (2008) who suggests that “L2 teachers’ knowledge base should not be viewed simply as translating knowledge and theories into practice but as constructing new knowledge and theory through engaging in particular types of activities and processes in specific social contexts” (p. 87). Galante (n.d.) accentuates the view further by his observation that teachers need to play a crucial role in the construction of knowledge to follow the post-method tide. (p. 61). Similarly, Kumaravadivelu (2003) confirms that teachers need to examine their existing knowledge, break them into teachable and learnable bits, manipulate them in the classrooms, observe carefully, reflect on what those observations and then revise their knowledge. He clarifies further that they have to think strategically and
mediate upon the particular learning and teaching “needs, wants, situations, and processes.” They can develop further knowledge through self-observation, self-evaluation and self-analysis. (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 2).

Zhu (2003) notices in Calderhead’s (1988) observation a close link between teachers’ reflective thinking and teacher knowledge. (p. 30). He considers filtering knowledge as important as gathering it that can only be accomplished by means of reflection. Teachers can develop practical knowledge by the “acquisition, comparison, evaluation and synthesis of images” that they gather through classroom practice. (Zhu, 2003, p. 30). They can devise their own theories interpreting and making adjustments to their previously gained knowledge. As O’Hanlon (1993) has rightly observed-

“How each person interprets and adapts their previous learning particularly their reading, understanding and identification of professional theories while they are on the job is potentially their own personal theory”. (as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 19)

This can eventually increase the depth of critical knowledge, too. In a similar tone, Richards (2008) contends that L2 teachers’ knowledge base should not be viewed simply as translating knowledge and theories into practice but as constructing new knowledge and theory through engaging in particular types of activities and processes in specific social contexts (as cited in Fandiño, 2013).

Teaching in diverse cultural setting also helps teachers develop a strong knowledge base. They need to develop the type of critical cultural knowledge that will help them understand their students and their educational and language needs. It helps them grow tolerant towards issues that arise from intercultural confrontation. It also helps them to develop suitable pedagogies for multicultural education and face other challenges such as tackle students from diverse cultural and linguistic environments. Troudi (2005) suggests that developing cultural knowledge requires patience, motivation, tolerance of differences, curiosity and a passion for knowledge (p. 9). Tudor (2003) affirms that understanding students’ culture of learning can help both the teachers and teacher educators to avoid ill-informed judgments of local practice. (p. 9).

Freeman and Johnson (1998) argue for a metacognitive approach of the knowledge base of language teacher education on the belief that “language teaching can be enriched when examining systematically how language teachers come to know what they know and do what they do in their work” (as cited in Fandiño, 2013, p. 86). They opt for a reconceptualization of teachers’ knowledge base that involves:

“(a) the teacher as learner of language teaching, (b) schools and schooling as historical and socio-cultural contexts for teacher learning and (c) the teacher’s pedagogical thinking about teaching, the subject matter and its contents and the language learning process” leading to “an informed exploration of language teachers’ actions and practices, which can ultimately help understand and develop their knowledge base”. (as cited in Fandiño, 2013, p. 86)

Calderhead (1988) suggests that teachers can acquire practical knowledge through practical actions in classroom while they can acquire academic knowledge through teacher education programs (as cited in Fandiño, 2013, p. 88). He adds that comparing, analyzing and evaluating different types of information help produce functional knowledge in teachers. Knowing the meta-cognitive structure of teachers’ knowledge also helps “understand how individual teachers build and develop their knowledge of teaching” (as cited in Fandiño, p. 89). Teachers can develop subject-matter knowledge also through courses such as general linguistics, syntax, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, second language acquisition, and translatology that are offered by different degree programs in TEFL (Zhang, 2007, p. 62). Tarone and Allwright (2005) suggest that “a clear understanding of learners, who they are, why they learn, what they need to learn, and what motivates them” should be included
in developing teachers’ knowledge base (as cited in Fandiño, 2013, p. 87). Tsui (2003) holds an ethnographic approach to the development of teacher knowledge and suggests that teachers should interact with the context in which they teach to provide an actual base to their knowledge (as cited in Zhu, 2003, p. 10).

**How the Process of Developing Own Knowledge Base Help Professional Development**

A teacher is a learner, too. The professional growth of teachers stops as soon as they stop learning. Carter (1990) and Winitzky and Kauchak (1995) consider teaching as a process of knowledge acquisition and knowledge construction (as cited in Zhang, 2007, p. 4). Whatever a teacher does to formulate a strong knowledge base eventually contribute to his/her professional development. In any kind of professional development program, teacher learning is posited at the centre. Freeman (2002) confirms that teacher learning is the central activity of teacher education and “any improvements in the professional preparation of teachers…need to be informed by this research” (as cited in Zhang, 2007, p. 4).

Teacher knowledge base serves as the starting point for a novice teacher to grow professionally. Fandiño (2013) echoes Ohata’s (2007) observation that “teachers need to critically acknowledge the underlying premises that guide their professional practices before systematically examining specific activities or procedures for their professional development” (p. 90).

Teacher knowledge that is static in nature is futile since it restricts the growth of a teacher. It must go through frequent revisions and adjustments. Zheng (n.d.) quotes Alexander (2000) who perceives that existing knowledge base needs to be reshaped and revisited frequently, because “a country’s educational policy can only be properly understood by reference to the web of inherited ideas and values, habits and customs (p. 3). These social cultural values are not static but dynamic as a result of social-economic change (as cited in Zheng, n.d., p. 3). Kumaravadivelu (2003) emphasizes that:

> Teachers’ sense-making (van Manen, 1977) of good teaching matures over time as they learn to cope with competing pulls and pressures representing the content and character of professional preparation, personal beliefs, institutional constraints, learner expectations, assessment instruments, and other factors. (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 36)

In order to revise their knowledge, teachers depend both on their theoretical and practical knowledge. Walls, Nardi, von Minden, and Hoffman (2002) discovered that expert teachers depend more on their own first-hand knowledge of what strategies and techniques have been previously effective whereas novice teachers depend on their knowledge of theories gathered from teacher training programs (as cited in Rodriguez & McKay, 2010, p. 3). Tsui (2003) argues that “the theorization of practical knowledge and the “practicalization” of theoretical knowledge are two sides of the same coin in the development of expert knowledge” (as cited in Zhu, 2003, p. 10).

A developing teacher keeps on challenging his/her prior knowledge to expand it further. Through different development activities, teachers learn more about a topic in their field, replace their customary materials or activities, or otherwise push themselves to the “edge of their competence,” where improvement occurs (Rodriguez & McKay, 2010, p. 3). Ongoing evaluation should be the central part of a professional’s responsibility for his/her continuing development. Experienced teachers need opportunities for self-directed, collaborative, and reflective professional development that recognizes the rich knowledge base and intuitive judgment they have developed over time (p. 6-7).

Postmethod approach identifies teachers’ previous knowledge as a great source of professional growth:
...post-method pedagogy recognizes teachers’ prior knowledge as well as their potential to know not only how to teach but also how to act autonomously within the academic and administrative constraints imposed by institutions, curricula and textbooks. (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 178)

It renders the autonomy to teachers to play the role of decision-makers. It also provides them the opportunity to examine their teaching, scrutinize the pros and cons of the results, identify new problems, postulate new techniques and repeat the whole process.

Postmethod considers teachers’ personal knowledge base as a reliable background for their professional development. It allows the teacher to draw from their personal knowledge. For their professional growth, they need to go through a repetitive action of practicing and theorizing. It discourages dependency upon external agencies. Kumaravadivelu’s (2003) macrostrategic framework claims to have “the potential to transcend the limitations of the concept of method and empower teachers with the knowledge, skill, attitude, and autonomy necessary to devise for themselves a systematic, coherent, and relevant theory of practice” (p. 2). He reinforces the idea that:

Teachers need to develop the necessary knowledge and skills to observe, analyze, and evaluate their own classroom discourse so that they can, without depending too much upon external agencies, theorize what they practice and practice what they theorize, thus contributing to the dismantling of the debilitating dichotomy between theorists and teachers, between producers and consumers of pedagogic knowledge. (Kumaravadivelu, 1999, p. 473)

In any case, teachers must not leave the steer to somebody else’s supervision. They need to be their own guide.

**Reflective Teaching in the Postmethod Era**

Wallace (1991) observes that reflection provides the opportunity to apply theory and research to practice as major tools for language teachers’ effective professional development (as cited in Rodríguez & McKay, 2010, p. 4). The concept of reflective teaching existed well before the term reflective teaching came into being. Any prudent teacher who is aware of professional growth consciously or unconsciously practices reflective teaching. John Dewey is considered to be the proponent of reflective teaching in the early twentieth century. In his book *How We Think* (1933), he differentiated routine action and reflective action on the beliefs that one is guided by tradition whereas the other is prompted by a careful and critical judgment of those traditions. Dewey views teaching “not just as a series of predetermined and presequenced procedures but as a context-sensitive action grounded in intellectual thought” (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 10). Don Schon (1993) has expanded Dewey’s views of reflection and showed how reflective practice can help teachers add fresh perspectives to the existing ones and helps teachers to take responsibility of their own professional growth (p. 10). Later on, Wallace (1991) suggested ways for reflective practitioners to apply reflective practices in different areas of teacher development such as “classroom observation, microteaching, and teacher education” (p. 11).

However, in order to utilize it the best possible ways, teachers need to follow an informed procedure. Francis, Hirsch, and Rowland (1994) consider the idea of reflective teaching inevitable as it can “lead a teacher in new directions of pedagogy and classroom practice and raise the teacher’s confidence and work status” (as cited in Rodriguez & McKay, 2010, p. 4). The conceptualization of knowledge base is no longer restricted to availing the basic skills required for teaching, the mastery of educators over their subject matter area, and the use of pedagogical strategies. Rather, it encompasses other factors such as their reflective practices and research skills. Teaching profession constitutes of a wide range of factors that have the possibilities to trigger
Reflective teaching provides ESL professionals with the scope of reexamining both theories and practices to reach “a richer and more thorough understanding of possibilities, opportunities, and challenges” (Valdes, Kibler, & Walqui, 2014, p. 19).

Reflective teaching is considered to comply with the postmethod the most—“the perfect match for a dynamic teaching and professional development” (Rodriguez & McKay, 2010, p. 4). Postmethod era has thrown light on reflective teaching from a different angle. In fact, Akbari (2007) claims reflective practice to be one of the aftermaths of the postmethod era (as cited in Dağkiran, 2015, p. 4). Postmethod teachers should trust their prior knowledge and their potential to develop a reflective approach to their teaching. According to Bartlett (1990) reflection means more than thinking, and it focuses on the day-to-day classroom teaching as well as the institutional structure. He believes that reflective teaching is not an easy process: “It involves a major shift in emphasis in our thinking and acting” (as cited in Tasnimi, 2014, para. 20) adopting a critical attitude to ourselves as teachers and challenging our personal beliefs about teaching. Murphy (2001) adds that reflective teaching introduces “way for teachers to look inward, both within themselves and within the courses they offer, to access information and inspiration about their efforts in language classroom” (para. 20).

Reflective practices also help teachers explore their hidden knowledge. Williams and Burden (1997) see reflection as a process of bringing out one’s own implicit knowledge and personal theories. They say the task of the reflective practitioner is to make this tacit or implicit knowledge definitive by reflection on action, by constantly generating questions and checking our emerging theories with both personal past experiences and with the reflection of others (as cited in Gnawali, 2008, p. 70). Murray (2010) sees “reflective practice as a fundamental part of continuing professional development” (p. 3). The process of reflection helps teachers take charge of their own learning through collaboration with peers. It also empowers them by making them self-assured and decisive. Teachers can build up a solid base of personal knowledge by examining and reexamining it through reflective practices that eventually lead them through the path of professional development.

**Changes To Be Made in Teacher Training Programs**

The above examination implies that changes are inevitable in teacher training and development program. It has to be reconceptualized by shifting its focus on the teachers’ preexisting knowledge base and their potential in revising that knowledge. Postmethod pedagogy takes whatever knowledge teachers have into consideration and provides a framework to them which will guide them in developing their own strategies. Postmethod does not consider the mind of a novice teacher as *tabula rasa*. Keeping in mind these facts, the teacher development programs should adopt certain changes that will consider teachers’ idiosyncratic knowledge base as an important source of teacher growth.

Referring to Alexander, Kumaravadivelu (2003) asserts that “the primary concern of teachers and teacher educators should be the depth of critical thinking rather than the breadth of content knowledge (p. 20). In other words, Teachers trainers should be more concerned with the critical thinking power of the student teachers so that they can use it to tailor and reshape their knowledge according to the demand of time. Language teacher educators should create opportunities for the student teachers to grow both in language proficiency and cultural knowledge.
Freeman and Johnson (1998) argue that teachers develop their teaching skills and refine them by being involved in a dynamic sociocultural process framed by the institutional forms and contexts where their teaching is done (p. 397). Bailey (1998) interprets that all these processes along with teachers’ reflection about their teaching are paramount to teacher education (as cited in Troudi, 2005, p. 4). Turkam and Schramm-Possinger (2014) propose that teacher training should provide precise guidance to catalogue language skills to help EL students understand the content, and opportunities to practice the attained skills (p. 6). Wajnryb (1992) and Richards and Nunan (1990) prescribe both the low-inference skills such as giving instructions or asking questions and high-inference skills such as planning and decision making as important factors that teacher trainers should take into account. Wajnryb (1992) quotes Prabhu (1987) who advocates two related ideas—equipping and enabling. “Equipping” means providing teachers with pedagogical knowledge and skills for immediate use, and “enabling” means helping teachers to develop ability to independently handle professional affairs (as cited in Gnawali, 2008, p. 70). Gnawali very cleverly has combined these two opinions. According to him—

Training can ‘equip’ teachers with low inference skills but to ‘enable’ them with high inference skills teachers need to be involved in reflective practice. (Gnawali, 2008, p. 69-70)

Although there is an increasing dissatisfaction with the traditional methods, experts suggest that rejecting methods altogether will not be wise. As Richards and Rodgers (2001) note, novice teachers at the beginning of their career should have knowledge about the techniques and procedures of a specific method as “it provides them with the confidence they will need to face learners and it provides techniques and strategies for presenting lessons” (as cited in Ahmadian & Rad, 2014, p. 595). They rightly claim that an approach or a predetermined method with its associated activities, principles, and techniques may be an essential starting point for an inexperienced teacher, but it should be seen only as that since in most cases, novice teachers are far from fulfilling postmethod promises (Ahmadian and Rad, 2014, p. 595). Similarly, Hawkins & Norton (2009) suggest that if teachers are to act autonomously within the academic and administrative restraints, the existing narrow view of teacher training and even teacher education programs need to be challenged by shifting toward an immense expedition for critical language teacher education (p. 595).

In his study, Kilickaya (2007) conceptualizes that teacher educators need to appropriate the methods taking institutional, material, and cultural methods into consideration and empower periphery teachers with creative and critical instructional practices (p. 262). He also talks about activities that can be used by the periphery teachers:

Small group discussions, peer reviews/interactions, collaborative writing, and paired assignments are simple ways in which students can be provided scope for experimentation and independence. Collaborative projects, guided fieldwork, and research activities (in libraries, dormitories, or off campus) enable students to construct safe houses outside classrooms. (Ahmadian & Rad, 2014, p. 263)

Zhu (2003) points at Richards’ realization that engaging teachers “not merely in the mastery of rules of practice but in an exploration of the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and thinking that inform such practice ‘is a long-term process…”” (p. 26). Teacher education must take all these variables into consideration. Above all, “if any element is to be the core of a teacher education programme it should be the teacher’s view(s) of what language education is about and what he/she considers teaching to be (Troudi, 2005, p. 5)
Conclusion

Empowering and enabling the language teachers to take charge and responsibility of their professional advancement is indispensable. In other words, they have to perform the roles of both professionals and producers of theories grounded on the language demands of the next generation of learners. They have to be aware of the “hidden agenda” of the expert-manufactured theories, pedagogies, and materials, and revise them according to the needs of specific situations. As ongoing practitioners, they have to frequently reexamine the self-devised teaching strategies and update them with proper judgment and reflection. Professional development is potentially complementary with the process of developing a substantial knowledge base, thus guiding the language teachers through the path of professional development.

References


