English Language Teachers' Knowledge Base: An exploration of Beliefs

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ABSTRACT

The present study explored English as a foreign language teachers' beliefs on the relevant components and sources of knowledge in Ukraine. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to collect primarily qualitative data from 44 language teachers, which were analyzed by means of content analysis. The findings indicated the strongest endorsement for language proficiency, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical and learner knowledge, and technological pedagogical content knowledge. The most frequently featuring component was pedagogical and learner knowledge, while the neglected one was content knowledge. More importantly, the respondents claimed the relevance of initial teacher education, pointing out its strong points and critical issues. The spin-off of the study was the respondents' treating dispositions for teaching on par with knowledge, thus emphasizing both the affective and cognitive domains of competence. Finally, the study provides clues to the kind of professional guidance needed by language teachers, which could leverage teacher education.

Although the role of teacher knowledge in providing effective instruction is widely recognized, research into language teachers' beliefs on its nature and constitution is still sparse, particularly in terms of localized experience. Disclosing the practitioners' beliefs is the first step in organizing teacher preparation resounding with their immediate needs. The present study seeks to uncover the components of knowledge English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers give precedence to and draw on in organizing effective instruction. It aims to explore the beliefs of EFL teachers concerning the essential knowledge components, the predominant sources of knowledge, and factors impacting their teaching. It also

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considers the curriculum content conducive to effective formal teacher preparation and its hallmarks. The given issues are elucidated in the context of EFL teacher preparation and development in Ukraine. Although the study's scope is Ukrainian milieu, it also carries implications for broader sites and settings, owing to multiple shared features of the language teaching profession.

Against the backdrop of the social constructivism theory (Johnson, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978), sense-making, information construal, evaluation, and knowledge internalization by language teachers and learners are affected by their beliefs. Beliefs determine the course and character of action, shaping language teacher learning (Borg, 2011a) and, hence, what is deemed requisite knowledge in EFL teaching. A host of factors shape language teachers' beliefs and learning. Notwithstanding varied research findings, evidence suggests that prior learning experience (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015; Lortie, 1975; Moodie, 2016), language teaching experience (Freeman, 2020; Liu, 2013), teacher education (Karimi & Fakhri, 2021), in-service teacher development (Borg, 2011b), engagement in research (Gomez, 2020), societal expectations and political attitudes to EFL teaching and learning (Mohammadzadeh Mohammadabadi et al., 2019) impact language teachers' cognitions and instructional preferences. Language teachers learn what is congruent with their system of beliefs, thus to design effective teacher education, it is indispensable to gain insight into internal mechanisms determining their professional knowledge selection and development.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Shifts in the construal of EFL teachers' knowledge base

EFL teachers' knowledge base conceptualization goes hand in hand with the field's self-definition. The circumscription of the essentials of know-what and know-how of the profession requires recognizing the internal and external driving forces molding language education and language teacher preparation (Richards, 2011). To the external drives refer the status of English as a lingua franca, lingual globalization, and transnational processes in education and market, which place an unprecedented demand on language competence of EFL teachers. The language education field is additionally exposed to the influence of the socio-cultural milieu in which it is set. One example from Ukraine is a recently introduced mandatory foreign language examination (Unified Entrance Examination) as an entry requirement to master's level or adoption of multiple governmental policies. At the same time, what EFL teachers should know is also determined by the insiders of the profession, i.e., language teachers, language teacher educators, researchers, and language learners themselves.

Identifying a static inventory of EFL teachers' knowledge base is problematic due to its exposure to the impact of the above-mentioned multiple factors. The XXth century quest for ideal method and dominant methodological paradigm in language education required teaching to prescription. Hence, most decisions were pre-specified and were not language teachers' preoccupation. Capacity for applying a single method irrespective of contextual demands was the only expectation held of language teachers (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Such reductivist and technicist perspective on language teachers' knowledge base was subsequently supplanted by consideration of the post-method era (Kumaradivelu, 2012) and the concept of well-grounded eclecticism (Tarnopolsky, 2018), according to which foreign language teachers make informed decisions in planning instructional intervention based on the teaching context, learners' needs, and educational aims. In so doing, teachers are expected to tap into a vast pool of knowledge aggregated by the professional field. Accordingly, the scope of teachers' knowledge should be much broader, more sensitive, and flexible compared to the previously endorsed methodological perspective. Resonant with this shift has become reconsideration of the authorship of professional knowledge whereby

language teachers from its passive consumers and reproducers now occupy a more active stance whose professional understanding feeds into and transfigures the field's specialized body of knowledge.

In a similar vein, developments in the theories of language and learning around the middle of the previous century put the field of language education on a theoretical basis, which was formerly relying more on intuition and common sense. Likewise, priorities in language teaching saw alterations. By way of example, under the influence of structuralism in linguistics and behaviorism in psychology, structural drills and reinforcement of habits, favoring implicit grammar and vocabulary acquisition through repetition, were employed in language classrooms (Fries, 1945). With the spread of cognitivism and transformational-generative grammar (Chomsky, 1957), grounding cognitive code learning, language learning was viewed as a conscious process of hypotheses formulation, and thus explicit grammar teaching saw a comeback. In the 1970ies, with the reappraisal of the role of language as a means of sense exchange, communicative language teaching emphasized teachers' ability to involve learners in genuine communication. The above developments are continually reframing the field's knowledge base calling upon activation by EFL teachers of distinct knowledge components.

2.2. Research into language teachers' knowledge base

Research into EFL teachers' knowledge is set on the multidimensional and interdisciplinary premises of teacher cognition research (Borg, 2011a), language teacher learning (Johnson & Dellagnelo, 2015), characteristics of effective foreign language teachers (Barnes & Lock, 2013; Levrints/Lőrincz, et al., 2021; Stronge, 2018), teacher evaluation (Borg, 2018), competence and expertise of language teachers (Farrell, 2015; Leung, 2009; Tsui, 2009), language teacher identity (Kapranov, 2020) among others.

Traditional considerations of language teachers' knowledge base revolve around a distinction between knowledge of and about language and its teaching, termed declarative and procedural knowledge (Richards, 2011). Disciplines of general and applied linguistics feed into declarative or content knowledge about language and its acquisition, while pedagogy and psychology provide knowledge about learning and teaching. Language teacher preparation sits uncomfortably between fields of linguistics and pedagogy, trying to support the development of knowledge of language teaching of its candidates. The complexity of this task finds reflection in literature replete with categorizations and frameworks of language teachers' knowledge (Richards, 1998, 2011; Tarone & Allwright, 2005). Mainstream research focuses on the discussion, among others, of language teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (Evens et al., 2019; Liu, 2013; Richards, 2011), knowledge of the target language (Freeman, 2017; Freeman et al., 2015), content knowledge (Ball et al., 2008; Bartels, 2009), knowledge of learners as a component of pedagogical knowledge (Canh, 2020), knowledge of the context (Tarone & Allwright, 2005), knowledge of classroom interaction (Zsu, 2013).

Pedagogical content knowledge is construed by Richards (2011) as a teacher's capacity to impart subject-matter knowledge in ways easily accessed by learners, thus constituting a foundational element of language teaching (p. 6–7). There is a longstanding debate in academia as to the way pedagogical content knowledge develops. Many researchers claim that it results mainly from teaching experience and less so in initial teacher preparation, dwarfing the role of formal education in preparing competent language teachers (Liu, 2013). As previously stated by Freeman and Johnson (1998), language teacher knowledge subsumed primarily 'the activity of language teaching and learning; the school and classroom contexts in which it is practiced; and the experience, knowledge, and beliefs of the teacher as a participant' (p. 413). Teachers were, thus, believed to be gaining their professional insight while engaging in teaching particular learners in specific contexts. As Freeman (2020) explained in his recent publication, at the time,

it was imperative to expand and share this knowledge oftentimes at the expense of pushing disciplinary knowledge to the outskirts.

Following a period of vacillations, content or disciplinary knowledge regains its status in language teacher education (Freeman, 2004). As stated by Richards (2017), it refers to knowledge obtained from disciplines that have language as their object of study, including linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics and others (p. 5). In her study Cunningham (2015) argues in favor of both implicit and explicit knowledge of the target language with identifiable consequences for both language teachers and learners. Content knowledge forms the core curriculum of language teacher preparation programs. Prospective teachers are expected to draw on this knowledge in organizing instruction, though there is no immediate connection between content knowledge and practical skill of teaching (Richards, 2011, p. 5), and in itself, it is insufficient for effective language teaching (Richards, 2017, p. 6). Despite numerous arguments in favor of content knowledge, what specifically should constitute its core to enhance the quality of instruction, is still unclear from the available research. Given sparse empirical support, the language teaching profession would continue to persist for decades supported by ideas '… based on logical and ad hoc arguments about the content people think teachers need' (Ball et al., 2008, p. 393). Yet while enhanced content knowledge can potentially bolster the quality of language teaching, 'when divorced from knowledge about teaching and knowledge about learners' (Borg, 2011a, p. 220), as well as knowledge of teaching or practical skills, it cannot vouchsafe effective teacher performance.

EFL proficiency endures as a requisite requirement as long as the language teaching profession has existed. Before the establishment of institutionalized language teacher education and long after it, language proficiency was, in fact, the only entry requirement into the profession. Its present-day status has undergone reconsideration, foregrounding other EFL teacher knowledge components. The hegemonic role of language proficiency in the structure of teaching competence has come under criticism (Freeman, 2017; Holliday, 2005; Richards, 2017). Nevertheless, it does not and should not diminish the role of the language factor in teaching effectiveness. For one thing, FL proficiency was shown to correlate with language teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, motivation, anxiety level, instructional practices, choice of tasks, types of interaction with learners, and, by extent, affecting their students (Faez & Karas, 2019; Farrel & Richards, 2007; Karas & Faez, 2020; Wyatt, 2018). One of the recent attempts to strike a balance between the ever-growing expectations of EFL proficiency level and what is attainable, is the treatment of teachers' communicative competence as a form of language for specific purposes. Rather than squarely focusing on general communicative competence, there have been calls to re-evaluate teachers' ability to operate within distinct genres and professional discourse as a viable alternative (Freeman, 2017; Freeman et al., 2015). Instructional interventions and assessment measures resounding with this idea are currently making their way into teacher education aimed at developing functional competence of EFL teachers to deliver and manage language teaching through the target language (Richards, 2017).

An emergent emphasis traceable in literature is on language learner knowledge as part of pedagogical knowledge. No matter the extent of content knowledge or language proficiency, the ultimate success of teachers' endeavors hangs on the learners themselves (Canh, 2020; Tarone & Allwright, 2005). With this in mind, Canh (2020) argues for the need to rethink the language teacher knowledge base by giving prominence to the knowledge of learners rather than treating it as ancillary to content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge. The researcher contends that learners are one of the principal sources of professional insight gained by language teachers. Understanding learners, thus, significantly contributes to effective instruction sensitive to learner needs.

Thus, there is a pressing need to embrace the practitioners' views in organizing teacher education and development, sensitive and catering to their needs. Otherwise, risks are high of furnishing language teachers with preparation experiences divorced from their actual wants. Moving on to the present study, concomitant research exploring Ukrainian EFL teachers' views on the knowledge base could not be

located. One of the central issues in language teacher education is, thus, the components of knowledge EFL teachers commonly perceive to be essential in organizing effective instruction and their principal sources. To this end, the following research questions need to be addressed:

1. What knowledge components do EFL teachers activate in organizing effective instruction based on their beliefs?
2. What are the perceived sources of EFL teachers' knowledge?
3. What features and teacher education curriculum components do EFL teachers consider relevant?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The present study was conducted with the voluntary participation of 44 EFL teachers working in Ukrainian educational institutions. A convenience sampling technique was used to recruit the subjects of the study. The respondents' teaching experience ranged from 2 to 41 years. They worked at primary (n=11), secondary (n=24), and tertiary (n=9) educational levels. All participants held BA, MA, and Ph.D. degrees in English Language and Literature. They held positions in educational establishments with the Ukrainian or Hungarian languages as an instructional medium. Their mother tongue was Ukrainian and Hungarian. The location of the study was a multi-ethnic region in Ukraine's Western part, inhabited by representatives of diverse nationalities. The interviewees' socioeconomic backgrounds did not differ significantly. The teachers were guaranteed the right to withdraw from the study at any moment without any consequences.

Table 1
Demographic data on the EFL teachers

Gender	Age	Teaching experience	Employment	Degree
5 M	28-65	2-41	Primary	BA
39 F			Secondary	MA
			Tertiary	PhD

3.2. Data collection and analysis

In this study, semi-structured interviews were undertaken to elicit primarily qualitative data on EFL teachers' beliefs about the relative importance of knowledge components. In order to increase the trustworthiness of this study, an interview protocol containing open-ended questions was developed. Its extension with follow-up questions allowed for clarification of responses. This helped counteract interviewer bias and raise the consistency of questions asked in the course of interviews. Similar questions were put to the same end, worded in a slightly different manner more than once, to probe for the consistency of responses. Phrasing direct and indirect questions likewise served to check the dependability of responses and lower the affective barrier of respondents. Such wording reduced the possibility of obtaining insincere answers on sensitive topics. To provide for the credibility of the adopted

data collection instrument, an expert conversant with qualitative research was asked to read the interview protocol. The final version of the protocol was adapted based on the expert's comments.

The participants of the study were asked about their language teaching and learning experience, what EFL teachers need to know to teach effectively, the principal sources of their knowledge, and the factors influencing their way of teaching. The interviewees were also invited to evaluate the effectiveness of their university program in preparing them to teach EFL, providing explanation to their answers, and to identify the relevant curriculum components of teacher education programs. The interviews took place either offline in the respondents' workplace or online via video software (Zoom, Google Meet) if it was problematic due to quarantine in 2021. The interviewees could answer either in Ukrainian, Hungarian, or English. The interview sessions varied in length from 18 to 50 minutes.

Data analysis was performed using the content analysis method. It presupposes not only the identification of recurrent themes in the interview pool but also their quantitative processing (Dörnyei, 2007; Griffee, 2012). The recorded and transcribed interviews were worked through, searching for emergent themes, which were then assigned codes. During the next phase of data analysis, similar themes were combined and condensed to form more generic groups, e.g., 'listening materials' and 'course books' were grouped as 'teaching resources.' Finally, the focus was narrowed down to themes directly related to the research questions. To deal with credibility issues reinterviewing (Griffee, 2012) of two respondents took place. After summarizing interview results, teachers were asked whether they agreed with the interpretation of their answers to ensure no misunderstanding of the expressed opinion occurred.

The data presented in the current study constitute part of a broader examination of EFL teachers' knowledge base. It reports the findings of the first stage of a sequential mixed-methods study exploring language teacher assumptions on a range of related issues. In the next phase of the study, the results were triangulated based on quantitative follow-up data generated with the help of a questionnaire study (paper under review).

4. Findings

The obtained results revealed the importance attached to knowledge base components by the EFL teachers. Based on the accumulated data, several themes were extracted pertinent to the knowledge base aspects identified by the participants.

4.1. Relevance of knowledge base components

When asked what an EFL teacher should know, the interviewees came up with a host of ideas, which were analyzed and systematized. Extracting and condensing themes in the interview transcriptions enabled their grouping into several categories, which are set in Table 2, supplied with frequencies of mentions and percentages.

Table 2
EFL teachers' perceived relevance of knowledge

№	Themes	Frequencies	Percentage
1	EFL proficiency	31	70,5
2	Knowledge of EFL teaching approaches, methods, and techniques	30	68
3	Ability to motivate learners	19	43
4	Knowledge of learners, their needs, interests	18	41
5	Knowledge of pedagogy and psychology	15	34
6	Motivation for teaching	12	27
7	Commitment to learners	9	20,5
8	Teachers' personality traits	8	18,2
9	Life-long learning	8	18,2

10	Technologies	7	16
11	Positive learning environment and rapport with learners	6	14
12	Communication skills	5	11,5
13	Teaching clarity	5	11,5
14	Knowledge of the target language culture	4	9
15	Knowledge of instruction organization and management	4	9
16	Knowledge of sociocultural context	3	7
17	Erudition and general intelligence	3	7

Of the multifaceted and interrelated components of EFL teachers' knowledge base, the participants expressed unanimous support for language proficiency (70,5%), followed by knowledge of contemporary language teaching approaches, methods, and techniques (68%), the difference between which was negligible. As shown in the following excerpt, language teachers were aware of the intricacies of the knowledge they strived at:

An EFL teacher needs various skills and knowledge to teach effectively: (1) a high level of language proficiency; (2) knowledge of and language teaching skills; (3) communication skills; (4) classroom management skills; (5) student engagement skills; (6) patient and calm, but firm attitude; (7) love for teaching and working with students (T29).

The third commonly endorsed theme was related to language teachers' ability to motivate learners by providing enjoyable and engaging instruction (43%), as demonstrated in the excerpts below:

An EFL teacher needs to know how to engage ALL learners with the instructional material and motivate them by instilling love for the subject (T12).

I feel challenged having to teach demotivated learners. Therefore, I believe it is essential to be able to develop learner motivation (T8).

Although mentioned by fewer respondents, motivation for teaching was also considered important for effective teaching (27%), as reflected in the answers presented below:

You must be willing to be an EFL teacher. The teacher has to know not only the subject matter, but also has to LOVE children, the language, and teaching (T31).

It is not only knowledge that matters but also dispositions for teaching. An EFL teacher must like the language and make children like it! S/he has to motivate learners by demonstrating enthusiasm (T1).

The findings of the study also revealed that (4) knowing students, their needs and interests (41%), and (5) pedagogy and psychology knowledge, which are closely intertwined, were also supported by many interviewees, as evidenced in the following comments:

An EFL teacher must be mindful of learner needs since they determine the methods utilized in a particular classroom (T22).

All students are different. An EFL teacher ought to discern their strong and weak points, their interests to organize effective instruction (T35).

To start with, a teacher has to learn as much as possible about their students. Understanding their interests and needs helps find a way to their hearts and minds, which is indispensable for effective teaching and learning (T3).

The next high-frequency aspect closely related to motivation for teaching was a commitment to learners. 20,5% of the respondents acknowledged its principal role in establishing effective instruction, as shown in the excerpts to follow:

A language teacher must sincerely love children. This realization dawned on me only with time and experience. The longer I teach, the more I come to like my learners (T1).

I derive pleasure in communicating with learners. I care for them and enjoy spending time talking to them and teaching (T7).

Another frequently endorsed aspect was teachers' personality traits which were mentioned alongside other domains of professional knowledge. Moreover, some respondents attached more weight to teachers' personality than their actual knowledge. The forthcoming comments serve to illustrate this:

An EFL teacher needs to be creative and imaginative but more essentially patient with learners. A good language teacher builds on students' strengths, encourages them by creating a supportive classroom atmosphere. A language teacher's personality should be harmonious. They should constructively correct learner mistakes and have a good sense of humor (T34).

Catalyzed by teacher motivation, the strong endorsement was voiced for life-long learning and continuous professional development, as testified by 18,2% of the responses. Such aspects of teacher knowledge as advanced use of information and communication technologies (16%), ability to establish a supportive classroom atmosphere, and rapport with learners (14%) were also seen as an asset by the participants. The following responses illustrate the numeric data displayed in Table 2:

I believe a good language teacher has to keep improving, so I invest considerable effort into self-development (T29).

To my mind, an EFL teacher has to be innovative, move with the times and engage in self-development. Also, the teacher needs to be flexible and quickly adapt to contextual demands. Computer-assisted language teaching has also gained relevance due to quarantine (T34).

Respondents likewise emphasized the relevance of clear teaching (11,5%), or, in the interviewees' terms, ability to explain the instructional material, communication skills (11,5%), and skills of organizing and managing instruction (9%). The following excerpts serve to support this data:

The teacher must know lots of things. However, the most relevant skills for EFL teachers are language proficiency, the skill of making complicated things easy, or, in other words, being able to explain the material clearly to different learners (T22).

The less frequently commented aspects were knowledge of the target language culture (9%), general intelligence and erudition (7%). The following statement sums up the obtained findings:

If you want to become just a little better in teaching, you have to learn a lot: you need to be profoundly knowledgeable, responsible, humble, loving, and patient (T17).

The data reported in Table 2 show that in giving spontaneous answers to questions as to relevant components of EFL teacher knowledge, respondents gave priority to language proficiency and communication skills, knowledge of EFL methodology, knowledge of pedagogy and psychology, including learner knowledge and ability to motivate them, establish positive classroom environment. Categorization of the responses revealed that the largest proportion of mentions concerned pedagogical and learner knowledge, as well as dispositions for teaching, like commitment to learners, the subject, and life-long learning. Instances of mentions related to language knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge were both numerous. Pedagogical technological content knowledge was also highly esteemed by the participating teachers. However, the content knowledge appeared to be overlooked by the EFL teachers, except for the target language culture knowledge.

A similar question worded indirectly (e.g., what aspects of professional knowledge or ability would you like to develop?) elicited almost identical responses. The frequently discussed knowledge components were language proficiency, pedagogical technological content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge (including reference to various aspects of language teaching), content knowledge, and pedagogical knowledge like clear teaching, making instruction enjoyable and motivating, establishing rapport with learners. Similar to the previous results, none of the participating teachers referred to knowledge about language in answering this question.

4.2. Sources of knowledge and factors impacting language teaching

Data analysis revealed that teachers derived their professional knowledge from several sources. The repeatedly mentioned sources are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3
Sources of professional knowledge

№	Sources	Frequencies	Percentage
1	Reading relevant literature and self-development	32	73
2	Teacher education programs	28	64
3	Professional development courses and conferences	21	48
4	Language teaching experience	16	36
5	Language learning experience	12	27
6	Talking to native speakers	7	16
7	Collaboration with colleagues	6	14

The participants reported relying on relevant literature and continuous self-development as the primary source of their knowledge (73%). Following were teacher education (64%), professional developmental courses (48%), language teaching experience (36%), prior language learning experience (27%), talking to native speakers (16%), and collaboration with colleagues (14%). The excerpts provided below illustrate the quantitative data set in Table 2.
My university program provided me with a good start. But right now, I believe I learn a lot from my learners. Having to solve problems and fulfill tasks related to language teaching serve as a powerful stimulus and source of my professional understanding (T11).

There were other sources of knowledge with a frequency of mentions of less than 10%, including engaging in research and, in particular, action research, study abroad programs, Ph.D. courses, and some others.

Additionally, teachers were asked to reflect on factors impacting their knowledge and teaching style preferences. Interestingly, the analysis of responses indicated that teachers were influenced by experience gained as language learners, observation of experienced colleagues, language teaching experience, study abroad programs, and professional conferences. Thus, teachers' perceptions of factors impacting their knowledge and teaching style differed from the identified sources of professional knowledge. As one of the participants commented:
Some years before, I attended a professional development course in Belgium. We had to observe an English lesson given by an eccentric-looking woman. Her peculiar appearance set me on the alert. But what a fantastic class she gave! All learners seemed to enjoy it immensely! When the lesson was over, I wanted to kiss her. So, I think this teacher turned up my world (T22).

A few participants pointed out that it was a combination of sources that shaped their professional mindset, as summarised in the following comment:
What I know about language teaching comes from many different sources, and all of them had a role in making me the teacher I am. So I can't decide which source was more or less powerful (T18).

4.3. Evaluation of teacher education programs' effectiveness

When asked to evaluate the effectiveness of their university programs, the vast majority of respondents highly rated their relevance and quality, albeit for disparate reasons. None of the participants disparaged the programs they attended as unnecessary or irrelevant. In most cases, the interviewees appreciated their programs for providing a necessary foundation for further extension of their

professional knowledge. At the same time, some teachers underlined the inherent intricacies of language teaching as illustrated in the following quotations:

I think I was taught the most important things, like the language teaching methods. But there are so many issues, which you cannot prepare for. They surface only in the process of teaching (T36).

Language teaching is extraordinarily complex, so one cannot learn about many issues from books or at university. You become aware of them once you start teaching (T14).

The university program gave me a good grounding. It disciplined me a lot. Nevertheless, you learn a lot during teaching, when dealing with tasks at hand, and learners. The classroom reality often differs from our beliefs formed at the university. That is why I learned a lot in the course of teaching (T11).

The second commonly endorsed reason was the high quality of practical language courses, which helped develop EFL proficiency. Many of the respondents also highlighted the practical orientation of their university programs:

To my mind, the university program I attended was quite effective. It wasn't overly theoretical, focusing rather on practical skills (T3).

Our university teachers felt it was essential to prepare us for real school work and supply us with usable knowledge (T29).

Last but not least, the interviewees expressed their appreciation of the trustful relationships built by teacher educators and the influence exerted by their personality as asserted in the quotation below:

It was not the content that had a profound influence on me, but rather lecturers' personality traits. The course content didn't matter at the time. I chose to attend courses because of the professors who taught them. I feel that some of them not merely taught but opened the world for us! (T17)

Meanwhile, despite general appreciation, a few respondents had some reservations as to their university programs' effectiveness because of insufficient opportunities for developing teaching skills and the time allotted for EFL methodology, pedagogy and psychology courses, as well as their formal treatment and subsidiary role in the curricula. One of the respondents remarked:

Nobody told me that someday I would have to teach English. We were mainly taught theoretical linguistics and some practical language courses. When I first faced a group of students, this revelation came as a shock! (T7)

Thus, the respondents underscored the value of teacher education, at the same time referring to the necessity of more practical experience that would prepare them for school reality and help forward theoretical knowledge transition into teaching abilities. The obtained findings reprise the challenge of the theory-practice gap plaguing many education programs in various sociocultural contexts (Karimi et al., 2021).

4.4. Curriculum content

The choice of teacher education core curriculum inductively reflects the stipulated by the professional community conceptualization of the EFL knowledge base. Several indirect questions were put to elicit teachers' views on the relevance of disciplines covered in the Ukrainian university programs. Participants professed their appreciation for opportunities to develop their language proficiency, oral and written communicative competence or, in some cases, deplored the limited opportunities to practice English. Respondents also attached great importance to language pedagogy and related course content, including individual differences in language teaching, assessment and testing, computer-assisted language learning. Culture studies and target language literature also featured regularly in the participants' discourse, though less frequently than disciplines of the language pedagogy cycle and practical language courses, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

When I went to university, my English was poor. So, first, I needed to develop my language skills. Thus, every curriculum component connected to this was useful (conversational practice, practical grammar, and so on). A little later, language pedagogy helped me a lot to prepare for teaching (T8).

Another issue transpiring in the course of interviews was the overly theoretical orientation of the language pedagogy, exacerbated by a lack of opportunities to apply language teaching and learning theories in practice. The next most frequently commented-on curriculum component was school practicum, including field experience (observation sessions), clinical teaching (teaching practice), and microteaching courses. Participants pointed to the necessity for extended practicum, observation of lessons in different schools and educational levels. Interviewees also believed that they would have benefited from more professional guidance from mentor teachers.

The next regularly alluded to curriculum component was an integrated pedagogy and psychology course, which is a mandatory discipline in teacher education programs in Ukraine. Respondents came up with a wide range of aspects of professional knowledge covered within the given cycle of disciplines. The interviewees underscored the significance of knowing learners' psychological characteristics, their individual differences, providing personalized instruction, teaching learners with special educational needs (both with disabilities and talented), dealing with learners, maintaining discipline, organizing and managing instruction, motivating learners, establishing rapport, developing empathy and others. The following excerpt showcases teachers' thoughtful comments:

An EFL teacher needs to continually develop pedagogy and psychology knowledge. No two learners or classes are alike. It is essential to be able to differentiate in teaching. What works for me in one group of learners fails in the other. Learners also change very quickly. Today's pupils are different from those I taught some years before (T35).

Controversial findings were obtained on linguistics courses, which impart knowledge about language. Respondents' opinions were divided as to their relevance for effective language teaching. In addition, some of the interviewees asserted the importance of certain areas of linguistics, while belittling others, as stated by some of the interviewees:

I could have lived without such disciplines as the history of English or theoretical grammar. I had a tough time learning the arcane information, never to use it in my teaching (T4).

Several teachers stated that all core curricular components of their university program were relevant to some extent. At the same time, interviewees deprecated having to learn many general disciplines unrelated to language teaching. One of the participants remarked:

Unfortunately, there were many compulsory disciplines of general nature, which had nothing to do with EFL teaching. They took much time and effort to prepare (e.g., history, economics, philosophy) (T29).

5. Discussion

Language teacher knowledge base remains an under-researched theme with little empirical support to guide teacher educators. To uncover the perceived needs of the EFL practitioners in Ukraine, an exploratory study was conducted to examine their beliefs as to the attached importance of the knowledge base components. The data collected through semi-structured interviews were processed using content analysis, which yielded quantitative and qualitative results.

Overall, the participants demonstrated awareness of the inherent complexity of the EFL teachers' knowledge. They expressed a conviction of the importance of the breadth and depth of knowledge, enumerating a host of respective aspects. The component of knowledge receiving firm support was language proficiency, which is congruent with the evidence provided by Moradi & Sabeti (2014). Analogously to previous research, the interviewees regarded pedagogical content knowledge, and general pedagogical and learner knowledge equally important (Tajeddin & Alemi, 2019). The results of this study

on EFL teacher knowledge constituents reprise the knowledge base model proposed by Akbari et al. (2012). Technological pedagogical content knowledge also emerged as one of the core components the participants strived to develop (Kozikoğlu & Babacan, 2019). Unsurprisingly, content knowledge or knowledge about language did not feature in the interviews, except for the target language culture knowledge, which is in line with previous research (Bartels, 2009).

However, the interview took an unexpected turn. Without diminishing the role of knowledge, the respondents took up the theme of dispositions for teaching (teacher motivation and commitment to learners), language teacher personality traits, and life-long learning as being on par with the essential components of language teachers' knowledge base. Moreover, many respondents attached greater importance to teacher dispositions and personality traits than to disciplinary knowledge. The findings of the EFL teachers' beliefs concerning the relevance of knowledge components are summarized in Figure 1, arranged on frequency counts and qualitative analysis of responses.
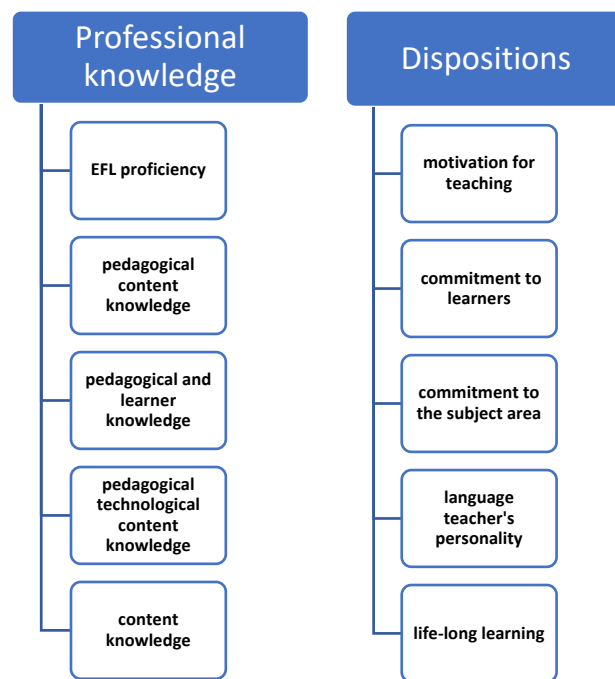

Figure 1. EFL teachers' beliefs on the interrelated components of competence

The interviewees fell back on multiple sources for professional insight. Reportedly, it exerted a compound impact on their professional mindset and competence. Similar to previous research, teachers in this study reported benefiting from reading relevant literature, initial teacher education, and professional development courses (Borg, 2011b). Other sources of professional understanding were teaching experience, prior language learning experience, talking to native speakers, and collaboration with colleagues (Jansem, 2014; Richards & Farrel, 2005). The factors impacting the interviewees' teaching preferences were not identical with the indicated sources of knowledge. Thus, the language learning experience, observation of expert teachers, and language teaching experience played a decisive role in shaping their instructional performance.

There was ample evidence that the participants appreciated initial teacher education. As in the earlier studies, the majority of respondents claimed its relevance, and its being foundational for

subsequent teaching (Akcan, 2015). Factors adding up to the effectiveness of teacher education programs were practical language courses with ample opportunities to develop language proficiency, programs' practical orientation and extensive course content related to EFL teaching, extended practicum with microteaching opportunities, and trustful relationship with university faculty. Conversely, theoretical treatment of the essentials of the profession abstracted from the reality of classrooms diminished the quality of formal teacher preparation. Meanwhile, critical issues evinced in the study pointed to teachers struggling with theoretical knowledge transfer into the practice of teaching, their unpreparedness for school realities, and a subsidiary role assigned to language pedagogy with the dominance of linguistics. These findings hold crucial implications for EFL teacher education in Ukraine, highlighting the trajectory for its development, though similar considerations appear in multiple publications from other cultural contexts (Karimi et al., 2021).

Regarding teacher education curriculum, the respondents indicated the need for enhanced development of language proficiency, drawing attention to the relevance of practical language courses. Topping the list in the frequency of mentions was also the cycle of disciplines of language pedagogy and school practicum, followed by the integrated course in pedagogy and psychology. Inconsistent results obtained on linguistics point to the necessity of raising the relevance of respective disciplines in teacher education by rigorous selection of the content and the utilized didactic approaches. On the whole, the respondents expressed their assurance of the value of most subjects making up the core curriculum. However, in their view, EFL teaching-oriented curriculum components should replace mandatory general disciplines to expedite the effectiveness of teacher education. Preferences in the participants' curricular choices resonate with the previously obtained findings of this study presented in Figure 1.

6. Conclusion and Implications

Tapping into the EFL teacher beliefs, in the given study the knowledge components deemed essential for effective teaching were explored in the context of Ukraine. The self-report data were analyzed from multiple perspectives. The study focused on the knowledge base components key to effective teaching, sources of professional understanding, and relevant curriculum content in teacher education. It also elucidated factors indirectly pointing to core components in the EFL knowledge base, i.e., characteristics and content of effective teacher education programs and their challenges, and factors impacting the instructional performance.

Overall, the participating teachers ranged the knowledge base components in the following way:
(1) language proficiency;
(2) pedagogical content knowledge;
(3) general pedagogical and learner knowledge;
(4) pedagogical technological content knowledge;
(5) content knowledge;
(6) knowledge of context.

The most widely discussed component was pedagogical and learner knowledge. Convincing evidence provided in the given study referred to teachers' placing dispositions for teaching and personality traits on par with the professional knowledge. The results gleaned in this study also indicated that knowledge held by the EFL teachers was not limited to a single source and was a dynamic product shaped by a constellation of factors. As related by teachers, it was a joint product of self-development, initial teacher education, professional development courses, language teaching and learning experience, and collaboration with colleagues. Meanwhile, their language learning and teaching experience strongly influenced their preferred teaching style. While valuing initial teacher education, Ukrainian EFL teachers

warned against the current theoretical slant of university programs, reflected in the course content selection in teacher education programs heavily loaded by linguistics and general disciplines.

Subsequent research on EFL teacher knowledge base could focus on examining the influence of their knowledge level (e.g., language proficiency, pedagogical content knowledge, pedagogical and learner knowledge) on the choice of instructional practices, academic or attitudinal gains in learners, teaching effectiveness, the correlation between teaching experience and the level of teacher knowledge in different domains, factors enhancing the development of knowledge, to name just a few.

Principle limitations of the study stem from its sample size, the researcher subjectivity inherent in findings interpretation in qualitative research, and problems associated with the adequacy of articulation of opinion by interviewees due to defensiveness, reluctance, or other reasons. The present study would benefit from additional quantitative measurements to extract more rigorous data of the analyzed phenomenon. Notwithstanding the study's limitations, both researchers and teacher educators would hopefully find it thought-provoking. Since the available empirical studies only scratch the surface in the field, more information should be in place to provide truly empowering language teacher education.

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