

Understanding the knowledge practices of English language teaching professionals in Mexico

*Hacia la comprensión de las prácticas del conocimiento
de los profesionales de la enseñanza del inglés en México*

Vicky Ariza Pinzón • Rosalba Leticia Olguín Díaz • Elba Méndez García

ABSTRACT

Determining what it takes to be an English language teacher (ELT) is an issue of constant debate. Often, when explaining the profession, the qualities, and abilities of the teacher as well as their implicit bodies of knowledge are put upfront leaving aside other underlying practices such as the context, the social space, and differing idiosyncrasies. This article explores those aspects from the perspective of nine English language teacher trainers from a BA program in a public university in Central Mexico. To understand what knowledge is at stake when exercising the teaching profession, we use Legitimation Code Theory to make visible the patterns of knowledge practices within the field in ELT. Generally, this field is portrayed as practical and homogeneous, composed of disciplines such as psychology, pedagogy and linguistics. Likewise, the English professional is portrayed as a subject specialist, ethically and socially committed and context sensitive. However, those findings look relationally different as teacher trainers add value to social critical practices over pedagogical and technical skills. Understanding these differences is relevant, as this can offer insights about how English language teachers are professionally perceived and how this can impact the design of teacher training programs.

Keywords: ELT, knowledge, Legitimation Code Theory, specialization codes, teacher education.

RESUMEN

Determinar qué se necesita para ser un docente de lengua inglesa es un tema de constante debate. Cuando se explica la profesión, frecuentemente se mencionan las cualidades, las habilidades docentes y los conocimientos implícitos, dejando fuera prácticas subyacentes como el contexto, el espacio social y las diferentes idiosincrasias. Este artículo busca comprender estos aspectos desde la perspectiva de nueve educadores, docentes de lengua inglesa, de un programa de licenciatura en una universidad pública en el centro de México. Para visibilizar los patrones de las prácticas de conocimiento en el campo de la enseñanza del inglés, se hace uso de la teoría de los códigos de legitimación. En general, la profesión se representa como práctica y homogénea, conformada por disciplinas como la psicología, la pedagogía y la lingüística. Asimismo, al profesional en lengua inglesa se le representa como a un especialista del idioma, sensible al contexto y ética y socialmente comprometido. Sin embargo, estos resultados lucen relacionamente diferentes debido a que los participantes valoran la práctica social crítica por encima de las habilidades pedagógicas y técnicas. Comprender estas diferencias es relevante, ya que esto nos ofrece perspectivas sobre la manera en que los docentes de lengua inglesa son percibidos profesionalmente, así como los posibles efectos en el diseño de programas de formación docente.

Palabras clave: enseñanza del inglés, conocimiento, teoría de códigos de legitimación, códigos de especialización, formación docente.

INTRODUCTION

Research on language teacher education and teacher transformation is an area of on-going interest. Over time, researchers have tried to explain what it takes to be a good language teacher and what knowledge is involved in teacher development (Bremner, 2019; Mohammaditabar et al., 2020; Narváez-Cantos, 2022; Richards, 2008). Key to understanding the field of education is the understanding of the political and historical context, as well as the importance given to the teacher and to the teaching profession (Flores, 2024). For example, in their study of English language teacher qualities, Mohammaditabar et al. (2020) analyzed 23 standard language teaching books and identified a comprehensive list of teacher traits associated with teachers' personality such as rapport, humor or empathy, and associated with professionalism, such as knowledge of pedagogy and knowledge of subject matter. Those characteristics were corroborated through teachers and students' interviews. Bremner (2019) analyzed the life stories of thirteen Mexican English language teachers and identified similar categories; however, their participants favored interpersonal relations with students as a key quality of teachers over their language proficiency or knowledge about the language. In contrast, Lemus-Hidalgo (2017) analyzed how English teachers internalize knowledge and build their own understanding of the teaching profession derived from their own practices and experiences by making a distinction between procedural knowledge and content knowledge; the former related to applying knowledge in the classroom; the latter related to language and language learning as established in the Second Language curriculum (Richards, 2008). A few studies on teacher education focus on the importance of idiosyncratic and contextual factors to become a teacher (Flores, 2024) and the need to understand the enculturation process student-teachers go through when getting to know a "new" teaching culture (Richards, 2008).

As English language teachers educators, we are aware of the importance of identifying effective English teaching qualities. However, adding more qualities to the list makes it difficult to recognize what really matters to be an ideal language

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teacher, for teacher trainers will teach and train student teachers depending on the understandings they have of the English teaching field and the English language professional. We frame this diversity of views as a problem of segmentation that still permeates in the field of teaching education (Flores, 2024). That is, the qualities, knowledge, skills, and idiosyncratic forces involved in the process of becoming a teacher are considered as independent categories that the student-teacher is supposed to gain along their formal education which he or she will be able to use later in their teaching practicum, often without contestation. We argue that what matters is not piling up a reservoir of skills and strategies or honing a set of personal traits. Instead, what matters is to develop an epistemology of English teaching that “strikes a balance between, on the one hand, ‘technical and positive information,’ and on the other, ‘taste and sympathy’” (Didau, 2021, p. 75). We are particularly interested in addressing the following questions:

1. What specialized knowledge and qualities are valuable in the field of ELT?
2. How do specialized knowledge and qualities interact to shape a successful language teacher professional?

This paper attempts to find a way forward to overcome segmentation in the field of ELT by making visible how different types of specialized knowledge integrate to portray an ideal English language teacher. Being aware of what is expected from the language professional increases the possibilities for success to find a place “where membership is based on entry requirements and standards” (Richards, 2008, p. 160). Following, there is a review of ongoing debates in the field of English language teaching that might contribute to the understanding of the problem of segmentation mentioned above.

Tensions in the field

In this section, we describe several ongoing debates in the English language teaching (ELT) field that permeate the consolidation of the academic discourse in the profession as an intellectual and disciplinary field (Martin et al., 2020), and the ways in which teachers exercise their professional practice. The theory-practice divide, the variety of theories in the field, and the first-time encounter with the context are described to situate this study.

The teaching field has been perceived as a *minor* profession on the grounds that professionals in education do not require special expertise or extraordinary knowledge (Schön, 1992) to perform in their field. This poses the teaching profession as practice-oriented, where practice overshadows the theoretical knowledge teachers exercise during their teaching (Flores, 2006). This apparent theory-practice separation leads to perceive teaching professionals as unable to claim specialized knowledge on the premise that teachers develop their teaching abilities and skills until they teach

others, in their professional practice. This misconception of teachers just operating on practice without needing theoretical foundations is partly due to most studies focusing on observing the teaching practice rather than inquiring about how teachers implement that knowledge in the classroom (Tsui, 2012). During practice, teachers draw upon disciplinary knowledge to constantly make decisions about their teaching practice (Flores, 2001). Therefore, the idea of teaching not requiring a comprehensive breadth of theoretical knowledge undermines the complexities of teaching and removes teachers' agency to simply reducing them to experimental practitioners.

As for the ELT field, it undergoes similar complexities at the epistemological level because it draws upon a wide range of methods derived from teaching-learning theories grounded in psychology, pedagogy, linguistics and other fields (Levrints, 2022). The dependence on other disciplines and the variety of teaching methodologies add to the belief that the ELT field has no systematic knowledge base (Lantolf, 2011) because there is no conceptualization of one sound theory that embraces all the teaching-learning ramifications. Moreover, the existence of various methods does not represent a lack of sound knowledge. Nonetheless, there is evidence of the need to continue researching language learning from different contexts and realities to infuse ELT pedagogy with new ideas.

This variety of ELT methods has been discussed thoroughly (Burns & Richards, 2018; Freeman, 2020; Richards & Rodgers, 2014); however, instead of finding the best theory or method, a better option would be what Kumaravadivelu (2005) asserts as a post-method condition where teachers are enabled to make decisions about which methods can be operational in their classroom. From this perspective, teaching practice becomes a powerful source of practical knowledge for teachers to exercise their autonomy (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, 2008), but such autonomy is combined with constant critical reflection (Dafermos, 2020; Samacá, 2021) on that practice. Whenever teachers decide on what suits their context, they are empowered to theorize about their own practice and reflect upon that theory in their practice. This balance provides teachers with control over their teaching. Enabling teachers to control the theory and methodologies they apply is what Prabhu (2019) describes as plausibility, which teachers develop over years of experience in applying all sorts of methods in their teaching context. This plausibility allows teachers to make informed decisions to solve unexpected situations in their teaching context. Regardless of the ample range of methods, teaching is practice-oriented and knowledge-based, and such dichotomy guides teachers' decisions and philosophy of teaching (Clandinin, 2020; Elbaz, 2020; Shulman, 2013, Tatto, 2021; Vygotsky, 2012). Instead of debating over which method is best, the task would be to conceptualize the teaching-learning field in a holistic view where theory and practice are part of the same entity and not as opposing forces on the same continuum.

How teachers exercise their teaching has impacted ELT teachers' beliefs and notions about how teaching should be and how an ELT professional is perceived. These notions concerning teaching and being a professional in the field are formulated in connection to teaching, the school context, and the interplay between the qualities of the English teacher and the necessary knowledge to be a successful professional. An example is teachers who encounter real-life teaching practice for the first time without any mentoring or supervision. It is only until they step into the classroom that they must make decisions about what knowledge, strategies, techniques, or methods of teaching to implement. However, these teachers may not be aware that teaching practice encloses more than regular classroom teaching, as it also includes the social practices pervading the school context for them to become part of that social space. This means that to legitimize their position in the field, they are demanded to possess traits and dispositions as valued members of the community (Martin et al., 2020; Maton, 2018). Teachers are also required to enact the recognition of knowledge, and the ways in which this knowledge is reproduced and recontextualized (Bernstein, 2006). Acknowledging how ELT professionals interpret and apply teaching theory in their classroom is key to recognizing how teachers reproduce and contextualize such knowledge.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This section explains Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) as a sociological framework that analyses discourse to identify the underlying principles of knowledge practices within particular social fields (Maton, 2014). These organizing principles, also described as *legitimation codes*, in essence bring to the surface the things that are valued in each social field such as English Language Teaching. Those valuables, in turn, represent the basis of legitimacy for belonging, entering—or not—into such a field. The specialization dimension makes it possible to see the actors' dispositions, their positions in a social field and the prevalent practices (Maton, 2018). This dimension focuses on the premise that practices are about something—epistemic relations (ER)—and are oriented by someone—social relations (SR)—(Maton, 2018). In other words, when describing knowledge practices in a field such as the ELT, one can think of “what can be legitimately described as knowledge (epistemic relations), and who can claim to be a legitimate knower (social relations)” (Maton, 2018, p. 255).

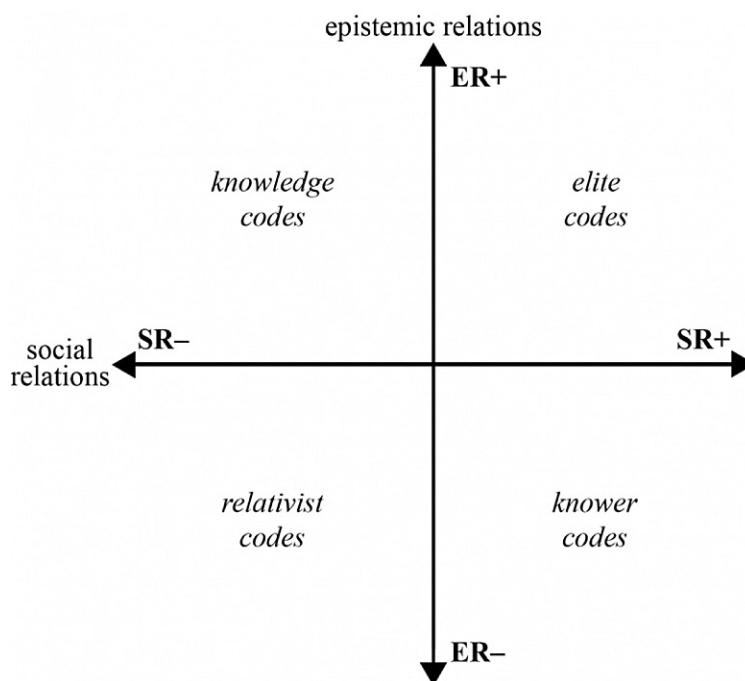
Epistemic relations and social relations can have different strengths in a continuum, stronger (+) or weaker (–), depending on the basis of legitimacy. The combination of strengths of ER and SR give rise to four specialization codes:

- *Knowledge codes* (ER+, SR–) oriented towards the possession of specialized knowledge, its principles and procedures.
- *Knower codes* (ER–, SR+) oriented towards someone's attributes, positions and dispositions in the field. What matters is who you are.

- *Elite codes* (ER+, SR+) oriented towards the possession of specialized knowledge and being the right kind of knower.
- *Relativist codes* (ER–, SR–) involving neither specialized knowledge nor being the right knower as the basis of legitimacy. In this case “anything goes” (Maton, 2014).

When placing the four codes in the specialization plane, one can see the positions that actors occupy as well as the basis of legitimacy based on the strengths of epistemic and social relations (see Figure 1). Importantly, the positions that actors occupy in intellectual fields are by no means absolute or dichotomic, i.e., one field can not only be a knowledge code, a knower code or an elite code. On the contrary, intellectual fields allow a full range of possible positions which show variation and relations between social practices; the specialization plane makes it possible to see these nuances. Furthermore, the positions of actors within a social field determine which codes are dominant and which codes are worth maintaining; for those confer power to those placed in privileged positions (Maton, 2018).

Figure 1
Specialization plane



Source: Maton, 2014, p. 30.

Specialization codes, then, are present in intellectual social fields, but they are not always transparent for everyone, especially for novices and newcomers, therefore, causing struggles over the ways into knowing which codes are dominant. The struggles

to understand dominant codes results in notions of *code clash* or *code match*. A code clash occurs when actors' practices, positions and dispositions are governed by different codes (Maton, 2014). In contrast, a code match occurs when actors in each field share the same understanding of practices positions and dispositions. For example, in a study by Maton & Chen (2016) on Chinese students' learning experiences in Australia, they found that students' dispositions emphasized knowledge codes while the teacher in the Australian context emphasized a knower code. This resulted in a code clash for students experiencing the Australian system as vague, focused on teachers and students' relations rather than on content or subject knowledge as they were used to in China. Identifying the dominant codes or finding out "the rules of the game" also allows movements between quadrants of the specialization plane, making it possible to change whatever code is dominant. The following section describes how the specialization codes were used as the methodological approach to identify the underlying principles of knowledge practices in the English language teaching field and reveal the basis of legitimacy.

Participants and context

The present study aims to identify what is valuable in the English teaching profession and what practices might represent struggles for language teachers within this field. The participants in this study are nine teacher trainers from a BA program in ELT in a public university in Central Mexico, with 8 to 30 years of experience. The participants—five female and four male teachers—are currently enrolled in the school of languages. Additionally, they have worked in a variety of contexts—rural, urban, public, private—and in diverse educational levels that represent the Mexican educational system—basic, middle and higher education—. Participants were selected based on years of experience in the field and exposure to different teaching contexts. We believe this purposive selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) can yield a wide range of perspectives of what it means to be an English language teacher in Mexican education.

Instrument

Congruent with the theoretical framework of specialization codes described above, participants were interviewed to provide expert accounts of their experiences in the field. A semi-structured interview was designed to get insights into the main qualities and knowledge of an ELT professional. According to Flick (2014), exploring the specialized knowledge of the participants of the study as well as the knowledge they have gained in the practical field over the years increases the possibilities that their expert voices recount not only their everyday practices, but also provide insights that structure the social practices of agents, on their professional field, and in meaningful ways. In the next section, we report the procedure followed for the analysis and the ways in which ELT knowledge practices were identified.

THE SPECIALIZED KNOWLEDGE AND QUALITIES VALUABLE IN ELT

The objective of this study was to explore the knowledge practices of ELT teacher trainers and how these practices shape their view of the field. To do so, two core questions were asked: a) what specialized knowledge and qualities are valuable in the field of ELT? and b) how do knowledge and qualities interact to shape a successful language teacher professional? The first step to address these questions was to carry out a thematic analysis and identify emerging themes. Then, these themes were related to the theoretical concepts of epistemic relations and social relations by means of a “translation device” which helped to build a bridge between theory and empirical data. Finally, the results were used to map ELT knowledge practices on the specialization planes to bring about those knowledge practices in ELT valued by professionals in the field. Each of these processes is described in detail in the following sections.

Thematic analysis

A software-based analysis (Flick, 2014) was done using MAXQDA to better organize the data. To ensure validity, each researcher immersed individually in data to identify emerging themes. Results were compared systematically to minimize inherent bias in qualitative research. This is known as researcher triangulation (Flick, 2014). This process opened the reality from the viewpoint of the participants and allowed researchers to question their own perceptions of that reality. After reaching a consensus, the 281 themes were turned into a core of four categories that describe English language teachers as subject specialists, qualified language teachers, context sensitive, and ideal collaborators. Table 1 shows the core categories with the most salient features for each.

As seen in the table, the subject specialist is portrayed as someone who possesses a comprehensive body of knowledge in linguistics and proficiency in the target language. This involves knowing the language and knowing about the language. In addition to that, English language teachers should possess a wealth of pedagogical knowledge, methods, and techniques to be able to teach the language. These categories coincide with Mohammaditabar et al. (2020), who identified knowledge of pedagogy and knowledge of subject matter as important traits of English language teachers.

In the same vein, the qualified language teacher in our study is described as an influential role model and as a “supreme individual”: responsible, sensitive, empathic, socially, and ethically committed, context sensitive and willing to collaborate. These traits, which are associated to teachers’ personality and values, reveal a sign of professionalism (Mohammaditabar et al., 2020), and are favored over language proficiency or knowledge about the language (Bremner, 2019). These qualities comprise those dispositions and attributes that make these individuals stand out from the crowd.

Table 1
Qualities and attributes of the ideal language teacher

Core categories	Subcategories
<i>Subject specialist</i>	Linguistic knowledge Pedagogical knowledge Knowledge about methods and techniques in ELT English language knowledge
Qualified language teacher	Socially and ethically committed Sensitive and emphatic Responsible and respectful Critical thinker Problem solver Be a role model or influence
Context sensitive	Understand the institutional context Know the school practices Learn the ‘rules of the game’ Engage in academic life
Ideal collaborator	Negotiation skills Open to dialogue Productive and objective achiever Respectful of other’s working ways and ideas Personal and professional affinity

Source: Own source.

The last two categories—context sensitive and the ideal collaborator—add to the list of qualities of English language teachers (see Table 1). These traits involve knowing the educational context, their practices and how their system works. Understanding the relations constructed around and the pertaining practice to that context is key for the professional in ELT. As one of the participants mentioned, English Language Teachers should know “the rules of the game” of being a teacher to be able to navigate the critical and social spaces of the differing school cultures they might find themselves in. One way of navigating the context is by being an ideal collaborator, portraying negotiation skills, being dialogue-open and being respectful of other’s ideas or ways of working. In addition to that, the ideal collaborator is a productive and objective achiever who is always willing to learn.

These results provided useful information that builds on previous studies about the language professional. Although these categories shed light on what abilities or attributes an ELT teacher may display, uncovering what it takes to be a successful language professional remained difficult to comprehend. The difficulty to define what is most valuable, for whom and for what purposes required another tool, the specialization dimension of Legitimation Code Theory, to bring to the surface other realities hidden beneath.

The specialization dimension and the translation device

To recontextualize the results of the thematic analysis in terms of specialization codes, a translation device was necessary (Maton, 2014). A translation device is a methodological tool that allows building a bridge between theory and empirical data. For the present study, the theoretical concepts of epistemic relations (ER) and social relations (SR) were assigned to empirical data from the thematic analysis which revealed the predominant codes in the ELT field. The translation device involved another form of triangulation assisted with the analysis of data to unveil knowledge practices. Tables 2 and 3 explain the core themes of the subject specialist and the ideal collaborator.

The translation device of the subject specialist (Table 2) can be read from left to right. The first two columnns display the theoretical concept and the core category which associate a value of strong epistemic relations (ER+) or weak epistemic relations (ER-). The third column provides a descriptor which foregrounds, or not, the importance of knowledge. In this case, emphasis was given to having a depth and breadth of knowledge within their disciplinary area (ER+). This is what mattered the most for teacher trainers. In contrast, a weak epistemic relation (ER-) was assigned when knowledge was not foregrounded as relevant. The last column shows examples of empirical data stating the knowledge English language teachers should hold, such as mastering knowledge about the language, pedagogical knowledge and content knowledge.

Table 2
Translation device of the subject specialist

Theoretical concept	Core category	Description	Empirical data
ER+	Subject specialist	Possessing a depth and breadth of knowledge within their disciplinary area	Um, basically, to master the language, I think that now, they must hold a certification that proves that one is proficient in the language. Not only must they know about pedagogy to teach English, but they also must diversify because they may teach content as well
ER-	Subject specialist	Situating in the context is more important than possessing a depth and breadth of knowledge	Well, yes, knowing pedagogy helps you situate yourself in any context with any kind of student, and this may allow you to get a good job from the start

Source: Own source.

The same principle was applied to the translation device of the ideal collaborator but with the concept of social relations (Table 3). When the personal traits or dispositions were emphasised, they were assigned a value of strong social relations (SR+). In the description column one can see that willingness to collaborate with peers is more important than the knowledge or the understanding of the field. As the empirical data shows, not understanding the area of ELT is acceptable as long as there is a willingness to collaborate. In contrast, a weak social relation was assigned when people’s dispositions were not foregrounded as relevant.

Table 3

Translation device of the ideal collaborator

Theoretical concept	Core category	Description	Empirical data
SR+	Ideal collaborator	A willingness to collaborate with peers is highly valued, rather than the knowledge of the ELT field	One can learn things, but what I say is that it must be someone willing to collaborate, to work with others. It must be someone who wants to learn, not someone who just pretends to get the work done It would look very, I don't know... very complicated to work with
SR-	Ideal collaborator	Understanding ELT knowledge field is more valued than the willingness to collaborate with peers.	someone who doesn't know how to run a research project from start to finish, right? So eh... that would be a very important thing, that they have knowledge of what we're doing in the research

Source: Own source.

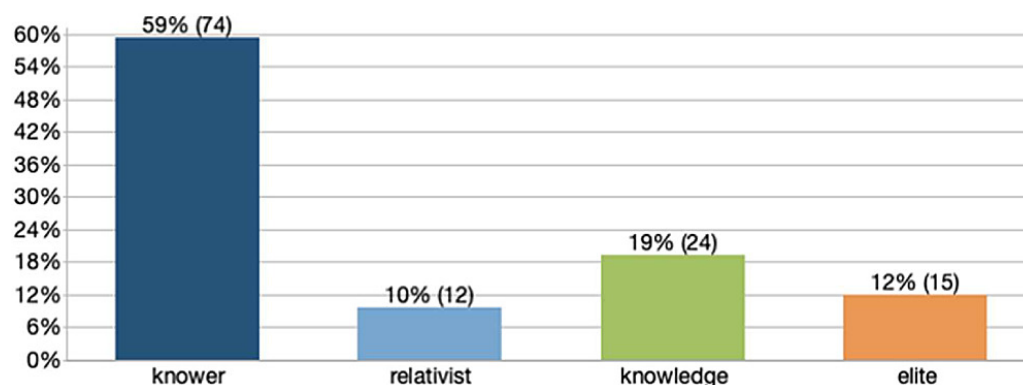
These translation devices were used to filter out all themes from the thematic analysis and assigned them a corresponding strenght of epistemic and social relations to map them into the specialization plane (Maton, 2014). This process is described below.

The specialization plane in ELT

Once all themes were screened in the translation device, they were assigned a strenght of ER +/- or SR +/- in the qualitative software MAXQDA. The combination of strengths yielded the most prominent specialization codes in the field of ELT. Unsurprisingly, all four codes were present in the data: *knowledge codes*, *knower codes*, *elite codes* and *relativist codes*. As Maton (2014) suggests, all codes are present in all intellectual fields, what the specialization codes allow is to make visible what codes matter the most in that social field. These types of relations uncover the basis of achievement in English language teaching. In this particular data set, the knower code was more prominent with 59% mentions, followed by the knowledge code with 19% and the elite and the relativist codes with less than 12% (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Specialization codes in ELT



Source: Own source.

These percentages were then distributed in the four quadrants of the specialization plane (Figure 3). This plane highlights the knower code over the other codes. This means that what matters is the set of qualities and attributes of the ideal language teacher. In the field of ELT, how actors position themselves in this social field is key

Figure 3

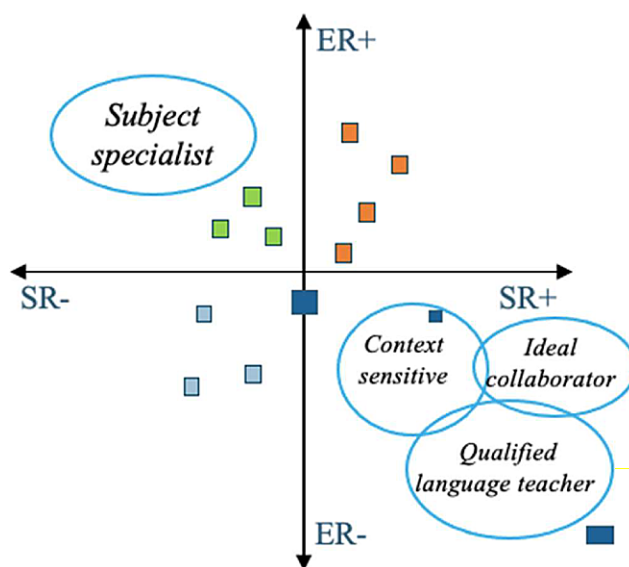
The specialization plane of ELT



Source: Own source.

Figure 4

The ideal professional in ELT



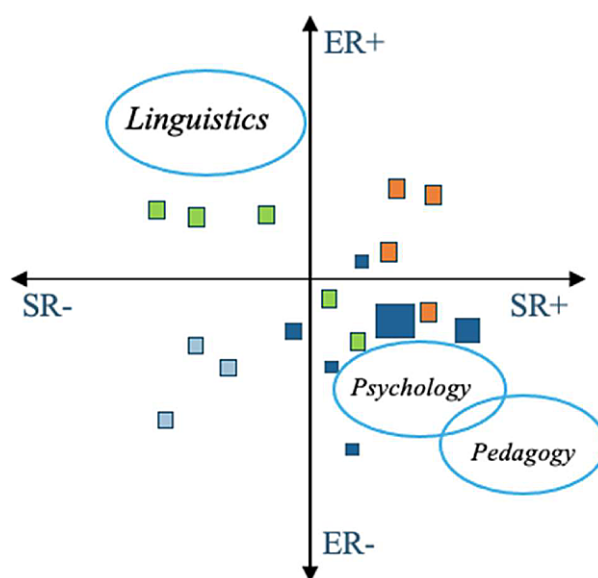
Source: Own source.

for succeeding in it. In other words, the value that is given to social dispositions over knowledge reveals the basis of legitimacy in the ELT field.

Another way to look at the specialization plane was by mapping the four main categories of thematic analysis with the aid of MAXQDA. This time the percentages were calculated by category—subject specialist, qualified language teacher, context sensitive and ideal collaborator—resulting in the specialization plane for the ideal professional in ELT (see Figure 4). In Figure 4, we can see that the subject specialist falls into the knowledge code while the other teacher dispositions fall into the knower code. This sheds light on the knowledge, values and dispositions that shape a successful language teacher professional.

The last specialization plane (Figure 5) depicts ELT as an interdisciplinary field. When identifying the body of knowledge that a subject specialist should have, participants recognized disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, and pedagogy. This, by no means, represents the full body of knowledge in the field, it only represents the epistemological views the participants hold about this context. While some of them perceive the interrelationship of the three areas and recognize the interdisciplinary trait of the field, others only perceive it as pedagogy or educational-psychology based. These relational views are plotted into the specialization field which places pedagogy and psychology in the knower code and linguistics in the knowledge code (see Figure 5).

Figure 5
ELT as an interdisciplinary field



Source: Own source.

Working with the specialization dimension has provided another way to look at the long list of qualities and knowledge that English language teachers must hold. Understanding how these traits interrelate in social fields is key for language teachers to successfully navigate new teaching scenarios. The specialization plane offers a means of visually representing what knowledge practices are at stake when exercising the profession in the ELT field. Specialization codes can also offer a means of informing curriculum decisions and teacher training programs.

DISCUSSION

In this final section, we summarize the findings from the study and shed light on how the specialization dimension of Legitimation Code Theory provides a step forward to overcome the problem of segmentation in the field of ELT. We also offer some more general implications for English teacher education and curriculum development.

First, the specialization dimension helped to visualize how different teacher qualities, attributes and types of knowledge integrate in what Maton (2014) calls knowledge practices. In our study, the specialization plane shows that the ELT teaching practice is guided by theoretical knowledge, but it also brings into the picture knowers' ways of being, acting and thinking. In other words, being a subject specialist and holding knowledge in areas such as linguistics, psychology or pedagogy is as important as the positions that future teachers occupy in each social field to make sense of this knowledge in their way of becoming "ideal language teachers". However, this social aspect and the cultivation of soft skills are invisible to the naked eye. In class, for example, teachers transform knowledge into creating lessons, clarifying questions or doubts, or simply solving classroom management issues. These practices may be perceived as pragmatic ways to solve classroom teaching problems, but they are the result of disciplinary knowledge application as well as the understanding of the social dynamics of the teaching field.

Although most studies clearly focus on observing what teachers do in the classroom, more research is needed especially to inquire about how teachers process knowledge behind their teaching decisions (Tsui, 2012) in critical social spaces. There seems to be a code clash between the emphasis given to disciplinary knowledge in teacher training programs and the encounter with complex teaching scenarios that novice teachers face for the first time without previous reference. Specialization codes make it visible that theory and practice coexist as one entity, and that a balance is necessary to understand the nature of epistemology behind teaching practices in critical contexts.

In addition to making the relations between knowledge and knowers visible, the specialization codes also revealed the emphasis the ELT community gives to the social dispositions necessary for newcomers to succeed in the teaching field. Generally, the

content knowledge, methods and teaching strategies (knowledge code) become the protagonist in the classroom, creating a blind spot in terms of one code dominating over the other where the knower is disregarded. The plane shows an epistemology component along with an evident emphasis on the knower code, which means that knowers and their dispositions are far more valued than knowledge in ELT. This also suggests a possible code clash that impacts not only the teaching practice overall but also practitioners, administrators, and the basis of the ELT field in general. This code clash is expressed when the curriculum focuses on building theory and technical pedagogical skills during the ELT major but leaves aside the exercising of the social practices (Flores, 2006). This implies that, as new knowers, graduated ELT teachers tend to reproduce teaching methods and strategies and disregard the teaching context as active involvement and commitment within the social space (Maton, 2018). The struggle lies in what teachers know as professionals (knowledge) and what the institutionalized context demands (dispositions) beyond the classroom.

These demands represent a mismatch between the theory they know and the existing social practices they are required to engage in that same context. This incongruity presents a challenge to new ELT teachers as they are unaware of how to link their academic instruction to what they are expected to do in their job environment beyond the teaching arena. This is what Flores (2001) explains about the workplace conditions as a “powerful variable” that shapes teachers’ own knowledge, beliefs, and their personal behaviors as professionals. Raising awareness by shifting the attention to those dispositions and social practices in the curriculum could be a start to ease ELT teachers’ entrance to the field. Specialization codes provided a framework of thinking from another perspective about the ELT profession and the ELT professional. This framework showed ways to legitimize teaching education practices and how this can open possibilities for trainees to succeed in the wide complex ELT work realities.

Finally, the specialization dimension also exhibited the interdisciplinary nature of the English language teaching field including linguistics, psychology and pedagogy. However, the field is by no means homogeneous. On the contrary, theories are as varied as the diversified views of teachers and teacher trainers (Lantolf, 2011). These epistemological views are expressed in divergent teaching paradigms and approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) that place a pressing issue in the ELT field because knowledge is reproduced differently from classroom to classroom. These views are also connected to the context and needs of students, which may explain why teaching practice is unique to each teacher (Kumaravadivelu, 2008; Prabhu, 2019; Tatto, 2021). The variety of teaching styles is the result of epistemological diversity, which confirms there is a body of knowledge in the ELT field, but knowers (teachers) are diverse, too.

This study is an initial attempt to address segmentation by making the knowledge practices and the social practices visible (Maton, 2014) to the actors of the field, which

may lead to a fruitful discussion about what ELT teaching is as a field, and what this may bring for the ELT curriculum and teacher training.

CONCLUSION

This study has helped us map the main characteristics or traits of the English language teaching profession and professional. Nonetheless, specialization codes provided new insights to understand what it is at stake when educating future English language teachers. The profile of a subject specialist highlights a trained individual with a sound diverse body of knowledge: psychology, pedagogy, and linguistics, but most importantly it also shows the cultivation of the traits of an ideal collaborator who is proactive and willing to take part in academic projects. The development of these traits seems to be highly valuable within the ELT community. In this study, the voices and experiences of ELT experts are a confirmation of the knowledge they have gained over the years and how this has shaped their perception of the field as a social space. From their accounts, and the analysis of specialization codes, it seems that the ELT field is characterized by *knower codes* where dispositions towards practice are valued over specialized knowledge, *knowledge codes*. ELT teachers seem to be operating in different codes and in different epistemological trends.

The ELT field also deals with the diversity of views teachers hold on what it means to train future teachers. Those who do not perceive linguistics will emphasize pedagogy and vice versa. This explains the diverse teaching styles and approaches ELT teachers operate on as this may also express the reproduction of how these teachers were trained themselves. This pressing issue must be brought to the attention of academia and curriculum designers. Listening to one another may be the very first step to proactive collaboration in solving shared problems in ELT teaching and training. Moreover, critiquing and dialoguing to find theoretical common ground are key for a reconfiguration of the field and its practices.

Striking a balance between teacher qualities and epistemologies in the curriculum may represent a much-needed action for teacher trainers in ELT to tacitly teach them. A possible step could be having pre-service teachers to be exposed to teaching scenarios at an early stage of their program so they can have a more realistic experience of the teaching field and understand the implications of becoming an ELT teacher. Including more hands-on or intervention classes in the curriculum could help reduce the gap between what is learnt and how to apply it to a classroom.

Specialization codes have revealed the school context not only as a physical space but also as a site of contestation that demands the recognition of “the complexity of the teaching profession and its intellectual, ethical, relational, political and inquiry-based dimensions” (Flores, 2024, p. 866). This is a first step to integrate the knowledges present in the field and grapple with the “rules of the game” of the teaching profession.

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