Positivist or constructivist paradigms in MA TESOL programs: developing a knowledge base for TESOL in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

This study explores twelve Saudi teachers’ course content and experiences in local and international MA TESOL programs. The researcher uses an epistemological lens to consider the theoretical content derived from both behaviourist and cognitivist learning theories, which are part of a positivist paradigm in contrast to constructivist pedagogical knowledge concerned with teachers’ knowledge construction of teaching through practice and reflection. The findings suggest that TESOL programs are primarily founded on a positivist paradigm, focusing on content and pedagogical knowledge. The researcher calls for constructivist approaches that prioritize practicums, engagement with contextual sociocultural histories, and students-teachers reflective work.

1. Introduction

The knowledge base of Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE) has been a topic for debate regarding what should constitute education of teachers: knowledge about language and teaching pedagogy or discussions about how teachers learn to teach and conduct teaching according to their beliefs and social values across contexts (Johnson, 2006; Cross, 2010). However, to the author's knowledge, there is limited research about the impact of epistemology on the content of education and training of SLTE in MA TESOL programs. Therefore, to understand the augmenting theories of SLTE, the literature of this study addresses the content of SLTE in terms of curriculum and pedagogy using an epistemology lens (see Figure 1). In light of this investigation, this article examines the MA TESOL knowledge of twelve female Saudi graduates from nine different universities with MA TESOL degrees. The analysis of their MA knowledge base was guided by; first, the literature reviewed in this study to explore the theories of knowledge supporting the content of SLTE in MA TESOL programs, i.e., the positivist or the constructivist paradigm. Second, Freeman’s (2009) three Dimensions of Scope of SLTE to explore the features of SLTE in MA TESOL programs. Finally, I discuss the results, limitations of the study and recommendations for future studies.

2. SLTE: an epistemology lens

A paradigm refers to the theory that underpins our thinking about knowledge as well as guides our research in education (Hwang, 1996). It consists of both ontology which evolves around the nature and essence of reality and epistemology, which expands on the methods of knowledge navigation (Ling, 2017). My core focus is the concept of epistemology in SLTE, which in this study means the underpinning philosophies and perspectives of SLTE in MA TESOL programs. In this respect, I found that we have two distinctive paradigms in SLTE curriculum and pedagogy: positivist and constructivist. These two paradigms have promoted and supported how pedagogical instruction is shaped and planned in education. Initially, positivist is the rational work of scientists who utilize scientific procedures to defend their views and build knowledge relying on quantification and statistical data (Hwang, 1996). In education, the behaviourist and cognitivist learning theories are conceived by the positivist paradigm (Hwang, 1996). They are both based on a planned procedure that is channelled by predicted learning behaviours that are then analysed and measured using reliable tools to assess the learning outcomes (Cunningham, 1992 cited in Hwang, 1996); in other words, top-down and structured education policies. As such, the managerial discourse defined by Sachs (2001) is also conceived by the positivist paradigm. In this standpoint, education becomes primarily concerned with achieving the goals of the learning institutions and the needs of the market (Sachs, 2001) rather than meeting the individuals’ learning needs in accordance with their cultural and educational backgrounds. In the next section, I explain SLTE in relation to the positivist paradigm.

Primarily, SLTE focuses on linguistics and knowledge about English as a second language (Johnson, 2006; Richards, 1987). The base knowledge of this paradigm is pure theoretical knowledge supporting the

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behaviour approach that is teaching teachers how to meet students learning outcomes as well as supporting the cognitive approach that focuses on teachers’ knowledge of teaching that impacts their decisions on practice and instruction (Johnson 2006; Freeman and Johnson, 1998).

This knowledge I classify as the positivist paradigm, which shares the same merits found in the theoretical base of TESOL (Richards, 1987), covering knowledge of English linguistics and English as a second language (Richards, 1987; Johnson, 2006). Meaning that teachers learn about the fields of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and language pedagogical knowledge of ELT (Freeman, 2020) using structured and disciplinary classroom instruction to meet particular learning outcomes promoted by the education provider. The importance of this view to knowledge is driven by the fact that teaching is understood as a behaviour and a cognitive practice (Ellis, 1997). To further explain, according to Graves (2009), during 1970–80, SLTE was focused on content knowledge which included language and pedagogy. In this perspective, it was assumed that teachers come with no knowledge about language and teaching, then the input—language and teaching knowledge—is conveyed and practiced, to be best implemented in the classroom—output (Johnson, 2006; Cirocki et al., 2019).

Not long ago, it is believed that SLA ownership of SLTE is declining, and more attention is emerging that considers teachers’ views and beliefs about language education and the meaning of teaching across contexts (Troudi, 2005). This decline is because focusing on the content, and pedagogical knowledge was found to be technical, have a limited contribution to what takes place in the classroom, and could not be transferred into a useful knowledge that could be employed in classroom teaching (Richards, 1987; Troudi 2005; Freeman 2020). Therefore, there are calls for a shift a conversion towards a sociocultural turn in SLTE which is, according to Freeman (2009) is based on activities or social practices of professional development that are focused on identity development within a specific context. It is a practice of an enlightened knowledge about socio-political and context factors in SLTE that assists teachers to analytically understand how they situate themselves in language teaching, their students’ learning roles in such a context, and teachers’ ability to adjust their knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of different teaching contexts (Dogancay-Akcuta, 2006; Faez and Valeo, 2012). This sociocultural turn in SLTE is derived from the constructivist paradigm. The constructivist paradigm is defined as the meaning-making of knowledge that is greatly influenced by the individual personal experience and sociocultural factors (Hwang, 1996). In education policy and planning, the democratic discourse defined by Sachs (2001) is resonated from the constructivist paradigm. According to Sachs (2001), under the democratic discourse teachers’ learning values, beliefs, and expertise are recognized using self-narratives. Consistent with this view, the sociocultural turn to SLTE allows teachers to voice their opinions and tell their stories about how they learn to teach and conceptualize the knowledge of teaching across different contexts (Troudi, 2005; Johnson and Golombok, 2020). Such an approach is also known as the personal practical knowledge (Clandinin and Connelly, 1986 cited in Golombok, 1998), which in SLTE means “teachers’ knowledge interacts with and is reshaped by the reconstruction of their experience through stories” (Golombok, 1998, p. 448). Thus, the constructivist paradigm shares the same merits found in the sociocultural turn in SLTE: the focus on personal experience, which is teachers’ teaching and learning experience, and the sociocultural factors framing this experience and contributing to the construction of teachers’ identity while constructing meaning. In the case of SLTE, this meaning construction task is learning how to teach English across contexts. Such pedagogical instruction is found to be similar to Wright’s (2010) description of pedagogy found in the sociocultural turn to SLTE, a shift in knowledge acquisition from being transmissive to constructive, allowing students teachers to engage in actual teaching and experiencing knowledge construction through inquiry-based learning and elements of critical pedagogy that are based on experience and reflection. Therefore, in the last twenty years, a growing body of research has evolved advocating for the education of teachers that focuses on how their prior knowledge and experience could influence their teaching across contexts (Canagarajah, 2016; Freeman, 2009; Johnson, 2006; Mullock, 2006; Wright, 2010; Vélez-Rendón, 2002). Freeman and Johnson (1998) argue that teachers are not ‘empty vessels’ but hold experience, prior knowledge, beliefs, values, and perceptions about teaching formed and constructed within a particular sociocultural context. Such factors helped assemble their knowledge about teaching and should be included in SLTE programs through reflective practices and classroom inquiry to allow teachers to understand themselves as teachers and how their knowledge is contextually constructed (Freeman and Johnson, 1998). Furthermore, Faez and Valeo (2012) point out that teachers enact their education through their experience, assumptions, and personal differences and can explain it by their context. This means that teachers learn through formal and informal experience and then situate their knowledge according to certain surrounding conditions such as elements of power (Pennycook, 1989), sociocultural factors, personal factors, which includes their beliefs and values, and then they construct and theorise knowledge in the form of teaching methods -post methods pedagogy-which they claim as their own (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Johnson, 2003, Johnson, 2006; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993; Cirock, Madyarov and Baecher, 2019). It also means that teachers need to grow awareness of themselves as learners, their own identities, and how they construct knowledge within their contexts. Teachers’ professional identity has a significant role in the constructivist approach to SLTE. This significance is because teachers’ choice of methods, teaching practices, understanding of their roles as teachers, their own emotions, decisions, and the way they justify and explain themselves within the context they work, is based on the assumptions and beliefs that underlie their professional identity (Pennington, 2015; Pennington and Richards, 2016; Connor, 2008; Macle, 1993). It is a compelling course of interpretation and reflection of experience (Beijaard et al., 2004). In doing so, each teacher draws back to

Figure 1. SLTE: An epistemology lens.
his or her own professional, cultural, political, and individual identity in perceiving education and teacher practices (Varghese et al., 2005). The sources from which they construct their identity are their teaching and learning history, the school and classroom culture, the social interaction of teachers in the workplace, teachers’ past experiences as students in schools and university classrooms, as well as the jobs they occupied before they entered teaching (Pennington and Richards, 2016; Trent and Gao, 2009). Therefore, each teacher develops his or her own teaching culture that translates into what type of values he or she believes in when teaching (Beijaard et al., 2004).

To conclude, SLTE literature discussed the refinements of SLTE teachers’ education. It is based on the positivist paradigm focusing on meeting students learning outcomes and teachers’ professionalism in terms of cognitive knowledge of SLA. Then scholars call for moving to the constructivist paradigm wherein teachers’ prior knowledge, culture, context, and identity were recognized in learning how to teach.

In the Saudi context, many graduates attended different MA TESOL programs locally and internationally. However, our awareness of the knowledge base that constitutes SLTE programs they attended in North America, Britain, and Australia (NABA) and Saudi Arabia TESOL and whether such programs are based on positivist or constructivist paradigms is limited. This research study is designed to answer the following questions:

1. What was the content of the MA TESOL programs attended by female Saudi teachers?
2. What were the features of the MA TESOL programs attended by female Saudi teachers?

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants and their context

The participants were twelve female Saudi teachers who graduated from MA TESOL NABA and Saudi Arabia between 2013-2018. Their BA degrees are in English Literature and Linguistics but not language teaching. As for their graduate training, after finishing their B.A. degrees, they joined the King Abdullah Scholarship program, a national scholarship program that offers free scholarships to Saudi students and were able to finish their MA degrees in TESOL. They received an MA in TESOL from nine universities distributed as follows: two participants from Australia, five participants from US, three participants from Saudi Arabia (attended the same university), and two participants from UK (attended the same university) (see Table 1). The program they attended was under the Art and Humanities or Education departments.

The participants’ teaching experience varied between one to six years. They are all teaching in two EFL institutes in two different universities in

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**Table 1. Participants’ MA course plans.**

| Country & number of participants | Duration | Semester 1                                                                 | Semester 2                                                                 | Semester 3 | Semester 4 |
|---------------------------------|----------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| AU graduate                     | 1.5      | Interacting with research in education contexts                             | Language culture and curriculum                                             | Thesis     |            |
|                                 |          | Developing learners and learning                                            | Pedagogy and assessment in TESOL                                             |            |            |
|                                 |          | Investigating issues in global contexts                                     | Research approaches in research                                              |            |            |
|                                 |          | Challenging curriculum, pedagogy & assessment                              | Research project in education                                                |            |            |
| AU graduate                     | 1.5      | Presenting academic discourse                                              | Research in applied linguistics                                              | English in globalized world       |            |
|                                 |          | Technology and language learning                                           | Quantitative methods in language studies                                    | Understanding education in context |            |
|                                 |          | Language testing                                                            | Language curriculum design                                                   | Grammar in use                      |            |
|                                 |          | SLA                                                                         | Sociolinguistics and language learning                                      |            |            |
| US graduate                     | 1.5      | SLA                                                                         | Teaching English as a second language                                        | Teaching EFL in Arab world         |            |
|                                 |          | Teaching people culture                                                    | ESL assessment                                                               | Translation theory into practice   |            |
|                                 |          | Language and society                                                       | Reading for English language learners                                       | Structure English language         | Multimodal texts |
| US graduate                     | 2        | Principle and practice of TESOL                                              | SLA                                                                         | Phonological grammar & discourse 1&2 | Practicum |
|                                 |          | Phonetics and phonology                                                    | Linguistic, literature & TESOL                                               |            |            |
| US graduate                     | 2        | SLA                                                                         | ESL assessment                                                               | Introduction to graduate English study | Thesis  |
|                                 |          | Teaching English as a second language                                       | Teaching people of other cultures                                           | Structure of the English language |            |
|                                 |          | Research methods                                                            | Syntax                                                                      | Composition theory and practice   |            |
|                                 |          | Morphology                                                                  | Testing and curriculum development                                          |            |            |
|                                 |          | Methods of forging language teaching                                        | Teaching practicum 1&2                                                       | Professional and ethics            |            |
| US graduate                     | 2        | Writing methods in TESOL                                                    | Cross-cultural teaching                                                      | Reading for TESOL                  | Foundations of education |
|                                 |          | Expository writing SSCI                                                     | Effective communication in education                                         | Computer assisted language learning | Curriculum design in TESOL |
|                                 |          | Expository writing SSCI                                                     | Effective communication in education                                         | Computer assisted language learning | Curriculum design in TESOL |
|                                 |          | Language curriculum design                                                 | Language curriculum design                                                   | Principle and practice of TESOL    |            |
|                                 |          | Corpus-based approaches to language description                            | Language curriculum design                                                   |            |            |
|                                 |          | Descriptive English grammar                                                 | Second language learning principles                                        |            |            |
|                                 |          | Discourse analysis for language teaching                                    | Language testing principles                                                  |            |            |
| US graduates (1&2)              | 1        | English phonology                                                           | Written language                                                            |            |            |
|                                 |          | Issues in Bilingualism                                                      | Teaching young learners                                                      |            |            |
|                                 |          | Information technology for language teaching                               |                                                                            |            |            |
| Saudi Arabia graduates (1, 2, &3)| 2        | SLA                                                                         | Special Topics in TESOL                                                     | Teaching practicum                 | Thesis     |
|                                 |          | TESOL methodology                                                           | English for specific purposes                                                | Testing and assessment             |            |
|                                 |          | Curriculum design and development                                           | Research methods in TESOL                                                    |            | Practicum  |
Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Participants teach preparatory year students who are 18–20 years old. Like the foundation year in international universities, this preparation year aims to prepare students with the academic skills needed for university. Their job description is a language instructor entitled teaching EFL to Saudi students for 18 h a week. The students and the participants share the same cultural background. In the EFL institute, language instructors are not required to complete their Ph.D. degrees or conduct research studies. Therefore, holding an MA in TESOL means that the language instructor is well qualified to teach in an EFL institute.

In each institution, the heads of units and departments set the context of education and decide the values and principles of EFL teaching. These values and principles influence the teaching and learning norms in the institution. Therefore, language instructors follow textbook and model plans of teaching and assessment prepared for them to implement by their language institute. They prescribe textbooks that Cambridge University Press and National Geographic published. The focus is to teach the four language skills found in those textbooks, including speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Hence, language instructors’ main task is not creating lesson materials, designing assessments, or planning language syllabus but teaching inside the classroom. This teaching practice demands a high capacity for developing and planning teaching strategies for each lesson.

3.2. Methodology

This qualitative study explores and uncovers the course content and program features of MA TESOL programs attended by twelve female Saudi teachers. For this purpose, directed content analysis in data collection and analysis was used (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005), which means that our understanding of a certain phenomenon is incomplete and needs further investigations (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In this study, we know about two types of the knowledge base in SLTE: a theoretical-base of TESOL and personal practical knowledge-base of TESOL (Clan-dinin and Connelly, 1986 cited in Golombok, 1998), but further exploration is needed regarding the positivist and constructivist paradigms operating in MA TESOL programs. In this respect, the data collection method and analysis of this qualitative research study are guided and predetermined by two theoretical frameworks. First, the literature reviewed in this study which explores knowledge theories underpinning the content of the MA TESOL programs, i.e., a positivist or a constructivist paradigm. Second, Freeman’s (2009) three Dimensions of Scope of SLTE to explore the features of MA TESOL programs. Therefore, the interview questions revolved around them (See Figure 2). They include the substance of SLTE, which is what participants are anticipated to learn through SLTE plans; engagement addresses how they are anticipated to learn through these plans; and influence/outcome evaluation of the outcomes of their learning through SLTE content (Freeman, 2009).

3.3. Data collection

After receiving approval from the English Language Institute (ELI) Ethics Committee to conduct the study, I communicated with 30 female teachers holding MA and teaching in two English language institutes in two different universities in Jeddah. The communication was conducted via email for their consent to participate in the study. Only twelve agreed to take part in this study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, in which I assured them that their identities would remain anonymous to ensure confidentiality. Because teachers graduated from different MA TESOL programs worldwide and varied in their learning experiences, semi-structured interviews were used to provide room for discussion and clarification about each program (Barriball and White, 1994). The data collection process took place during the coronavirus lockdown in March 2020. There was no opportunity for face-to-face meetings. Therefore, I used three methods of data collection open-ended survey, course transcripts, and semi-structured interviews. An open-ended survey was sent to them via email and used to collect demographical information: age, country of graduation, university, and teaching experience. Participants were also asked to send their course transcripts to record their MA TESOL plans and courses. After receiving all survey documents and transcripts, I asked the participants to allocate a time slot for phone interviews. Before holding interviews with participants, interview questions were emailed to them so they could get prepared. The interview protocol consisted of three parts: substance, engagement, and outcome (see Figure 2). Phone interviews were recorded and conducted in English. Each interview lasted between 30-35 min.

3.4. Data analysis

To answer the research questions, the author used directed content analysis. The directed content analysis uses ideas for categories derived from the researcher’s knowledge of other theories found in other studies (Elliott and Timulak, 2005). Categorizing is thus an immersive process in which the data takes precedence, but the interpretation is ultimately aided by prior knowledge (Elliott and Timulak, 2005). Using this method of data analysis was helpful in data interpretation and coding, which increases the power of the deductive process (Collins and Stockton, 2018). In addition, this qualitative study focused on understanding the knowledge base of MA TESOL students. This knowledge required careful planning in data collection and analysis for three reasons. First, the study was conducted by one author who needs to be precise about the data collection process and what to exclude and include in conducting data collection and analysis. Therefore, the author used previous knowledge as a guide to increase the study’s trustworthiness. According to Elo et al. (2014), the trustworthiness of content analysis results is highly dependent on a well sufficient data as well as a description of the participants and data collection. The data collection and participants were described in sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 of this study. Second, there was the issue of validity and ensuring that the data collected reflect the phenomena under study, which is the students’ knowledge base of their MA TESOL courses. Therefore, data collection and analysis were coded under three categories: substance (knowledge base), engagement, and outcome. These categories are derived from Freeman’s (2009) three Dimensions of Scope of SLTE, which were basically used to guide my interview questions than data analysis (see Figure 2).

In addition to Freeman’s theory, I used the literature review in this study to further code the MA TESOL substance and content received into positivist and constructivist paradigms. This coding process was achieved by analyzing the demographic surveys and transcripts. The demography data, including the graduation country, duration, and courses received according to their manuscripts in each semester, were arranged and coded in Table 1. Then I coded these courses into six areas of knowledge: language pedagogy, linguistics, and applied linguistics, curriculum planning and testing, research, culture and context, and practicum (see Table 2). Finally, I coded the courses into positivist and constructivist paradigms (see Figure 3). Courses with theoretical backgrounds involving no direct experience in an authentic context and no opportunities for students to experience what they learned in real-life situations were coded as a positivist paradigm. Courses coded as a constructivist paradigm were courses allowing students to engage in actual classroom teaching and experience knowledge construction. Such learning is accomplished by prioritizing practicums, engaging with contextual sociocultural histories, and student reflective work. Third, to establish credibility and verify the data with participants. The data coded under the three categories were sent to all twelve participants to obtain their consent for the data interpretation. They all approved the author’s analysis and gave their consent.

4. Results

4.1. Substance

Although the focus was the MA TESOL topics, the participants were asked about the topics of their BA courses to understand their educational
backgrounds before they finished their MA. They all finished their BA in Saudi Arabia, attending different local universities around the country. Answers were as follows:

1. It included literature, linguistics, and teaching knowledge.
2. English Language (Literature and linguistics)
3. Literature and linguistics.
4. English literature, linguistics, and methods of English teaching in high schools.
5. During my BA, I studied English literature and English-Arabic translation courses.
6. I had many courses in linguistics. There was no focus on teaching how to teach English in my BA program.
7. It focused on linguistics and literature.
8. Mainly linguistic.

Regarding their MA courses, as the table below shows (see Figure 3), the knowledge base of MA TESOL programs attended by participants in this study was primarily based on a positivist paradigm, field-driven knowledge. This knowledge is divided into six knowledge content areas (see Table 2): according to Figure 3, language pedagogy forms the majority, with 35% of the courses taught in MA TESOL programs. This is

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**Figure 2. Interview questions.**

- Was your program under the Art or Education faculty?
- What type of content did you receive? Linguistics OR Language pedagogy? Explain?
- Did you receive knowledge about culture, identity, context and their impact on EFL teaching and you as a teacher?
- Define teachers’ identity?
- What about language power and its relation to EFL policy and planning in different contexts. Did you do any courses in relation to that?

- 1. Did you conduct reflective writing?
- 2. Were you given the freedom to choose topics for learning and assignment?
- 3. During TESOL classroom, How was the teaching? Teacher centered-based or discussions?
- Did you have the freedom to voice your opinion?
- How were your assignments conducted? Group work or individual?
- In your assignments, were you given the choice to talk about your context and relate it to theories of EFL teaching?
- Was your assignment of critical approach (task based: such as designing a teaching lesson or teaching course) or theoretical approach (literature review only)?
- Was a practicum course included? How?

- 1. In teaching, how do you make use of the knowledge gained from your MA? Explain?

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9. Linguistics and teaching knowledge
10. I had many different subjects; most were about English literature, and some were linguistics. I think I only had one or two subjects related to language teaching.
11. It was focused on language and literature with no focus on teaching knowledge at all.
12. The main focus of my BA courses was language, language teaching, and literature.
Table 2. Analysis of the MA TESOL courses by knowledge content.

| Area of knowledge                  | Courses                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Language pedagogy                 | Teaching English as a second language                                  |
|                                   | Composition theory and practice                                        |
|                                   | Principle and practice in TESOL                                         |
|                                   | Teaching ESL reading                                                   |
|                                   | Methods of forging language teaching                                   |
|                                   | Teaching young learners                                                |
|                                   | Second language learning principles                                   |
|                                   | Special Topics in TESOL                                               |
|                                   | Foundation of education                                               |
|                                   | English for specific purposes                                          |
|                                   | TESOL methodology                                                      |
|                                   | Developing learners and learning                                       |
|                                   | Writing methods in TESOL                                               |
|                                   | Teaching English as a second language                                  |
|                                   | Reading for English language learners                                  |
|                                   | Teaching EFL in Arab world                                            |
|                                   | Translation theory into practice                                       |
|                                   | Principle and practice of TESOL                                        |
|                                   | Reading for TESOL                                                      |
|                                   | Effective communication in education                                   |
|                                   | TESOL listening and speaking                                           |
|                                   | Fieldwork TESOL                                                        |
|                                   | Technology and language learning                                       |
|                                   | Information technology for language teaching                           |
|                                   | Multimodal texts                                                       |
|                                   | Computer assisted language learning                                    |
| Linguistics & applied linguistics | 5 SLA courses                                                           |
|                                   | Presenting academic discourse                                          |
|                                   | Grammar in use                                                         |
|                                   | English in globalized world                                            |
|                                   | Sociolinguistics and language learning                                 |
|                                   | Structure English language                                             |
|                                   | Language and society                                                   |
|                                   | Phonetics and phonology                                                |
|                                   | Linguistic, literature & TESOL                                         |
|                                   | Phonological grammar & discourse                                       |
|                                   | Structure of the English language                                     |
|                                   | Syntax                                                                  |
|                                   | Intensive grammar                                                      |
|                                   | Morphology                                                             |
|                                   | Corpus-based approaches to language description                        |
|                                   | Descriptive English grammar                                            |
|                                   | Discourse analysis for language teaching                               |
|                                   | English phonology                                                      |
|                                   | Issues in Bilingualism                                                 |
|                                   | Written language                                                       |
| Curriculum planning and testing   | Challenging curriculum, pedagogy & assessment                          |
|                                   | Pedagogy and assessment in TESOL                                        |
|                                   | Language testing                                                       |
|                                   | Language curriculum design                                             |
|                                   | ESL assessment                                                          |
|                                   | Testing and curriculum development                                     |
|                                   | Language curriculum design                                             |
|                                   | Language testing principles                                            |
|                                   | Curriculum design and development                                      |
|                                   | Testing and assessment                                                 |
|                                   | Curriculum design in TESOL                                             |

followed by linguistics and applied linguistics, representing around 30% of the MA knowledge. Then comes curriculum planning and testing, which obtains almost 15% of the knowledge presented in MA TESOL programs. The figure also shows that research courses occupy about 10% of the MA TESOL courses. Finally, the figure illustrates that culture and context make 6% while practicum forms 4% of the courses provided in the MA TESOL programs. These findings were in alignment with what the participants mentioned in the interview. They reported the following: It was both linguistic and pedagogy, But I think that the theoretical part of language knowledge was intensive (UK graduate).

My MA program was rooted in a four-strand approach; academic preparation, pedagogy, practice, and electives (US graduate).

It was a mixture of both areas, but I felt it was more focused on language acquisition than pedagogy (AU graduate).

It was mostly theories about SLA but then we took assessment courses and teaching courses (Saudi graduate).

4.2. Engagement

Participants from the NABA and ME MA TESOL programs reported that the knowledge was presented through structured education practices. The course content was dependent on the professor and the nature of the course. They explained that the topics discussed in the classroom were planned and decided by professors and were strictly based on the course syllabus given at the start of the course. Some professors were open to discussing different topics chosen by participants; others were structured and limited discussions to what they presented in the classroom and course syllabus.

Depends on the nature of the course. I was supposed to write assignments and follow guidelines. So, I didn’t have that freedom to decide what topic to write about because I had questions or guidelines that I had to follow (Saudi graduate).

I think we were structured and controlled by the syllabus, and you know I don’t recall that I choose what to study or a topic for the day. It was like the professor answers the questions give introduction and general idea but most of the classes there was work we do (UA graduate).

I think most of the time your curriculum was already decided. But if we had something that we wanted to discuss they wouldn’t say no, but it was structured. I mean like the professor will enter the classroom and will start lecturing (US graduate).

The professors often file the work between the students and then we must do the research but not all the classes. I think I had two classes where the professor did most of the work (US graduate).
The evaluation was mostly based on comprehensive exams and assignments. Professors chose the assignments and designed them. The role of candidates was to prepare and discuss them in the classroom individually or in groups. They stated that this provided room to think and discuss what to include in their assignments. In all programs, they were engaged in different activities such as reflective writing, suitable for use within a constructivist paradigm. However, they mentioned that the way it was implemented was missing the application phase of the covered topics. For instance, the nature of the reflective writing they were engaged in heavily depended on the articles (readings) or classroom observations but lacked actual practice in classrooms. They often were asked to read and relate them to their previous teaching practices, which was a challenging task for some of them due to the lack of teaching experience. This assignment included problem solution activities and a critical review of previous teaching practices related to new EFL teaching theories they learned about in the course. The training was purely theoretical, with no opportunities to apply in classrooms.

We were required to do two research papers in the program and most of our assignments were reflective papers and comprehensive exams at the end of the program (US graduate).

Mostly literature review where you go and read the literature and summarize it or they will give you an assignment about solving a problem (US graduate).

The difficulties of reflective writing were also related to the lack of knowledge about this type of academic discourse. Most of the participants revealed that they had no previous reflective writing experience, critical tasks, or description of their teaching practices. However, participants did not discuss such concerns with their professors because they felt awkward talking about their contexts without feeling defensive.

I was self-conscious because whenever I voice my opinion. I was sensitive about it. I wasn’t used to my thoughts being questioned even by myself. So, I felt a bit awkward about it (AU graduate).

The Practicum course was differently conducted in each context. For example, two US graduate participants had undertaken intensive practicum courses where they practiced teaching for six months in real classrooms. This teaching practice was held by the end of the program. One US graduate reported that practicum was all about doing classroom observation at the end of the last semester, where she was asked to write her reflection on what she observed. Three Saudi graduates explained that practicum was about classroom observation and conducting a few demo lessons for evaluation. The rest (two US graduates, two UK graduates, and two Australian graduates) were eager about conducting actual teaching in addition to learning, but they were not offered. They wanted to do the teaching themselves so that they could judge their knowledge and understanding of EFL practices under the supervision of their professors.

I learned most of the theories I need for teaching, but the MA practicum was like a tutorial, not actual teaching. Exactly, we did observation of other teachers, but I know we had to teach actual classes. This is one thing that I think that was missing in the program that I did not do (US graduate).

Honestly, I wouldn’t say it was a perfect experience. Like I’ve learned a lot. I learned so much, but I didn’t have the chance to teach people from other cultures. This would have made a difference (AU graduate).

Saudi MA TESOL graduates were part-time students, and they were studying and teaching at the same time. Accordingly, they complained about the overwhelming assignments and amount of research writing.

I thought it was overwhelming…with the assignments we were asked to do a lot of things. Too many assignments. When I remember it, it was like a timeout from all life, and I was teaching at that moment. So maybe my experience was exhausting (Saudi graduate).

Topics related to market-driven education, managerial movements, Western pedagogy, and globalization concerning EFL teaching were limited. Only two participants reported that they had received training in these issues. Four participants informed that they had been explicitly exposed to classroom-related cultural issues. In addition, EFL teaching identity was not defined by nine (two UK graduates, two Saudi graduates, four US graduates, one Australian graduate) participants; they explained that they had no idea what it meant.

### 4.3. Outcome

All the participants appreciated the knowledge gained from the experts. They revealed that they had developed an understanding of teaching and language acquisition theories. This knowledge had increased their confidence in their teaching skills. For instance, some participants explained that they had learned how to simplify knowledge and choose appropriate teaching strategies to meet their students’ needs.

I am totally different person before taking my master. I have the confidence to teach and the skills. I know the easiest methods to convey information. I also understand the acquisition process (US graduate).

On the other hand, others stated that the knowledge gained from the MA TESOL was for self-improvement but not applicable in the Saudi context, for cultural and contextual reasons, among which are the
structured practices and imposed curriculum. The information was found to be theoretical and not practical. Furthermore, some stated that they do not remember what they had learned so far. They forgot most of the theories and knowledge gained from their MA TESOL. They stated that such knowledge could have been obtained via books and reading articles from different websites without being a student at an MA TESOL program. This view is evident in the following responses:

Since my MA focused on taught courses, most of the knowledge gained has been for self-improvement and little did it help in teaching (UK graduate)

When I came back, I don't remember a lot about EFL teaching knowledge. You can read books about SLA theories whether you took the MA or not (US graduate)

The only obstacle I have is the lack of ‘authentic life situations’ in the textbook and in the English classrooms (US graduate)

Regarding TESOL, I learned a lot about how to teach English using different methods and I benefited from the American students who were teachers and have experience and study at the same time. I could not apply most of the knowledge gained, partly because the system here is different (US graduate)

5. Discussion

The base knowledge of participants in this study was disciplinary, focused on theoretical-driven knowledge or a positivist paradigm founded on content and pedagogical knowledge. The positivist paradigm constitutes about 90% of the programs’ subjects, while the constructivist paradigm aggregates around 10% and is limited to practicum and culture courses. Moreover, TESOL classrooms were based on structured education heavily dependent on systemic evaluation, including projects and exams. Participants identified reflective writing as a challenge because Saudi students were not familiar with this academic discourse and lacked teaching experience. The participants’ experience during their BA degree differed from their experience during their MA. The teaching style and assessment were conducted differently in both stages. Even the purpose of the two degrees was different. To some participants, the BA degree was a degree in English Language literature and linguistics but not teaching. Those who received courses in English teaching explained that the courses were in teaching strategies and pedagogical knowledge. Knowledge of sociocultural factors framing teaching practices and teacher's identity was not included in their BA courses.

Participants explain that they did not conduct research or reflective writing during their BA degree. It was an exam-oriented course where they received knowledge and their understanding was assessed through exams. Some participants explained that they expected the same way of teaching style and assessment during their MA TESOL. However, they were surprised by unfamiliar assessment methods, such as writing research papers, literature reviews, and reflective wiring. They also thought that they would practice teaching in real classrooms, but this was not the case; instead, they were doing classroom observations, and some participants did not have the chance to attend or teach in real classrooms. Furthermore, most of the participants were unaware of concepts and knowledge related to teachers’ identity and sociocultural factors that may play a role in how they structure their teaching knowledge and frame their teaching practices in each context. Finally, some of the participants, regardless of training context, found that they could not apply the knowledge base of MA TESOL in their teaching contexts.

This research paper contributes to two central bodies of knowledge. First, it provides a deep understanding of the SLTE knowledge base about knowledge epistemology and paradigms. In this study, the literature critically reviewed the SLTE knowledge base through an epistemology lens dividing it into two significant paradigms of knowledge understanding. The Positivist paradigm is represented by the theoretical side of SLTE found in structured classrooms. In contrast, the constructivist paradigm is represented by the sociocultural turn and praxis in SLTE found in knowledge construction by teachers themselves.

Second, it relates to the planning and reform of MA TESOL in Saudi Arabia. This reform of MA TESOL in Saudi Arabia coincides with the first Saudi Association for TESOL Education, which is concerned with developing teaching and learning English in Saudi Arabia. On this matter, I explain with reference to the data how to improve SLTE in Saudi MA TESOL and maybe other MA TESOL programs.

In this study, participants were non-native speakers (NNS) who received TESOL knowledge in NABA and Saudi Arabia, where education is based on Western pedagogy. They returned intending to implement what they learned in their context, where English is a foreign language, and the teaching environment is structured and dependent on top-down policies. Therefore, what is left for teachers is the teaching task that requires high-impact teaching strategies. Therefore, their teaching context is based on a positivist paradigm. However, they need teaching competencies found in the constructivist paradigm for effective teaching. To further explain, some participants found that the knowledge gained was useful for self-improvement but could not apply it in their teaching contexts. This inability to apply what they have learned may be due to two reasons. The first is supported by Liu (1999), Lee, Murphy, and Baker’s (2015) study, which found that TESOL and SLTE courses focused on knowledge-based on SLA and linguistics theories that are transmitted directly to teachers in TESOL classes, have little to do with everyday teaching practices and are not applicable in different teaching contexts. The second reason could be participants’ lack of adjustment and adaptation teaching skills which may enable them to make the right decisions about applying newly acquired knowledge of TESOL pedagogy to their teaching contexts. Therefore, when NNS teachers apply what they have learned about English language teaching, they need to consider its particularity, practicality, and possibility (Kumaravadivelu, 1994), which teacher educators and TESOL programs tend to overlook. The conditions under which those teachers work are different from the conditions found in TESOL books and references. Teacher educators need to teach NNS students how to construct their understanding of EFL teaching practices and adjust such knowledge to fit their working environments better. Therefore, it is imperative to rethink the knowledge base and pedagogy of SLTE to meet the needs of teachers in different teaching contexts. In this respect, I recommend that SLTE in Saudi Arabia should be mostly based on a constructivist paradigm for education with no less than 70% of the MA TESOL courses. NNS students joining TESOL programs are viewed as constructive learners of knowledge rather than passive recipients. To do so, I suggest that the constructivist paradigm of SLTE should be reconstructed around three areas of knowledge: teachers’ identity, sociocultural and political factors framing education across contexts, and practicum.

In this study, some participants had limited knowledge about the meaning and importance of their teaching identity. It is evident in Table 2 that some MA programs lack knowledge concerning the meaning of identity and its relation to EFL teaching. Participants revealed that they had not received enough knowledge about identity, and some even found the concept new. Knowledge about identity evolves around teachers learning about who they are, what they want to be, and what features comprise the teaching image they strive to achieve (Kubanyiova, 2014). Because teachers’ education is a course of identity construction that shapes teachers’ actions and perceptions of teaching as a profession (Beijaard, 2019), identity should be explicitly taught in teachers’ education so they can understand themselves, their actions, and their cognitive abilities (Beuchamp and Thomas, 2005). It is important to remember that teachers’ identity develops following the philosophy, morals, and values that underpin their motivation and practices. Thus, it is essential to develop ‘ethical knowing’ that enables teachers to reflect on the moral purposes, values, and philosophy that guide their teaching practices (Kubanyiova, 2014). Hence, Farrell (2011) and Nguyen and Dao (2019) underline the importance of engaging teachers in reflective practices and telling stories that assist teachers in realizing how their identities are shaped and constructed. Awareness of the importance of identity roles in
teaching and reflection on their practices enables them to create teaching philosophies, methods, and environments that align with their values and beliefs about teaching (Cirocki et al., 2019). Teacher educators need to examine methods to enhance teachers' awareness about how they conceptualize their patterns of understanding teaching and their role across context and time. In this way, they can learn about themselves, their beliefs, and the values that influence their interpretation of pedagogy and management of students (Morgan, 2010). Their role is to support teachers in discovering, outlining, or even constructing these principles and adjusting them when necessary. It is an opportunity for novice teachers to know themselves better and envisage their future paths in teaching as a career and education as a field. Knowing their identities may also help teachers manage their teaching skills, their potential, and the changes they can bring to the field. It is an opportunity to test and evaluate the knowledge presented in SLTE against their own beliefs and values, to learn which school of teaching practice they prefer e.g., direct methods or critical methods of teaching, and how they can better integrate them into their practices or even reconstruct new theories of learning.

The second area of knowledge missing from some of the participants' education in this study was knowledge about sociocultural and political factors that may frame teaching practices in a teaching context (Johnson and Golombok, 2020). Sociocultural and political factors are important to be included in SLTE because they affect the teaching practices and pedagogical choices inside the classroom. For example, the impact on English language education of the dominance of market-driven education and managerial movements (Chan, 2002); Western pedagogy (Phillipson, 2009; Liu, 1999); and globalization movements (Chang, 2006). The literature about ELT is a rich source of debate. Nevertheless, not all participants in this study were educated enough about these developments, as Figure 3 illustrates that social and cultural knowledge about ELT teaching compose 6% of TESOL courses. They need to know why such movements exist, what the underpinning ideologies and values are, and how they can be managed if they do not align with the values and beliefs of a teacher's own identity. Such knowledge may broaden teachers' understanding of how policymakers manage education and how certain sociocultural and political factors may affect teaching and learning in a specific context. They will understand why certain practices learned and applied in Western education institutions may not be applicable in their contexts but how they might be adapted and utilized. Discussions about adjusting and appropriate their pedagogical practices to meet the needs in different contexts should be facilitated. Writing tasks could ask teachers to reflect on their contexts, highlight the main policies and ideologies that have been implemented, analyse their thoughts and beliefs about such policies, and what improvements could be made to improve English teaching. Teachers could be encouraged to think about how to localize EFL pedagogy to meet the needs of students in their contexts and how to overcome challenges to achieve such targets. Awareness of how sociocultural and political factors such as ideology and social norms frame teaching practices in contexts is essential to achieving these learning outcomes.

The third area of knowledge is the practicum, which according to Freeman and Johnson (1998), should form the core knowledge of the SLTE knowledge base. However, the practicum forms 4% of TESOL courses (see Figure 3). Some of the participants were unable to participate in practicums, because certain courses were structured around a course syllabus. In addition, some participants found it challenging to apply the knowledge gained from such courses in their teaching contexts. Therefore, I suggest that SLTE in Saudi MA TESOL could benefit from applying classroom instruction found in the constructivist paradigms based on praxis of inquiry problem-solving instruction, which, according to Johnson (2006), is guided by transformative practice teaching. Such an approach could illuminate or minimize the theoretical stance to teaching knowledge and focus on the application one. In such an approach, teacher educators engage TESOL students actively and critically to learn about whom they want to be, how they will teach, and what sociocultural and political factors may frame their teaching practices (Johnson, 2006; Freeman and Johnson, 1998). This is achieved by exposing students to dilemmas that would challenge their cognitive abilities to deeply examine their beliefs about teaching (Richardson, 1997). In doing so, they deal with different factors that may frame their solution to the dilemmas, such as context, students’ needs, culture, knowledge of EFL teaching, and perspectives. Dealing with each factor means crafting their experience and learning how to deal with different emerging issues (Faeez and Valeo, 2012). Taking all these factors into account, doing practicums courses, and connecting theory to practice would improve the efficacy of the teaching courses and have a long-lasting effect on the learning of MA TESOL students.

6. Limitation and future studies

This study has a few limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the number of participants was small, twelve females only. This study was conducted during the pandemic break out; thus, it was difficult to recruit participants. The author contacted around 30 participants via email, but only twelve responded. The second limitation is related to the subjectivity of the data in qualitative research. This study explored the views of MA TESOL students only without including teachers or courses coordinators; hence, findings are not intended to be generalised to other contexts or individuals. Instead, data represents the views and perspectives of the participants of this study. Finally, the study focused on females without including male participants. This is explained by the fact that education is segregated in Saudi Arabia; thus, the author only had access to female participants.

Future research studies could replicate this study with more participants, including male participants and others who graduated from different cultural and social backgrounds. Saudi researchers also could deeply investigate the issue raised by participants about reflective writing, which they define as challenging to implement in research writing and assignments. A final research point that I encourage fellow researchers to discuss is whether conducting a theoretical research assignment, for example, literature review and annotated bibliography in MA TESOL, has any future pedagogical application in ELT classes or not.

7. Conclusion

In this research, teachers were NNS who finished their MA TESOL degrees in NABA and Saudi Arabia. The knowledge was mostly based on the positivist paradigm of learning in which teaching practices in TESOL classes were structured around a course syllabus. In addition, some participants found it challenging to apply the knowledge gained from such courses in their teaching contexts. Therefore, I suggest that SLTE in Saudi MA TESOL could benefit from applying classroom instruction found in the constructivist paradigms based on praxis of inquiry problem-solving instruction, which, according to Johnson (2006), is guided by transformative practice teaching. Such an approach could illuminate or minimize the theoretical stance to teaching knowledge and focus on the application one. In such an approach, teacher educators engage TESOL students actively and critically to learn about whom they want to be, how they will teach, and what sociocultural and political factors may frame their teaching practices (Johnson, 2006; Freeman and Johnson, 1998). This is achieved by exposing students to dilemmas that would challenge their cognitive abilities to deeply examine their beliefs about teaching (Richardson, 1997). In doing so, they deal with different factors that may frame their solution to the dilemmas, such as context, students’ needs, culture, knowledge of EFL teaching, and perspectives. Dealing with each factor means crafting their experience and learning how to deal with different emerging issues (Faeez and Valeo, 2012). Taking all these factors into account, doing practicums courses, and connecting theory to practice would improve the efficacy of the teaching courses and have a long-lasting effect on the learning of MA TESOL students.
Declarations

**Author contribution statement**

Nesreen Alzhrani: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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