

## **NARRATIVES: UNVEILING TEACHERS' IDENTITIES**

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**Resumo:** Este estudo tem por objetivo narrar os resultados de uma pesquisa qualitativa interpretativa sobre o conhecimento prático de um grupo de professores de inglês como língua estrangeira. Mais especificamente, o objetivo foi identificar as regras e os princípios que orientam a prática do professor através de narrativas de vida. O resultado foi um conjunto de histórias através das quais os participantes puderam fazer conexões entre os momentos significativos de suas vidas e o seu conhecimento prático. O processo de pesquisa oportunizou aos participantes o contexto necessário para uma reflexão sobre suas identidades profissionais como professores e revelou aspectos implícitos das mesmas. Este estudo sugere que as narrativas de vida podem ser uma ferramenta de acesso ao conhecimento prático do professor e pode ajudá-lo a mudar, tanto a sua forma de pensar como a de atuar, sobretudo se usada nas fases iniciais dos programas de formação de professores.

**Palavras-chave:** conhecimento prático; formação de professor; narrativas.

**Abstract:** This study aims at reporting the results of a qualitative interpretative research on English as a foreign language teachers' practical knowledge. More specifically, the objective was to identify the teachers' rules and principles of practice, through life-story narratives. The result was a set of biographical stories through which the participants

themselves could make meaningful connections between moments of their lives and their practical knowledge. The research process as a whole offered the participants a fruitful context for reflection on their professional identities as teachers and the bits and pieces of the unknown identities turned to be a bit more known. Finally, this study points out that life-story narratives can open a window into teachers' practical knowledge, which may mean an alternative to possible changes on cognitive and/or behavioral level if introduced as a tool for reflection in early stages of teacher education programs.

**Key words:** practical knowledge; teacher education; narratives.

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este trabajo es reportar el resultado de una investigación cualitativo-interpretativa sobre el conocimiento práctico de un grupo de docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera. Mas específicamente, se buscó identificar las reglas y los principios que orientan las prácticas de esos profesores a través de las narrativas de sus vidas. La investigación generó un conjunto de historias en las que los docentes conectaron los momentos significativos de sus vidas y su conocimiento práctico. El proceso de investigación les permitió a los profesores reflexionar sobre sus identidades profesionales y reveló aspectos implícitos de las mismas. Este trabajo sugiere que las narrativas de vida pueden ser una herramienta que permite acceder al conocimiento práctico del profesor, y que lo puede ayudar a cambiar tanto su forma de pensar como su forma de actuar, sobre todo, cuando se usa en las etapas iniciales de los programas de formación docente.

**Palabras clave:** conocimiento práctico; formación de profesores; narrativas.

## Introduction

Researchers in the field of foreign<sup>1</sup> language teacher education have called for a broader theoretical base of language teacher education programs over the last decades to include knowledge, not only on methodological procedures, but also on what teachers already know

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, foreign and second language teaching/learning are used interchangeably.

and how they transform such knowledge into teachable and learnable content in practice (FREEMAN & JOHNSON, 1998, 2001; FREEMAN & RICHARDS, 1996; RICHARDS & NUNAN, 1990). Based on the assumptions that teachers acquire and produce specific knowledge named practical knowledge (ELBAZ, 1981; CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 1987; TELLES, 1997, 2002, 2004) which emerges from lived experiences in the past, from actions in the present, and from plans for the future, this study<sup>2</sup> aims at reporting the results of a small-scale interpretive qualitative study on English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' practical knowledge with a view to gaining insights for teacher education programs and research.

## 1 Rationale

Teachers' knowledge labeled as pedagogical knowledge (GATBONTON, 1999; MULLOCK, 2006); as practical knowledge (ELBAZ, 1981); or as personal practical CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 1987; TELLES, 1997, 2002, 2004) is generally understood as the set of teachers' accumulated knowledge about the teaching act that serves as the basis for their classroom behavior and activities (GATBONTON, 1999; MULLOCK, 2006). As a consequence, research on teachers' knowledge is based on the assumption that what teachers do in the classroom has its sources in teachers' thoughts, which in turn have been shaped by attitudes, values, knowledge, and beliefs learned throughout their lives as students and teachers (BORG, 2003; GATBONTON, 1999; MULLOCK, 2006).

The conception of practical knowledge developed by Elbaz (1981) and chosen to support this study refers to "a body of knowledge and expertise proper to them [teachers]" (p. 45) and encompasses "knowledge of practice as well as knowledge mediated by practice" (p. 46) [*italics in the original*]. In order to elaborate a conception of teachers' knowledge, her study views the teacher as holding and actively using knowledge to shape the work situation and guide teaching practice. Within this context, she elaborated a conception of teachers' knowledge,

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<sup>2</sup> This study is part of a wider study in which we tried to investigate teachers' practical knowledge by crossing information from different data sources: life-story narratives, recollections of practice, and sentence completion.

which she termed “practical knowledge”, in three main domains: the content of knowledge, its orientations and structure.

The first domain, the content of practical knowledge, includes five categories: knowledge of subject matter; curriculum; instruction; the self; and the milieu of schooling, which, according to Elbaz (1981), can provide us some clues on where teachers’ practical knowledge originated, how it developed, and what concepts of language and language teaching and learning underlie it. The second domain, the orientations of practical knowledge, encompasses five different categories: situational; theoretical; personal; social; and experiential. These five categories can indicate us how teachers’ practical knowledge is held. And in the third domain, the structure of practical knowledge, three terms were proposed to reflect teachers’ practical knowledge relationship to practice, to their experience, and to their personal dimension: “rule of practice”; “practical principle”; and “image”, which is brief descriptive and metaphoric statement that can unveil us how teachers’ practical knowledge is structured.

The literature in teacher education field acknowledges that the process of learning to teach is socially constructed, normative, and life-long built on different social contexts i.e., from teachers’ experiences as students in schools, in education programs and in their working communities (JOHNSON & FREEMAN, 2001). In addition, studies also acknowledge that learning to teach is shaped by different types of knowledge: knowledge about the self-as-teacher (TELLES, 1997, 2002, 2004), about the content to be taught, about the students, the classroom routine, and the contexts teachers work or will work (JOHNSON & FREEMAN, 2001). Research has shown that teacher education programs form the basis of teachers’ initial conceptualizations of language teaching and influence teachers’ lives. However, the impact on teachers may vary across studies and among teachers in the same study, as shown in Almarza (1996).

This study is based on the same assumption of Clandinin and Connelly (1987); Elbaz (1981); Gatbonton (1999); Mullock (2006); and Telles (1997, 2002, 2004), which state that teachers learn and produce specific knowledge throughout their lives that emerges during the teaching act. Thus, we intend to demonstrate that teachers’ practical knowledge is related to experiences they have lived and emerge in their classroom practices. We are going to focus on the metaphorical

expressions<sup>3</sup> in the discourse the EFL-participant teachers used to narrate their life-story. This is due to the fact that there have been very few studies that attempt to discover something about teachers' knowledge from the perspective of the teachers themselves (MUMBY, 1986) and, besides, metaphors "capture the thinking of the teacher in their own language rather than in the language of the researcher" (ibid. p. 198).

## 2 The study

This study is grounded on a qualitative interpretative theoretical paradigm<sup>4</sup> (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 1998) and aims at identifying EFL teachers' practical knowledge. We sought to answer three research questions: RQ1: What stories do the participant-EFL teachers tell? RQ2: What knowledge emerges from the participant-EFL teachers' narratives? RQ3: How is the participant-EFL teachers' practical knowledge oriented and structured in practice?

In the first semester of the year 2006, we, post-graduate students of English at a Federal university in the south of Brazil were challenged by our professors to engage in a self-knowing research as EFL teachers. Thus, we are at the same time the researchers and participants in this study. For the purposes of preserving our privacy, we adopted fictitious names: Ana, Elisa, Jennifer, and Victoria. The participant-teachers have similar experiences regarding education and language teaching. Except for Jennifer, who holds a Bachelor Degree in Business Management and currently is a Master candidate, the other three participants, Ana, Elisa, and Victoria, majored in Portuguese and English and currently hold the Master degree in English and corresponding Literature. Besides, some of them have worked in

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<sup>3</sup> According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), the essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of thing in terms of another thing. This claim is going to guide our choices regarding metaphorical expressions used by the participants.

<sup>4</sup> According to Denzin & Lincoln (1998) qualitative theoretical paradigm or qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to its subject matter and makes use of a variety of instruments to gather and analyze data in order to get an organic view of the subject at hand.

private language schools and others in both, private and regular schools as EFL teachers. They also have common idealistic and academic interests, that is, to investigate EFL teachers' knowledge and behavior to understand how teachers make sense of what they do in their classrooms (JOHNSON & FREEMAN, 2001) to contribute to a wider view of Teacher Education (TE) research in the TE field in Brazil.

Data were collected in two moments. The four participants had to tell their life-story narratives regarding learning experiences. Ana told her life-story narrative in class and audio recorded it as an example for the group. The other participants Elisa, Jennifer, and Victoria told and audio recorded their life-story narratives individually at home to save time. After the narratives were audio recorded, the participants exchanged tapes randomly for transcriptions and analysis.<sup>5</sup>

The analysis of data was also conducted in moments. In the first moment, the participants' life-story narratives were analyzed. First and individually, the researchers had to identify the type of story the participants told and the knowledge resulting from the experiences lived by them and reflected in their life-story narratives. Second, the researchers had to identify in the narratives the domains and the categories that constitute each domain of teachers' practical knowledge (ELBAZ, 1981). After that, they had to identify metaphorical expressions and map them following Lakoff and Johnson (1980). Finally, the researchers met to compare findings and get consensus when necessary.

### **3 Lived experiences ground teachers' practical knowledge**

The participants told a set of biographical stories; family, pedagogical, and professional through which they could make meaningful connections between stories in different moments of their lives and their practical knowledge. According to Telles (2002), family stories are the ones related to family members' relationship. Professional stories, the ones related to teachers' relationship with teaching and learning, pedagogical decisions, frustrations and identification with

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<sup>5</sup>The life-story narratives were produced by the participants in American English and edited by the researchers. Pauses, repetitions, hesitations, stress, among other verbal features, were avoided to facilitate reading.

previous teachers' approaches to teaching, and professional development. And pedagogical stories are the ones related to people's meaningful experiences as students and teachers related to teachers' behavior in class.

Family stories, especially in this study, are related to the participants' relationships with their parents and grandmothers. Because of specific social circumstances, the participants' family stories were interwoven with reflections on pedagogical behaviors.

Ana's parents' house was managed by her grandmother due to the fact that both her father and mother had to work full time to help support the family. There were thirteen people in the house and her grandma, "a German woman who had a very strict education", raised Ana and her siblings. Ana's grandma "looked for perfectionism in everything. The organization of the house was run by the clock; there was time for everything; exact time for meals, for work and for fun". And "this is also something strong [her] life "nowadays"; she's "always worried about the clock. Hardworking, organization, discipline, a scheduled time for everything, hierarchical position respect, adults rule versus children obey", were utterances made by Ana to depict her social context and moral values at home. Moreover, Ana's perception "that perfection leads to satisfaction and to professional realization" was also "constructed at home and she "brought it when" she "entered school" during the 60s as a student, and during the 80s as a teacher.

Extending Ana's perception of her relationship with her grandmother – "adults rule versus children obey" – to establish a parallel to explain the way she may understand and experience teacher and student interaction, we may infer, at this point of our analysis, that Ana perceives such relationship as a monologic one. By the metaphorical use of the expression versus in the utterance "imposition versus submission", which means people playing opposing roles, we may also infer that Ana perceives teacher and students playing different roles. The teacher is the one who holds the knowledge to be imposed to students whose minds are considered empty recipients and thus receive it submissively. In other words, teachers are knowledge senders and students are knowledge receptors and, by extension, teaching may mean for Ana to transmit knowledge.

In the same line, "the organization of the house", understood here as school by extension, "was run by the clock", may show that

for Ana there is always a stronger force ruling her activities. “The clock” may be metaphorically used by Ana to depict, for example, institutions that impose, in Ana’s words, a package of knowledge through school curriculum, syllabus and textbook, regardless of the diversity of school contexts. Teaching, generally speaking, may mean a package which is delivered to teachers, who deliver it to students, who receive and consume it as any other goods. On the other hand, students deliver the result of teaching to teachers, when they have to “reproduce knowledge at the end of the month through tests to show the teachers” they have “learned or not”. The teachers, in their turn, deliver it through numbers to society when the students who have not “reproduced knowledge have to repeat the school year”.

Similarly to Ana, Jennifer was taken care by her grandmother. Jennifer’s parents “were both teaching and finishing college” when she was born, “so it was pretty hard for them to be with [her] during the day”. She “went to a day-care center (in the morning) and spent the rest of the day at [her] grandma’s house”. In the day-care center she “did a lot of other things that somehow got [her] used to learning new things the whole time and not being afraid of asking questions”. The environment she “was used to, as a small child, was very stimulating, in the sense that [she] had people teaching [her] all sort of things all the time”. Her parents were teachers, so “they were the whole time creating a kind of atmosphere at home that encouraged [her] to be curious and wanting to learn”. When she was “old enough” she started going to kindergarten and “it was a lot of fun” to her. She “loved going there”. So when she started school, “it was like an extension of kindergarten” and the teachers made her “feel very comfortable there”. She “always felt [she] could ask questions and give [her] opinion about things”. She “loved learning but most of all [she] loved socializing, including in class”.

From Jennifer’s memories about her family and early school years, we may infer that she also began to construct her first perceptions of teaching and learning in the micro social context of her family, which were kept and extended to the day-care center to kindergarten and to school, as overtly stated by Jennifer in the above utterances.

We may also infer that for Jennifer, home and school are “stimulating environments” and “encouraging” and “comfortable atmosphere” for learning and socialization. This may mean that Jennifer



perceives teaching and learning in a dialogic relationship. In this sense, the teacher's role is to create the conditions for learning to occur and the students' is to help the teacher through opinions and inquiries. In short, teachers and students are partners in the construction of knowledge.

So far we may say that, at least for Ana and Jennifer, their first perceptions regarding teaching and learning were influenced by the experiences they lived at home which were similar to the ones they experienced at school. For Ana, teaching seems to be to transmit knowledge in a monologic way. For Jennifer, it seems to be a dialogic activity in which teacher and students construct the necessary conditions for teaching and learning to occur.

Elisa and Victoria made few comments about their families and about themselves when they were children. Although only a few comments were made to relate to their families, they were complemented by other aspects in the flow of their narratives showing Victoria's and Elisa's trajectory and determination to study a foreign language. Their narratives' focus was specifically on the experiences and memories related to English language learning and teaching processes. The pieces of information provided showed that both teachers know who they are and where they want to get as learners and teachers.

In the going back and forth of the narratives, the tone of the professional stories the participant-teachers told becomes confessional and appraisal. The participant-teachers perceive improvement in their teaching style nowadays, as in the case of Ana who says she "was a structuralist teacher teaching about the language and not teaching the language to use the language". So she "had to construct a new learning process in the following years in order to continue in the working market". Jennifer "really wants to be a good teacher" and thinks that only her "experience and some small courses that [she] has taken along the way are not enough". She "needs more" and that is why she is in "the post-graduation program". She "wants to know more about what exists beyond the teaching techniques" she has "learned in books".

The participant-teachers have also learned a lot with mistakes and inexperience. Jennifer stated that when she stops to think about her teaching style she can "clearly see it has improved". She said she was "really bad at first". Elisa argued that her "major difficulty during

[her] first experience as a teacher was related to the management of a class". Although she had "studied contents of History, Geography, Portuguese, and Mathematics" she, "didn't have experience and didactic experience to pass that knowledge".

They lamented when they compared past and present practical knowledge, as overtly mentioned by Jennifer: "sometimes I feel sorry for my first students". But they concluded that all experiences were part of their practice, as pointed out by Ana when saying that she "brought to classroom the same images" she "constructed at home". She was "very strict and very organized and the students had to sit in rows". She mentioned "it was nice" and that she "could identify herself doing that in that environment". Or by Jennifer when saying that "all the experiences" she "had had with the English language, specially the ones as an exchange student", and her "experiences as a student were a big part" of her practice. Elisa said she "learned many things during the classes with the interactions with students" because in both institutions she had "only to speak English and interact with students in this language".

Currently the participant-teachers are trying new challenges to bridge the gap of their professional competence, as stated by Ana in: "I had to construct a new learning process in the following years in order to continue in the working market" or by Jennifer in: "I really want to be a good teacher and I think that only my experience and some small courses that I have taken along the way are not enough. I need more I want to know more about what exists beyond the teaching techniques we learn in books". By Elisa in: "I'm still trying to improve language and to understand better how to teach students a foreign language" and by Victoria in: "I want to learn more to do a better job".

From the excerpts of the professional stories, we may say that the participant-teachers seem to have a clear picture of themselves as teachers and their needs as well. Due to the pressure of the working market, Ana engaged in a deconstruction process of her teaching model learned at home, which she seemed to enjoy, and held during her professional life, as previously mentioned. The other participants, although the motives varied among them, also engaged in development processes. Jennifer wants to know what exists "beyond teaching techniques", Elisa wants to develop linguistic-communicative and

applied competences better, and Victoria wants to improve her professional competence.

The pedagogical stories the participant-teachers told are intermingled with criticism and judgment on human ethical and moral values and suggest that they perceive them as fundamental and interconnected conditions for teaching and learning to occur, as stated by Victoria: “I try to do the things that I liked in my teachers and I avoid the things that I didn’t like”. Or by Ana in: “It was a big school with lots of students and there was no relationship between students and teachers”.

Besides that, teachers should have specific competences in their teaching area such as linguistic-communicative, applied and professional,<sup>6</sup> as stated by Elisa in: “I expected to learn English fluently and that didn’t occur, the teachers applied the traditional grammar translation and audio-lingual method in the classes”. Or by Jennifer in: “I had a good idea of what a well-prepared class was like and the classes we were having were not planned by the teachers at all”.

The participant-teachers also think that teachers should raise students’ interest through well-planned lessons and have a good relationship with their students, as stated by Ana in: “She (her Math teacher) had a different way of dealing with children, teacher and student relationship. She walked around the class and she touched the students and always had a smile on her face”. Or Jennifer in: “They were experienced and knew what they were talking about. Plus, they made the students very interested in the classes”. And Victoria, when she says that she did not like “the way they (some of her teachers) treated students, some of them used to give more attention to some of the students”.

From the pedagogical stories, we may infer that for the participant-teachers their perceptions of teaching and learning shaped and have been shaped by the experiences they have lived since early

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<sup>6</sup> According to Almeida Filho (1999, 2000) linguistic-communicative competence is constituted by the knowledge and specific skills teachers have in the foreign language which allow them to produce meanings via communicative experiences; applied competence consists in transforming theory into practice; and professional competence is characterized by the awareness teachers have of their role as educators.

stages of their formal education until the present moment; have turned to be a strong belief and part of their personal practical knowledge; have served as reference for appraisal, criteria for judgment of what is right or wrong, good or bad, as filter of what may be effective or not in teaching and learning, at least when they talk about it.

So far we may infer that the four participants have tried to put in practice what they felt worked with them as students and as teachers; their practical knowledge based on intuition and perceptions. Besides that, we may also infer that the perceptions of previous teaching and learning experiences may be important sources of teachers' practical knowledge; influence decision-making; and contribute to support and constitute teachers' knowledge regarding teaching and learning in practice.

### **3.1 Biographical stories ground the content of teachers' practical knowledge**

Based on the set of biographical stories the participant-teachers told, we may say that it was possible to identify the three domains of practical knowledge and some categories in each domain, as proposed by Elbaz (1981), although there is not a clear cut among them. Generally speaking, the content of practical knowledge was oriented by social, situational, theoretical and personal experiences the participant-teachers lived, which was structured in practice as rules and principles of practice and images (ELBAZ, 1981). In what follows we will approach the first domain, the content of practical knowledge and some of its categories and, in the sequence, the orientation and the structure of practical knowledge.

From the biographical stories Ana, Elisa, Jennifer and Victoria told, we could identify the knowledge of the milieu of schooling and of the self as teacher, as the content of the participant-teachers' practical knowledge. Regarding knowledge of the milieu of schooling, the participant-teachers emphasized teacher and students' relationships and roles, teaching and learning processes, and the role of schools.

Ana told, in broad terms, that school's and teacher's role was to transmit accumulated knowledge following the teaching method in use at that time, as shown in the following excerpt:

We had to reproduce knowledge at the end of the month... through tests to show the teachers we learned or not... if the students hadn't learned, they had to repeat the school year... In 72 I entered university. The images about teaching and learning were not different from high school. We were in 50 students ...and only three had some ability in speaking and writing... the course for me was a language course... nowadays, analyzing the experience, the teachers had to teach the language and left aside the pedagogical part of the course... language teachers taught future language teachers the language and not how to teach the language...When I studied at the university we used the book English 900. It was repetition drills... I brought to classroom the same images I constructed at home. I was very strict and organized. The students had to sit in rows. It was nice. I could identify myself doing that. I was a structuralist teacher teaching about the language and not teaching the language to use the language.

We also could identify in Ana's narratives, general knowledge of "the self as student and teacher". As a student, she perceives herself as a passive one: "we had to reproduce knowledge at the end of the month". As a teacher, as a structuralist one: "I was a structuralist teacher teaching about the language and not teaching the language to use the language". However, she feels comfortable being like that: "I brought to classroom the same images I constructed at home. I was very strict and organized. The students had to sit in rows. It was nice. I could identify myself doing that". Nowadays, as a post-graduated student, she seems to criticize the unbalanced time spent by language courses on teaching foreign language to future language teachers in relation to the time spent on the pedagogical aspect of the course: "nowadays, analyzing the experience, the teachers had to teach the language and left aside the pedagogical part of the course... language teachers taught future language teachers the language and not how to teach the language". This seems to indicate some change in Ana's perception regarding what and how to teach foreign language teachers, at least on the cognitive level.

From Elisa's narrative concerning teaching and learning experiences, we may say she perceives schools as sites for the

construction of knowledge through teacher and students interactions, as shown in the excerpt:

In 1972 in the fifth grade of elementary school I had my first contact with English. I was highly motivated to study a foreign language. I had excellent teachers, they applied the grammar translation method, but they were very good. I expected more from college. I was frustrated with the English I learned...teachers applied the audio-lingual method... From 1992 to 1995 I gave classes ...it was very nice because I learned many things during the classes with the interactions with students... From 2003 to 2005 then I returned to my city and I tried to give a feedback of my learning and I was always preparing different activities for classes the way my students learn and the best way to teach them. I think I gave good classes and especially I think I could interact well with my students and made them have good interaction between themselves.

Although Elisa had been taught by methods in which knowledge was transmitted from teachers to students, differently from Ana, she does not perceive teaching as knowledge transmission, but rather, as knowledge construction through teacher and student interaction. Elisa seems to weigh heavier how the teacher works in class to foster learning than the method s/he may use: "In 1972, in the fifth grade of elementary school, I had my first contact with English. I was highly motivated to study a foreign language. I had excellent teachers, they applied the grammar translation method, but they were very good". Teacher and student interaction may explain how she perceives successful teaching and learning from her own perspective and language:

From 1992 to 1995 I gave classes...it was very nice because I learned many things during the classes with the interactions with students... I think I gave good classes and especially I think I could interact well with my students and made them have good interaction between themselves.

From Jennifer's teaching and learning experiences, in broad terms, we may say that she perceives schools as challenging sites that encourage and motivate students' curiosity and socialization, and, by extension, classrooms, lessons, and teachers, as shown in the following excerpt:

My parents were teachers, so they were the whole time creating a kind of atmosphere at home that encouraged me to be curious and wanting to learn...kindergarten ...was a lot of fun to me.... school, [was] like an extension of kindergarten and the teachers made me feel very comfortable there. I always felt I could ask questions and give my opinion about things...I loved learning but most of all I loved socializing, including in class.

We also could identify in Jennifer's stories general knowledge of the self as student and teacher. The teachers' role is to be competent and committed to plan challenging tasks which encourage students' risk-taking to promote learning and the students' role is then to face challenges to guide teachers in teaching. Moreover, teachers have to promote a creative and fun environment for teaching and learning to occur: "my classes were full of different activities and it was nice to see that the kids were having fun, and were learning English". And finally, teaching is a continuous learning process: "I want to know more about what exists beyond the teaching techniques we learn in books".

Our perception that teacher's decision-making concerning teaching and learning model and behavior are based on the experiences the teacher has lived as student and teacher, seem to find support in Jennifer's narrative as well. Jennifer's positive perceptions regarding the school environment made her copy her favorite previous teachers' behavior in class. Fun, creativity, and diversity of activities seem to be related to successful teaching and learning in Jennifer's point of view: "I remember I always tried to remember my favorite teachers when I was in class with my students. I always tried to copy what I imagined was going to help them learn and make the class a nice place to be in".

From Victoria's narrative regarding learning and teaching experiences, we may infer that she has a humanitarian way of approaching teaching and learning in the classroom. She seems to

perceive schools as sites in which students deserve equal treatment and opportunities for learning. Similarly to Jennifer, Victoria overtly stated that her good and bad memories from the time she was a student have influenced the way she teaches, as shown in the excerpt:

I have good and bad memories from the time I was a student ... these good and bad memories have influenced the way I teach... For me it's very important to treat all students the same way. More than knowing what and how to teach, a teacher has to know how to treat students, has to care about them...it is important to treat students as human beings, not as empty boxes to be filled with contents. I want to learn more to do a better job also because of some professors who treated me as a human being and encouraged me to go on.

Victoria also weighs heavier teacher and students' relationships rather than the linguistic or the pedagogic content itself in teaching and learning: "More than knowing what and how to teach, a teacher has to know how to treat students, has to care about them". Besides, she considers students' knowledge in the process of teaching and learning: "It is important to treat students as human beings, not as empty boxes to be filled with contents". Similarly to Jennifer, she also perceives teaching as a continuous learning process: "I want to learn more to do a better job also because of some professors who treated me as a human being and encouraged me to go on".

So far we may say that the perceptions teachers get from lived experiences as students and teachers may influence their decision-making in relation to the maintenance of teaching model and behavior that seem to be positive for them, as in the case of Ana and Jennifer, or the changing of them when perceived as negative, as in the case of Elisa and Victoria.

### **3.2 Personal experiences orient practical knowledge**

Ana overtly stated that her practical knowledge is oriented by her personal experiences lived in different moments and social contexts throughout her life as a student and as a teacher, mainly by



observing her grandmother and teachers and reproducing their practice in her practice. This may mean that in and by practice Ana has also been acquiring, producing and using a body of knowledge which shaped and was shaped by multiple social contexts, meaningful for her and specific to a particular context, corroborating Elbaz's (1981) study and shown in the following excerpt:

So I taught English till 96. It was a long period and I brought to classroom the same images I constructed at home. I was very strict and organized and the students had to sit in rows. It was nice. I could identify myself doing that. I was a structuralist teacher teaching about the language and not teaching the language to use the language.

According to Elisa's life-story narrative, as a student she went through teaching methods which discard students' knowledge in the process of teaching and learning. In the grammar translation and the audio-lingual method the teacher holds the knowledge which is transmitted to students who are considered mere receptors of knowledge. However, as a teacher, Elisa overtly stated that she learned a lot with her students. Differently from the other participant-teachers, who seem to hold their practical knowledge as students, Elisa is frustrated in relation to the type of teaching she received in the past, and currently her teaching experiences point out that teacher and student interaction is an alternative for successful teaching and learning, as shown in the excerpt:

I expected more from college. I was frustrated with the English I learned... actually I wanted to learn the language. I expected to learn English fluently and this didn't occur... Teachers applied the traditional audio-lingual method in the classes. From 1992 to 1995 I gave classes ...it was very nice because I learned many things during the classes with the interactions with students.

Jennifer also stated that her practical knowledge is oriented by her personal experiences, mainly by observing her favorite teachers and imitating them in her practice, as shown in the following excerpt:

I remember I always tried to remember my favorite teachers when I was in class with my students... All the experiences I had had with the English Language, especially the ones I had as an exchange student, and my experiences as a student were a big part of my practice. And when I say teachers I say all of them, from school, the English course, my ballet classes and Arts school ...I learned in terms of teaching practice while observing my teachers.

Victoria's practical knowledge is also oriented by her personal experiences as a student and as a teacher. She overtly stated that in practice she tries to avoid things that she did not like in her teachers and imitates the ones she liked, as shown in the following utterances:

I try to do the things that I liked in my teachers and I avoid the things that I didn't like. For example, I didn't like when my teachers spend the class time talking about their private life. I never liked that and now I hardly ever talk about myself, about my private life... these memories have influenced the way I teach.

From the narratives the participant-teachers told, we may infer that their practical knowledge is oriented by methodological theories as well as personal experiences as students and teachers in different periods and situations lived in social contexts.

### **3.3 Rules, principles, and images structure practical knowledge**

The knowledge acquired and produced in practice based on the participant-teachers' social, situational, theoretical and personal experiences is organized in rules and principles and images in practice (ELBAZ, 1981).

Through Ana's biographical stories, her general principles of practice may be the following: (1) classrooms are sites to transmit knowledge; (2) the teachers' role is to transmit knowledge; and (3) the students' role is to receive it. And her rules of practice may be: (1) schools have to transmit accumulated knowledge; (2) teachers are knowledge transmitters; and (3) students are knowledge receptors.

The images related to a “German woman who had a very strict education; the organization of the house was run by the clock; and adults rule versus children obey” used by Ana to refer to teaching and learning experiences condense metaphorically her feelings, values, needs and beliefs and seem to guide intuitively her teaching (ELBAZ, 1981). The metaphorical clues given by Ana through her life-story narratives lead us to depict her as a knowledge transmitter teacher.



Figure 1: The Knowledge Transmitter Teacher\*

Elisa’s general principles of practice may be: (1) teacher and student interaction help teaching and learning; (2) knowledge should be shared through interaction; and (3) teaching is a learning process. And her rules of practice may be: (1) teacher and student have to interact in class; (2) knowledge has to be shared in class; and (3) teaching is learning.

Unfortunately, we could not identify any metaphoric image in Elisa’s narrative. However, the emphasis on teacher and student interaction was enough for us to depict her as an interactive teacher.



Figure 2: The Interactive Teacher

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\* We thank to Sabrina Melo da Silva (Illustrator artist) for the drawings.

Based on Jennifer's biographical stories, her general principles of practice may be the following: (1) classrooms have to be challenging sites that encourage and motivate curiosity and socialization; (2) teachers' role is to be professionally competent and committed to plan challenging tasks which encourage students' risk-taking to promote learning; and (3) students' role is to face challenges to guide teachers in teaching. And her rules of practice may be: (1) classrooms are sites to encourage and motivate students' curiosity and socialization; (2) teachers have to plan challenging tasks to encourage students' risk-taking in class; and (3) students have to face challenges in class.

The images "stimulating, encouraging and comfortable" related to "atmosphere" and "environment" used by Jennifer to refer to teaching and learning also condense metaphorically her feelings, values, needs and beliefs, may guide intuitively her teaching, and lead us to depict her as a risk-taker teacher, in the sense that she is always creating different and challenging activities to encourage and stimulate students' participation in class.



Figure 3: The Risk-Taker Teacher

Victoria's general principles of practice may be: (1) teachers should avoid talking about their private life; (2) teachers should establish a symmetrical relationship with students; and (3) teachers should treat students as human beings, not as empty boxes to be filled with content. And her rules of practice may be: (1) do not talk about your private life in class; (2) establish a symmetrical relationship with students in class; and (3) treat students as human beings, not as empty boxes to be filled with content.

The metaphorical image that students are “not empty boxes to be filled with content” and the emphasis on the symmetrical relationship teacher and students indicate that Victoria perceives the role of the student an important component in teaching. The metaphorical clues given by Victoria in relation to her students lead us to depict her as a humanitarian teacher.

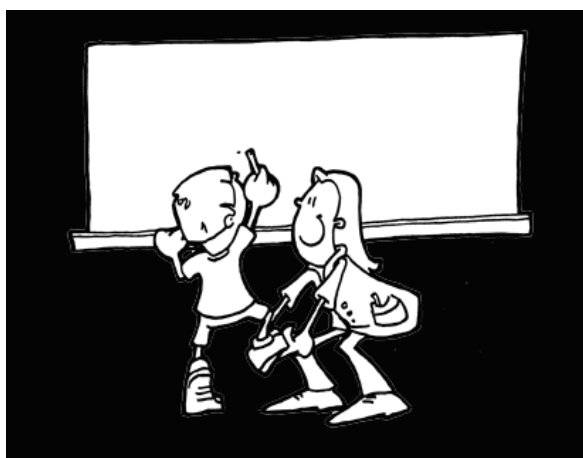


Figure 4: the Humanitarian Teacher

### Final remarks

The present study corroborated previous studies (ELBAZ, 1981; CLANDININ & CONNELLY, 1987; TELLES, 1997, 2002, 2004). The result was a set of biographical stories; family, pedagogical, and professional stories through which the participants themselves could make meaningful connections between the most relevant stories in different moments of their lives and their personal practical knowledge, as well as unveil some features of their professional identity as EFL teachers, at least the most remarkable ones.

Family stories recovered the meanings of childhood events and were re-experienced in the present again; pedagogical stories within the family context and outside it with older people and former teachers were vivid references and/or strong criticism for their present pedagogical behavior; pedagogical stories on teaching and learning were

tools to praise teaching and learning experiences and/or criticize teaching and learning damages and methods, and professional stories were the scenario in which the participant-teachers experienced and/or searched for professional models they believed. In general all stories had an appraisal and confessional tone.

Moreover, shared reflective moments on their stories triggered new perceptions. Some of the participant-teachers could map changes in the way they perceived teaching and learning in the past and in the present and old and new metaphoric images were unveiled. The research process as a whole offered the participants a fruitful context for reflections on their practical knowledge as EFL teachers as well. They had to pose themselves while revisiting some past events related to teaching and learning; criticizing, praising, assessing, reformulating prior perceptions, and reassessing the old and the new and the past and the present to plan the future. Finally, throughout the process of establishing connections with their past and present practical knowledge in relation to teaching and learning, the bits and pieces of the unknown, their philosophy of practice - rules, principles and metaphoric images, turned to be a bit more known.

From this perspective, this study points out that personal life-story narratives open a window into teachers' philosophy of practice unveiling their rules and principles of practice and metaphoric images, which may mean an alternative to change in teachers' practical knowledge on cognitive and/or behavioral levels. If introduced as a tool for reflection in early stages of teacher education programs, it may provide the necessary time teachers need to access their practical knowledge regarding teaching and learning and work on it towards changing, when necessary. Last but not least, although using only one data source – life-story narratives – it was possible to unveil how teachers' practical knowledge seems to be oriented and structured in practice. However, it is important to point out that narratives mirror only partially the saying of the teachers about their thinking on teaching and learning. A deeper study to compare teachers' saying about their thinking and doing on teaching and learning in practice may lead to more trustworthy and insightful findings.

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