

## **KNOWLEDGE BASE OF LECTURERS IN TEACHING READING COMPREHENSION AT TEACHERS TRAINING INSTITUTES: A CASE STUDY**

**Leong Lai Mei**

School of Educational Studies, Universiti Sains Malaysia,  
11800 USM Pulau Pinang, Malaysia  
E-mail: lmleong@usm.my

**Basil Jude Surin**

Sultan Abdul Halim Teachers' Training Institute,  
Jalan Kuala Ketil, 08000 Sungai Petani, Kedah, Malaysia

**Abstract:** The focus of this study was the knowledge bases of teacher training institute lecturers with regard to teach reading comprehension to Post-Graduate Teaching Diploma Course (KPLI) students who took the English Studies subject. The study involved four lecturers and it looked into the types of knowledge bases that they draw upon. Data was obtained via semi-structured interviews. From the data, six knowledge bases, which were subsumed in a typology of pedagogical content knowledge, emerged. In this report, the knowledge bases of these lecturers in teaching reading comprehension to their students are described.

**Abstrak:** Fokus kajian ini adalah pada dasar pengetahuan pensyarah-pensyarah di institut perguruan berkaitan dengan pengajaran pemahaman bacaan kepada pelajar-pelajar Kursus Perguruan Lulusan Ijazah (KPLI) yang mengikuti kursus Pengajian Inggeris. Kajian ini melibatkan empat pensyarah dan ia meninjau jenis-jenis dasar pengetahuan yang mereka guna. Data kajian diperolehi melalui temu duga separa struktur. Data yang diperolehi menunjukkan terdapat enam dasar pengetahuan menonjol. Keenam-enam dasar tersebut dirangkumi dalam tipologi "*pedagogical content knowledge*". Laporan ini menghuraikan dasar pengetahuan pensyarah-pensyarah tersebut dalam pengajaran pemahaman bacaan kepada pelajar-pelajar mereka.

### **INTRODUCTION**

One important element of a quality teacher educators is their knowledge. The knowledge base of these educators is fundamental to bring out new teachers with calibre. This is because "quality teachers beget quality students" (Musa, 2001), where in our case the term *teachers* here is applied to teacher educators while *students* represents the student teachers in teacher training institutes. Professional knowledge is a basic element that good teacher educators need to guide their supervision behaviours, and a lack of this

knowledge can be frustrating and reduces their confidence in discharging their duties (Kremer-Hayon & Zuzovsky, 1995).

The study of teachers' knowledge is beneficial in that it is able to provide them with a "valuable set of guidelines from which to move beyond" (Duncan, 1996). Besides that, identifying and using frameworks that include the knowledge, understanding and skills of teaching well are useful as they "provide clear directions to teachers who are in pursuit of professional development" (Banks et al., 2001: 4). However, research in teacher's knowledge, particularly pedagogical content knowledge among teacher educators in Malaysia is still lacking (Lee, 2002).

### **Knowledge Base of Skilled Educators**

Teacher education lecturers have varied responsibilities and roles in educating new teachers. Among them are managing dilemmas and coping with uncertainties, correcting misconceptions by attempting to influence the implicit theories about teaching, and functioning in the roles of instructor, model and mentor (Clark & Lampert, 1986). Hence, these lecturers carry with them vital roles in modelling good teaching to student teachers.

A teacher in a classroom is faced with many connected and competing decision situations in lesson planning as well as in classroom teaching (Shulman, cited in Clark & Lampert, 1986). Although teachers are confronted with diverse activities and uncertainties throughout a lesson, they are expected to execute decisions skilfully and make the lesson flow seamlessly. Any hint of doubt and difficulty has to be so well concealed that it looks effortless and simple on the outside. Based on these contentions, it can be concluded that knowledge holds the teacher in good stead and plays a requisite role in making the teacher's classroom toil seem easy.

### **Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

The concept of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) came about from studies into teachers' subject knowledge (Meijer, Beijaard & Verloop, 2002). According to Woolard (2004), transforming subject or content knowledge into PCK results in effective teaching.

Nonetheless, the notion of PCK is difficult to pin down. It has been variously described as a type of knowledge particular to teaching (Quinn, n.d.), a professional form of understanding (Woolard, 2004) and the ability to transfer subject matter from one's own knowing to another's knowing (Fernandez-Balboa & Stiehl, 1995: 294).

In Shulman's (1986: 9) opinion, PCK is:

...embodies the aspects of content most germane to its teachability. Within the category of pedagogical content knowledge, one include, for the most regularly taught topics in one's subject area, the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations and demonstrations – in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that makes it comprehensible to others. It also includes an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult: the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to learning.

In other words, PCK is the knowledge that enables teachers to make the content learnable to their students.

In addition, PCK is a "new type of subject matter knowledge that is enriched and enhanced by other types of knowledge" (Wilson, Shulman & Richert, 1987: 114). This is reflected by Calderhead and Shorrocks (1997: 13) who put forward that:

developing pedagogical content knowledge ... seems to require the orchestration of a wide variety of knowledge about teaching ... understanding of the subject, children, abilities and interests, how they tend to respond to different situations, appreciation of different teaching strategies, how classroom activities might be managed.

As such, PCK is not useful as a stand-alone knowledge it needs to assimilate with the other knowledge categories. Fernandez-Balboa and Stiehl (1995: 294) observe that:

separately each ... component (of a typology of knowledge base) is of little use to the teacher. It is only when the teacher is able to integrate them all and apply them appropriately (at the right time, for the right students, in the right circumstances) that superior teaching will occur ... due to the integrative character of pedagogical content knowledge, enhancing any of these components will also enhance pedagogical content knowledge as a whole.

An expert or skilled teacher possesses a high level of PCK. Moreover, Gudmundsdottir (1991) believes that PCK is the most important part of the knowledge base of teaching that differentiates an experienced teacher from a novice or even a scholar. The experienced teachers would often have elaborate models to help them in their vocation (Gudmundsdottir, 1991). The importance of PCK is reiterated by Shulman (1986, 1987) who considers it as a vital part of

teachers' practical knowledge. This practical knowledge is formed from the teachers' own experience in the classroom (Calderhead, 1987).

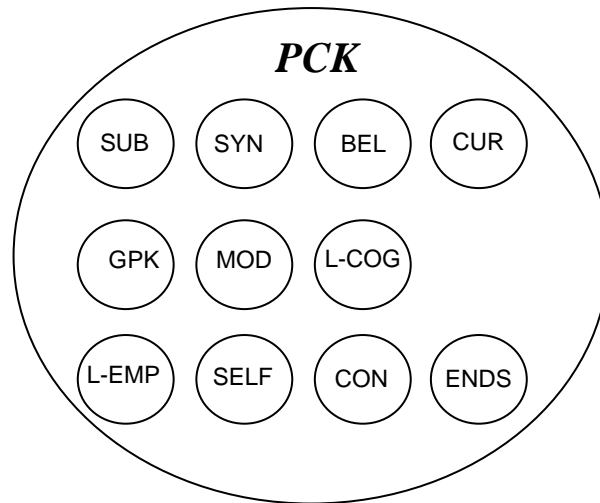
Cochran, DeRuitter and King (1993), note that PCK is acquired and developed through the numerous exposures and experiences in classroom settings with the students. It is acknowledged that PCK develops in the context of the teachers' classroom experiences (Van Driel, Verloop & De Vos, 1998). It means, as different teachers teach different sets of students in different classroom situations, their experiences will necessarily be different. As a result, their construction of PCK may also differ.

### **Typology of Pedagogical Content Knowledge**

The typologies of PCK presented by Cochran, DeRuitter and King (1993), Fernandez-Balboa and Stiehl (1995), Van Driel, Verloop and De Vos (1998), and Turner-Bisset (1999) had emphasized the integration of several knowledge categories in their formulation of PCK. Nonetheless, Turner-Bisset's knowledge base model, among the typologies mentioned, seems to be the most comprehensive in terms of the number of discrete categories. There are 12 knowledge bases in Turner-Bisset's model (1999: 43):

1. Substantive subject knowledge (SUB)
2. Syntactic subject knowledge (SYN)
3. Beliefs about the subject (BEL)
4. Curriculum knowledge (CUR)
5. General pedagogical knowledge (GPK)
6. Knowledge/models of teaching (MOD)
7. Knowledge of learners: cognitive (L-COG)
8. Knowledge of learners: empirical (L-EMP)
9. Knowledge of self (SELF)
10. Knowledge of educational contexts (CON)
11. Knowledge of educational ends (ENDS)
12. Pedagogical content knowledge (PCK)

Each of these bases is represented as sets, in which pedagogical content knowledge is an overarching set that includes all the other 11 sets. Figure 1 shows the relationship among these knowledge bases.



**Figure 1.** Knowledge bases for teaching (Turner-Bisset, 1999)

### **Purpose of Study**

This study was an attempt to offer a description of lecturers knowledge bases in teaching reading comprehension to Post-Graduate Teaching Diploma Course (KPLI) students in teacher training institutes.

This study aimed to answer the following research question:

"What are the lecturers' main knowledge bases of teaching reading comprehension?"

This study was carried out because there is a need to consider "teachers' knowledge and beliefs and the contexts in which they are developed and used in order to understand how teaching and learning occur in classrooms and how they might be improved" (Calderhead, 1996: 721). Furthermore, the identification and use of frameworks encompassing the "knowledge, understanding and skills that describe effective teaching" are useful as they "provide clear directions to teachers who are in pursuit of professional development" (Banks et al., 2001: 4).

The information gleaned regarding the knowledge bases of lecturers at teacher training institutes is pertinent because their students, who are to be practising teachers eventually, learn from them. Therefore, the knowledge passed on from

lecturer to student may in time mould the knowledge bases of these KPLI student teachers.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The present study was a qualitative one. Thus, a semi-structured interview was used to establish the lecturers' knowledge bases of teaching reading comprehension. This method was adopted so that the lecturers were able to freely give their ideas of the various aspects of teaching reading comprehension to their KPLI students.

Four participants were selected for this study. They were chosen using purposive sampling (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006) with the criterion that they were teaching, or have taught, reading comprehension to KPLI (Minor) English Studies student teachers in the last two years. The four participants were lecturers from the English Studies Unit of the Language Department at three teacher training institutes in the north-western part of Peninsular Malaysia.

The semi-structured interview questions encompassed the concepts of reading, text and teaching. These concepts are the concerns of Part One in Nuttall's (1996) 'Teaching Reading Skills in a Foreign Language', a text in the reading list of the KPLI (Minor) English Studies syllabus.

In data analysis, data from the semi-structured interview were first transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, the "framework analysis approach" (Ritchie & Spencer, cited in Lacey & Luff, 2001: 9) was used. The process of the analysis in this approach comprises the following stages:

1. Identifying the thematic framework
2. Matching themes to key points
3. Transferring key points into a thematic chart
4. Mapping and interpretation

In this study, the constituent categories in the Turner-Bisset model (1999) were utilized as the analytic framework for interpreting and representing the findings of this study of lecturers' knowledge base in the teaching of reading comprehension to KPLI student teachers.

### **Analysis of Data**

From the transcription of the interviews, the following knowledge bases were established from the participants in this study. The identifiers (PA), (PB), (PC)

and (PD) were used to denote verbatim responses of participants A, B, C and D respectively.

*Substantive subject knowledge (SUB)*

Four themes related to subject knowledge emerged from the interview data, i.e., definition of reading comprehension, nature of reading, concept related to reading comprehension and nature of texts.

The participants were in complete agreement that reading involves the understanding of content or to get meaning of the text read. For example,

(PD): Reading comprehension ... reading a text ... from various sources ... different types of text and then the ability of the students to understand what is in the text.

However, one participant defined reading to also include "reading for fluency and accuracy". Here, reading aloud was believed to play a vital role in text comprehension. Generally, all the participants were of the opinion that reading is an active process and it involves meaning-making.

An interesting issue that emerged was the use of literary texts in teaching reading comprehension. It was mentioned that the literariness of texts is useful for teaching.

(PA): Any text has a certain amount of literariness, it's a cline ... the higher the literary level the higher will be the quality of the work probably from canonical writers ... but even low literary works like a travel brochure can be exploited for reading tasks ... the more the literariness the better ... to cultivate reading ... to use as a tool.

In general, all the participants agreed that reading is an active process and involves meaning making.

*Beliefs about the subject (BEL)*

All the participants stressed that the ability to read well was essential, especially the students who would be Science and Mathematics teachers. However, this ability to read well and comprehend what was read was seriously impeded because of students' lack of vocabulary. Thus, reading and vocabulary were seen to be the answer to overcome the problems students faced.

- (PC): They have limited vocabulary. Unless you expand your reading, you are unable to come up with a range of vocabulary that is necessary for you to teach ...

One participant believed that using literary texts in reading comprehension lessons was crucial in promoting understanding of the self and forming the ability to understand inherent or connotative meaning. This participant also believed that reading does not only focus on textual meaning but also to include greater ideals of self and societal betterment. Another participant held the opinion that to improve reading capability, students need to have good reading aloud skills.

*General pedagogical knowledge (GPK)*

The participants in this study revealed a strong general pedagogical knowledge base. This was evidenced by the depth of detail given during the interviews. All the participants have knowledge of a wide repertoire of teaching strategies and activities to use in teaching reading comprehension. These findings are described under eight subsections.

(a) The use of Science and Mathematics-based reading materials

In their teaching, a common element that came out in the interviews was the participants' use of Science and Mathematics-based reading materials in reading comprehension lessons. For example;

- (PB): I'm teaching Maths and Science students. I will try to get materials ... if for KPLI Maths, I will try to get anything from the lecturers' ... about Maths ...

(b) Text selection based on pedagogical reasons

The criteria of selecting texts for teaching reading comprehension were based on pedagogical as well as student-based reasons. Some of the pedagogical reasons were:

- i. selection of authentic texts
- ii. usefulness of texts for teaching and learning
- iii. texts related to learning outcomes of reading lessons



(c) Text selection based on student-related reasons

Some of the student-related reasons influencing the selection of texts were found to be:

- i. prior knowledge
- ii. motivation level
- iii. language proficiency
- iv. maturity

One participant said that since the KPLI students were adults, their interests had to be taken into consideration when selecting reading materials to be used to teach them. Chief among them were current news or topics related to their lives.

Put forward, too, was an interesting idea regarding text selection, in that students, instead of lecturers, were given the task to choose the texts to be used in the classroom. This was said to be a motivating factor for students to read.

(PD): Most of the time, I would get the students to think of the topic of interest, sometimes even they look for the reading material they are going to use in class. That will be more fun for them because they are reading materials they get ... something that they would like to read about ...

(d) Selection of teaching strategies

A host of teaching strategies manifested themselves from the interviews conducted. Nevertheless, some of the most common strategies were those that focused on tasks, problem solving, collaborative group work, discussion and the integration of skills.

In general, the participants felt that reading should be taught integratively with the other language skills, namely, listening, speaking and writing.

One respondent's strategy, which was different from the others, in helping the students improve their diction and reading aloud skill was to record on tape their reading of a very simple text. A comparison was then made between the students' recording and the lecturer's recording of the same text.

(PC): I gave them a text, a very simple passage from a Year 6 book ... I taped their reading, a few people, and did a comparison and showed them their own product ... I taped my reading and I told them that this is sort of benchmarking, how you should read this passage ...

(e) Model of classroom teaching adhered to

The pre-, while- and post-model of a reading comprehension lesson was generally adhered to by the participants.

(f) Roles of lecturers in reading comprehension lessons

Roles of lecturers in reading comprehension lessons mentioned by the participants were varied. However, among the common ones were "transmitters of knowledge" and "facilitators". Other roles that were mentioned include "partners in discussion", "devil's advocate" and "evaluator".

(g) Simplifying learning in the planning stage

According to the participants, to ensure success in reading comprehension lessons, pertinent decisions have to be made during the lesson planning stage itself. Some of the decisions involved were text selection and adaptation, and activities. Instances of these views were:

(PA): I think the choice of text ... if I had planned well and I adapted the text, even ... literary texts, if I adapt the text to suit the particular group of pupils, I think (lack of comprehension) can be minimized.

(PC): ... going from very simple tasks to moderate to difficult tasks. By giving them activities like word games, quiz, then, probably more difficult tasks, like translating a passage from another language to English ...

(h) Simplifying learning in the teaching stage

In the teaching stage, the techniques used by the participants to help students grasp the lesson content include breaking up long texts, translating text to a familiar language, reading in groups, and using a dictionary. For example:

(PB): ... if the text is long ... I will divide it into sections and ... ask questions.

(PD): If the text is very tough, I would ... kind of take the text by parts ... get them to predict or get through or to guess ... in parts. That will simplify or make it easier for them to comprehend ... also give them questions ... to guide their reading.

However, in general, using a dictionary was the last resort in trying to comprehend texts because real life reading does not need the comprehension of every word in the text.

*Knowledge/models of teaching (MOD)*

All the participants voiced their knowledge of teaching reading comprehension. Their awareness was evidence of established practice of reading. Some of the knowledge expressed includes:

- i. teaching reading is different from testing reading,
- ii. teaching using authentic materials,
- iii. teaching decisions are influenced by student factors,
- iv. reading should be taught together with the other language skills,
- v. teaching reading should consider real life purposes.

*Knowledge of learners: Cognitive (L-COG)*

The participants had good knowledge of their students based on their experience in teaching them and in having regular contact with them. The participants' general knowledge of their students' reading ability and what their students consider difficult when reading a text were similar across the participants. Among them were:

- i. knowledge of learning strengths of their students,
- ii. knowledge of students' learning ability and weakness related to reading comprehension,
- iii. knowledge of students' attitudes towards learning.

*Knowledge of educational ends (ENDS)*

All participants had general goals of teaching reading comprehension. These goals can be grouped into three broad areas, namely, helping students to

comprehend texts, training students to access English texts fast, and developing language elements.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings from the interviews showed that the participants in this study relied upon or used seven knowledge bases of the 12 in the Turner-Bisset's model. The seven knowledge bases were:

1. Substantive subject knowledge
2. Beliefs about the subject
3. General pedagogical knowledge
4. Knowledge/models of teaching
5. Cognitive knowledge of learners
6. Knowledge of educational ends
7. Pedagogical content knowledge

Referring to Turner-Bisset's conceptualization, pedagogical content knowledge – the seventh knowledge base listed above – is the knowledge base which encompasses the preceding knowledge bases. PCK is, therefore, an overarching set that includes all the six categories of knowledge bases listed.

Although only seven of the 12 knowledge bases were identified as the lecturers' main knowledge bases of teaching reading comprehension, the seemingly incomplete knowledge base components is natural. Different educators have different combinations of knowledge bases (Turner-Bisset, 1999). This is attributed to the dissimilar teaching experience or beliefs of each group of educators. Nonetheless, "due to the integrative character of pedagogical content knowledge, enhancing any of these components will also enhance pedagogical content knowledge as a whole" (Fernandez-Balboa & Stiehl, 1995: 294).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study on teacher training institute lecturers' knowledge base in teaching reading comprehension to KPLI students is limited and exploratory only. The knowledge bases in the model would, nonetheless, be useful to function as standards of practice for lecturers in such institutes.

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