

Exploring Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistants' pedagogical growth in United States universities

**Author:**Nhlanhla Mpofu¹ **Affiliation:**¹Department of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Education, Stellenbosch University, Cape Town, South Africa**Corresponding author:**Nhlanhla Mpofu,
nmpofu@sun.ac.za**Dates:**

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This research addresses the scarcity of studies examining how participants in higher education exchange programmes, specifically the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) programme, use situated learning experiences to develop professional knowledge. To fill this gap, the study examined how FLTAs construct and reconstruct teaching knowledge during their fellowship. Grounded in situated learning theory and experiential learning, the phenomenological design aligns with interpretive and qualitative traditions. The 2017–2018 cohort, comprising six FLTAs, participated in focused group discussions. Data analysis, utilising grounded theory approach, revealed that FLTAs constructed knowledge through structured programmes and personal-social experiences, employing introspective, retrospective, and prospective reflection practices. Additionally, participants emphasised the impact of accommodating and adapting beliefs, values, and dilemmas in challenging assumptions about higher education teaching and learning. This study contributes to a novel understanding of how planned activities and authentic experiences form the basis for professional knowledge construction across continents.

Transdisciplinary contribution: The transdisciplinary nature of this study allows for a holistic exploration of the process of teaching knowledge construction. By integrating insights from teacher knowledge construction, cognitive psychology, higher education teaching, inter-cultural practices and continuous professional development, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of how Fulbright FLTAs construct their professional knowledge during their fellowship. The study highlights the complexity of knowledge development, considering the cognitive processes involved, and addresses the context of higher education teaching and inter-cultural experiences. By emphasising the importance of continuous learning and growth, this research contributes to the field of teachers' knowledge development.

Keywords: Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant; higher education teaching; knowledge construction; phenomenological design; exchange programmes; situated learning.

Introduction

To understand how professional knowledge is constructed as situated experiences, this transdisciplinary study explores the way in which Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistants (FLTAs) shape their professional knowledge during their fellowship at different universities in the United States. The purpose of the FLTA programme is to provide participants with an:

... [O]pportunity to refine their teaching skills, increase their English language proficiency and extend their knowledge of the society and culture of the United States, while being teaching assistants for their native language to U.S. [United States] students and strengthening foreign language instruction at U.S. colleges and universities. (p. 1)¹

As one of the 2017–2018 FLTAs and as a university lecturer in South Africa, I immediately recognised the programme's effectiveness as a tool for professional development at the time of my application. Through this study, I explored my co-FLTAs' narratives of how they viewed their own professional development during their residency at United States (US) universities alongside my own reflection as the main research instrument. Specifically, in this article, I explored the teaching knowledge gained by five FLTAs about higher education teaching and learning contextualised to international spaces during a 9-month residency at American universities under the Fulbright programme.² That is, through the experiences of FLTAs, I explored the way their

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teaching knowledge was transformed in different contexts to perform their duties as university lecturers in a new environment.^{3,4} I argued for an exploration of university teaching knowledge resulting from an epistemological repertoire that was contextually embedded and held together by idiosyncratic and collective experiences.^{3,5} Through this stance, I sought to explore how teaching knowledge becomes constructed in the interchange between theoretical orientations, from the point where knowledge was constructed and ordered to the actual practice where it is recontextualised, selected and relocated.^{6,7}

Although studies on a wide variety of knowledge at different levels of the education system have been conducted within distinct teacher-centred fields,^{3,5,6} such studies tend not to engage with more broadly situated and experiential knowledge development, especially in higher education exchange programmes.^{5,6} Instead, lecturers' knowledge construction in higher education was being researched from different disciplinary viewpoints that usually examine the relationship between teaching knowledge and participation in knowledge sharing and the lecturer's performance.^{8,9} Traditionally, studies in this field have focused on teacher-centred perspectives, examining the relationship between teaching knowledge, knowledge sharing and lecturer performance.^{3,5,6} However, there was a growing recognition of the importance of transdisciplinary approaches to knowledge development, especially in the context of higher education exchange programmes.^{10,11} From a review of the current literature, three strands of teaching knowledge emerge that characterise the field of teaching knowledge as a transdisciplinary, complex and multifaceted process.

The first strand of studies measured the extent to which lecturers can exhibit professional knowledge.⁸ For example, in their study, Fullwood et al.⁹ used a questionnaire-based survey to measure the intentions of university lecturers when participating in knowledge sharing. Their findings intertwined university lecturers' knowledge development and performance management as they highlighted that 'intentions towards knowledge sharing and related factors, including expected rewards and associations, expected contribution, normative beliefs on knowledge sharing, leadership, structure, autonomy, affiliation to institution, affiliation to discipline and technology platform' were critical as evidence of a knowledgeable practitioner.⁹ Similarly, Ramayah et al.¹² extended the intentions of knowledge sharing among university lecturers. They found that beyond performance management requirements, university lecturers were participating in knowledge sharing to create a sense of belonging, as well as to maintain an organisational climate.

The second strand of literature in this field focused on the extent to which lecturers' knowledge influences students' performance. Drawing from the work of Shulman,¹³ the researchers in this strand believed that lecturing knowledge consisted of knowledge of content, general pedagogy, pedagogical content, learners, educational contexts, educational aims, curriculum

and accumulated wisdom. Using mainly questionnaire-based surveys, researchers in this strand had produced a list of statements that captured the actions of knowledgeable lecturers.¹⁴ Like the researchers in the first strand, the aim of these surveys was to measure the teacher's performance.

A study conducted by Slater and colleagues¹⁵ discovered that the characteristics of teachers they observed did not do a good job predicting or measuring their teaching quality and its impact on students. Moreover, in this line of research on teacher knowledge, the studies do not provide strong evidence about whether one can accurately measure these concepts and if they related to how teachers teach and how students perform (p. 1).¹⁶ Additionally, Mpofu and De Jager¹⁷ point out that there was often too much focus on what teachers should know rather than what they have learned through their teaching experiences, which was sometimes referred to as 'accumulated wisdom' by Shulman.¹³ However, this strand of inquiry has been criticised for overlooking the role of the lecturers in their own learning and development.¹⁷

The third strand of teaching knowledge emerged in response to dissatisfaction among researchers who felt that previous inquiries neglected to consider the knowledge teachers gain from their hands-on professional experiences.^{18,19} This strand sought to incorporate the wisdom acquired by teachers through practical, on-the-job learning. In fact, until recently, consideration of higher education teaching knowledge as 'a comprehensive, nuanced and theorised set of insights [about] ... context plays in the ways in which academics learn to teach' (p. 11)¹⁸ has been incidental and a fragmented examination. Arndt¹⁹ highlights that there was a need to focus on professional development and knowledge as multilayered and extremely complex, emphasising situational and contextual nuances in determining how teaching knowledge was shaped, constructed and reconstructed. Focusing on immigrant teachers in New Zealand, Arndt (p. 120)¹⁹ found that 'in a space and place where unpredictable, unstable short-term goals and expectations override long-term commitments, perseverance and aspirations, measurable, superficial knowledges tend to become elevated'. However, using FLTAs from Uzbekistan teaching in US universities as participants, Uzum²⁰ and Cheng et al.²¹ found that it was the unpredictability, challenges and uncertainties of the environment that transformed the beliefs and practices of the teachers.

The three strands discussed incorporated viewpoints from various fields, including organisational psychology, educational psychology, sociology, technology, curriculum studies, anthropology and educational theory. These strands exemplify the interdisciplinary nature of research on teaching knowledge.^{7,10,17} By drawing from these diverse disciplines, my aim was to achieve a more complete understanding of teaching knowledge. Each discipline offers unique insights and perspectives, facilitating an exploration of the factors that impact the construction and development of knowledge among lecturers, including FLTAs.^{9,16,17} This holistic approach

ensures that multiple dimensions and contexts are considered, leading to a more accurate and nuanced understanding of teaching knowledge in higher education.^{17,19,20,22} The literature in the third strand highlights a glaring gap in relation to how FLTAs constructed and reconstructed knowledge from experiences.

Granted, studies on teachers' knowledge abound in the literature; however, to date there was still a dearth of research on how this process unfolds in the intercultural spaces across continents. Against a call for global education, international programmes such as the Fulbright FLTA programme offer opportunities for English teachers from around the world to experience teaching at US universities. As a result, while navigating this social world, FLTAs construct teaching knowledge which is 'negotiated, shifted, and possibly transformed through ... primary experience[s] with the students' (p. 242).²⁰

However, there has been found to be a paucity of studies in the available literature that described how participants in programmes such as the FLTA use situated learning experiences to construct their professional knowledge. This study provided a context for understanding professional teacher knowledge development that was in an international programme that differs from traditional settings, such as teacher education or professional development in one's own country. Although such professional development programmes were not novel, they did offer insights into the process of university teaching and raise questions about teachers' professional development. This had implications for the way one understands transactional experiences as a basis for knowing how to teach. Thus, this study answered the question: How do FLTAs develop professional knowledge during their fellowship? To this end, this study proposed to build on existing but largely international university teaching by exploring how FLTAs develop knowledge across continents during their fellowship in US universities.

Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching programme

The Fulbright programme was started by Senator William Fulbright in 1969. The main purpose of the FLTA programme was to promote foreign language teaching in US universities. Drawn from all continents, foreign language teachers who were awarded the FLTA fellowship had a duty to expose their students to their home language and culture.¹ The FLTA programme was a transdisciplinary programme that brought together elements from various disciplines to promote language teaching and intercultural exchange.¹ The overarching goal of the FLTA programme was to 'build cultural collaboration through increased contact and subsequent understanding' (p. 1).¹ In addition, on a professional level, the FLTA programme aimed to help participants refine their teaching skills, improve their English language proficiency and extend their knowledge of US culture while sharing their home language and culture.¹ The FLTA

programme aimed to help participants grow by offering real-life experiences, teaching expertise and cultural understanding. The programme itself had sociocultural qualities that resulted from the social and cultural interaction embedded as a goal.²⁰

The FLTA programme was designed to allow the fellows to enhance their professional knowledge as second language teachers through experiential learning.²² This learning approach to structuring study abroad opportunities was rooted in the theoretical principles of situated learning theory. The study was conceptually grounded in the framework proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991)¹⁰ emphasising a sociocultural perspective that highlights the optimal nature of learning when situated in authentic environments and contexts where practical application occurs. For the FLTAs, their professional development was deeply integrated into various aspects of their teaching roles, including the content they taught, their interactions with students, mentor staff and the US community, as well as the guidance provided by the Fulbright offices.¹¹ This holistic approach to professional growth took place within an educational context that often contrasted with their own experiences.¹¹ This sociocultural process of knowledge in practice was transformative as through reflection and mediation the FLTAs confronted their initial pedagogical practices on what constituted effective second language teaching in higher education.^{22,23} Thus, this theory challenged the understanding that teacher learning was not only an individual and cognitive pursuit²⁴ but also an activity that gained from social interaction. Lave and Wegner¹⁰ stated that learners (in this case FLTAs) begin their journeys as apprentices and through observing and participating in the community's culture and events develop their own personal practical knowledge. The FLTAs developed their teaching knowledge from the social and academic experiences drawn from the US experiences as well as their prior worldview as emerging English as a second language (ESL) practitioners in their own countries.^{4,11,20,23} Through its emphasis on language education, intercultural communication, teacher professional development, academic collaboration, cross-cultural understanding and global education, the FLTA programme showcased its transdisciplinary nature.^{11,22}

Theoretical orientation

In this section, I account for the theoretical orientation that framed my argument in this study. Past studies on professional knowledge construction have highlighted differing theoretical orientations as to how this process occurs. Firstly, the process of constructing teaching knowledge was viewed as processual, meaning that it was not a linear process but was shaped by historical, cultural and political forces.²⁵ Secondly, this process was relational because knowledge construction has the character of encounter as it was transformed and shared through the interconnectedness of social interaction.⁷ Lastly, the process was contextual as knowledge construction is entrenched in historical and sociocultural systems.⁷ I argued that university teaching knowledge is entrenched in multifaceted sociohistorical

situations and practices and that no one trajectory could explain it. To extend my understanding of context in teacher knowledge construction, I drew theoretical insights from Lave and Wenger's¹⁰ situated learning theory (SLT). Situated learning theory emphasises that knowledge was constructed from contextualised experiences gained through social interaction and collaboration.²⁵

This iterative, emic and cyclical process of constructing new knowledge incorporated the FLTAs' prior experiences, wisdom and reasoning ability, as applied in actual situations.¹⁰ The FLTA programme structure aligned with the basic tenets of SLT. The theoretical insights I embraced served the aim of the study as they underpinned an examination of the reconstruction of pedagogical discourses in and between different higher education contexts.²² In addition, this theoretical framework provided an analytical structure for examining the participants' sources of knowledge and how they were organised in different pedagogical environments. In sum, the theoretical explanations I employed in this study were anchored on the sociocultural trajectories of professional development, emerging from a process of co-construction.^{23,24} I assumed that this co-construction process was situated in a dynamic interplay between the social factors and the individual actions.¹¹ By viewing the teaching knowledge process in this light, I embraced the notion that it was socially constructed from the interaction of the physical, cultural and social contexts, which spanned time and space.^{7,22} Situated learning theory provided a comprehensive framework for understanding learning in specific contexts by integrating concepts from psychology, sociology, anthropology, education and communication studies.^{7,22} It recognised how intricately social interaction, cultural factors and educational processes interact with one another. The SLT's transdisciplinary character enabled it to capture the varied nature of learning and offers insightful information for practitioners, researchers and educators looking to improve learning opportunities across a range of fields.^{11,20,24}

Research design

The study was underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm and employed a phenomenological approach within the qualitative tradition as the methodological framework. I chose a qualitative, emic research approach that values understanding individuals and their perspectives, emphasising the idea that reality and relationships are socially constructed.²⁶ This approach highlights the significance of making meaning and gaining clarity in research.²⁶ The study employed this methodological approach as a transdisciplinary strategy that integrated philosophical perspectives, methodological fusion, a multidisciplinary focus, conceptual integration and knowledge transfer, drawing insights from hermeneutics, social constructionism and phenomenology.^{26,27} This combination of diverse methods, exploration of multiple disciplines and connection of subjective experiences enabled a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of teaching knowledge from various domains.^{17,23,28}

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to select the participants. The FLTA programme participants are ESL early career educators in higher education or schools.¹ The minimum applicant requirement for the FLTA programme was 'English Language Teachers, [who] are in the last year of training to become English teachers' (p. 1).²⁹ Thus, most of the participants were school teachers. The 2017–2018 cohort had over 206 fellows from different countries. From this cohort, only 40 of the FLTAs were English lecturers at universities in their home countries. In applying the sample criteria and adhering to the principle of voluntary participation, five FLTA participants were included as part of the study. The five FLTAs were from Egypt, Vietnam, Spain, Thailand and Brazil. The participants taught Arabic, Vietnamese, Spanish, Thai and Portuguese in different US universities but were professional ESL teachers in their home countries. Pseudonyms of names Husani, Nguyet, Mayuree, Isabella and Marian, were used to protect the identity of the participants.

Data collection

I collected data using focus group discussions (FGDs) via the Google Docs platforms. To allow for a discussion, the Google Docs were jointly edited. I facilitated the discussion using the two questions: (1) How are you developing your professional knowledge? (2) What have you come to know about teaching at university during your fellowship? I decided to gather the data in January 2019, once the programme had concluded. This timing allowed the FLTAs to become accustomed to their environments but was not so late that they would have forgotten the novelty of their teaching experiences. I conducted two FGDs via Google Docs, which lasted 75 min and 66 min each. I sent the discussion link to the participants who logged on at the same time. I facilitated the discussion using questions and each participant responded either by building on an issue raised by another or by introducing a new view. An FGD allows a researcher to yield data on the community level by facilitating interaction between participants.²⁷ Thus, its purpose was to facilitate interaction and thereby produce, via the snowballing of thoughts, deeper insights.²⁷ In conducting FGDs via the Google Docs, the participants did not have an opportunity to be in the same physical space. However, the medium did not limit the participants from offering an in-depth discussion through interaction that was both communal and collaborative.

As I was a member of the group (FLTAs), I was collecting data from members with whom I had 'a certain amount of legitimacy' (p. 58),³⁰ which allowed the participants to discuss their teaching abilities openly from a place of both strength and vulnerability. From this insider perspective, I was able to obtain in-depth insights from the participants to answer the research questions. However, orienting my study from an insider perspective had its limitations as it might have resulted in 'role confusion when the researcher responds to the participants or analyses the data from a perspective other

than that of a researcher' (p. 58).³⁰ Hence, after data analysis I checked the trustworthiness of my findings using member checking as a strategy for limiting confusion relating to my role as both a researcher and a member of the FLTA group. Member check is a process where the researcher shared study findings and data summaries with participants to ensure the accuracy and representation of their experiences and perspectives in the research findings.²⁷

Data analysis

I obtained the text transcriptions of the FGDs from Google Docs. As I sought to understand the participants' experiences by studying their own words, inductive thematic analysis was used, which involved 'immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships; it begins by exploring, then confirming, guided by analytical principles' (p. 362).³¹ I framed my analysis using a five-step data analysis process underpinned by the approach by Glaser and Strauss.³² Firstly, I read the raw data to familiarise myself with them. Secondly, I coded the data, looking for patterns in them using an iterative coding approach. Thirdly, I applied axial coding to comprehend connections between categories and subcategories. Fourthly, I identified themes and subthemes relating the research question. Lastly, I interpreted the data by attaching meaning to them by comparing them to current literature in the field by highlighting similarities, differences, gaps and novel findings.

Results

Beyond the superficial comprehension of what Afdal³³ calls the 'organization of knowledge in curriculum documents' (p. 245), the study participants indicated a coherent, contextual and connected practice of knowledge construction that is embedded in sociohistorical and cultural contexts. From the analysis, two levels emerged to explain the processes of knowledge construction for the FLTAs. The findings revealed that the FLTAs constructed their professional knowledge from structured and personal-level experiences.

Professional knowledge from structured experiences

The structural-level knowledge orientation was theoretical and planned by Fulbright and university-based professional development programmes. The participants referred to a structured teaching development model as an important source of their teaching knowledge. This model was embedded in the profession and included planned activities such as induction (orientation) workshops, mentoring, peer support sessions and coaching facilitated by both Fulbright and the host universities. For example, Husani, an Egyptian FLTA, said in this regard:

'When speaking about the experiences that helped me develop my professional knowledge in the past nine months, I can recall three main attributes. The first one will be the summer orientation and the mid-year conference that we had through Fulbright to help us

develop our professional knowledge and teaching abilities. The second one is my own experiences through teaching adults in the university level back in Egypt. The last one will be the academic resources that I had through this year. As a student in the US, I had the chance to study different courses related to teaching foreign languages which helped me improve and develop my professional knowledge.' (P1, Egyptian, teaches Arabic)

The same sentiments were echoed by Nguyet from Vietnam, who highlighted that her professional knowledge improved because of the social support embedded in the workplace, such as technological know-how, material development and faculty support:

'There are many factors that contributed to developing my professional knowledge in here. As the sole instructor, I have learned and used learning management system of my university to provide resources and assessment for my classes. I have support in technology from my faculty staff to develop teaching materials and so on. In addition, I took part in many workshops on teaching methodology and classroom issues to gain knowledge on teaching basis in my school and trend of the world'. (P2, Vietnamese, teaches Portuguese)

Similarly, Mariana from Brazil, who taught Portuguese in the United States, also recognised the activities offered by her host university and Fulbright as guiding her teaching knowledge development:

'Being part of a more encompassing and diverse programme of Portuguese, including all Lusophone countries and not just the norm (Brazil) was one of the most striking traits that guided my professional experience while working here in the US.' (P3, Brazilian, teaches Portuguese)

Unlike Nguyet, who found support from other faculty members, Mariana found support from other FLTAs from Lusophone countries. These FLTAs had a similar theoretical understanding of teaching Portuguese as that which Mariana threaded into her own teaching knowledge. It would appear from the participants' quotes that the US university context presented them with complex problems that necessitated diverse approaches other than those that they knew from their country of origin. In attending to the continuous need for them to transform the learning environment to respond to the US context, the FLTAs' constructed knowledge from the conceptual tools that they accessed through the epistemic modes of practice were entrenched in the structured programmes organised in their fellowship. Importantly, and related to the theoretical lens that underpinned the study, the findings highlighted the processual²⁵ approach to organising their teaching knowledge, which was shaped by the university's culture, history and attitude towards the language the FLTA taught.

Professional knowledge from personal-level experiences

The personal-level experiences are experiential and cognitive. This means that the FLTAs, through introspective, retrospective and prospective reflection practices, developed a better understanding of teaching and learning from

personal-social experiences. In their conceptualisations of their teaching knowledge development, the participants took time and care to explain how they used sociocultural interactions to process their reasoning, beliefs and values about teaching situated within their context, as reflected in the following verbatim quotes:

'Teaching at a rural college in the USA enabled me to compare teaching strategies and methods to teach in different scenarios. Through discussion with my colleagues, I confirmed that students have different needs, so different ways of learning. At the beginning, it was difficult to understand some of the cultural aspects of teaching at a university, but challenging myself to research other materials and strategies to teach my own language helped me to improve my teaching skills.' (P4, Colombian, teaches Spanish)

'I had the main role (teacher) in one of the courses. I learned a lot about how to use different technological devices since I did not know how to use many of them. I learned new techniques that I can apply to my mother tongue and English as a Foreign Language that is my career.' (P5, Argentinian, teaches Spanish)

'I think being in classes everyday with my supervisor and observing what she does provides me new knowledge about my native language and new techniques in teaching languages. Talking and doing both in-class and outside-of-the-class with students expands my understanding of individual differences in learning languages.' (P6, Thai, teaches Thai)

From the participants' quotes, it was apparent that their knowledge construction is founded on a dynamic interaction process that is entrenched within the context of the university as a social environment. Akin to Lave and Wegner's¹⁰ situated learning theory, through the university's social and academic structures, culture and history, the FLTAs adapted to these systems to create a sense of belonging and provide an effective environment for their students. These interaction trajectories were by nature temporary but shape the immediate and the future teaching activities as they 'force' the FLTA to confront previous beliefs and values and to reconstruct what it means to be a professional higher education practitioner in different locales.

From these interactions, the FLTAs obtain a critical contextual understanding about teaching. The FLTAs' insights into their practice emphasise that knowledge was constructed from contextualised experiences through social interaction and collaboration.¹⁰ For example, Isabella came to know the role of culture as a strategy for creating an effective teaching environment. On the other hand, Mariana, by interacting with technological aspects of teaching, adapted her practice to suit the contextual needs. In Mayuree's case, by observing her mentor, she re-evaluated her teaching practice and generated new ways of engaging the students in her native language. This contextual coherence became the resource from which FLTAs draw to make sense of their teaching in different contexts. Such resources were in multifaceted ambits that include personal, collective, cultural and historical practices. Apart from this multifaceted epistemic process, the participants highlighted that their knowledge construction was enhanced by the accommodation and

adaptation of beliefs, values and dilemmas that challenged their previous assumptions about higher education teaching and learning.

The findings of this study demonstrated a transdisciplinary character as they illuminate how teaching knowledge is developed from experiences at both structured and personal levels. The structured experiences highlight the importance of professional development programmes and support provided by the Fulbright programme and host universities. This encompassed aspects of education, professional development and cross-cultural understanding. The personal-level experiences emphasised the significance of sociocultural interactions and reflection, incorporating elements from psychology, social sciences and education. The participants' knowledge development was influenced by contextual factors such as culture, history and social environments, demonstrating a multidimensional understanding of teaching. The integration of diverse perspectives and contexts enriches the findings and contributes to a comprehensive understanding of teaching practices in various educational settings.

Discussion of findings

The teacher professional learning process described by the FLTAs in this study makes use of cyclic, interactive, dynamic, experiential and transformative processes that find meaning in the unity between contextual experience in the United States and their own personal philosophies of education. In literature, this process was known as sense-making as it described how, within the educational contexts, individuals made sense of new curriculum innovations³⁴ as was the case with the FLTAs teaching in the US universities. This was a process that allowed educationists to 'perceive, choose, and interpret ideas in their environment, but also how they implemented them to make them meaningful' (p. 834).³⁴ Additionally, sense-making refers to the cognitive and emotional process of transformation that happened when a teacher tried to match their existing beliefs, knowledge and experiences to a new pedagogy.³⁵ Through applying the lens of the sense-making process, I was able to identify the events, ideas and problems that contributed to FLTAs' interactions with the new innovations in the US universities, and how they acted on them to enhance their pedagogical practices.³⁶

The sense-making process was made up of two aspects, personal frames of references and situational demands. Personal frames of references were the FLTAs' beliefs, knowledge and practices that shaped the way they interpreted their educational and instructional contexts.³⁷ The FLTAs in this study incorporated their prior knowledge of being language teachers in their home countries, their beliefs of what it meant to be a second language teacher, personal held beliefs and current (from the Fulbright orientation activities) pedagogical practices of teaching a second language as part of their personal frames of reference. The situational demand was the expectations that were placed on the teacher as a pedagogy by external parties.³⁷

For example, the FLTAs in this study were expected to teach their native language in the US universities, enrol into two courses per semester to enhance their professional practices, facilitate language clubs and tables and participate in community outreach projects.¹

The findings in this study also highlighted that the FLTAs during their fellowship in the United States followed a dynamic sense-making process that resonates with the stages provided by Luttenberg et al.³⁵ that encompass assimilation, accommodation, toleration and distanciation (p. 294). Assimilation was the FLTA's adaptation to a new pedagogical situation to align and match with their own personal epistemology, while the process where FLTAs relinquished their immediate personal frames about teaching and learning to solve a situational challenge with other frames was called accommodation. Toleration on the other hand referred to how FLTAs put up with ways of teaching and learning at the cost of their own personal frames of reference. This means the FLTAs tolerated the mismatch that existed between their own frames and those that have been presented with to suit the new pedagogy. Lastly, distanciation was the process where the FLTAs completely ignored the new pedagogy and opted to continue using their own frames. That is, the new frames of reference had no impact on the pedagogical practice of the FLTA. From the findings, the FLTAs gravitated towards the processes of assimilation, accommodation and toleration as they adapted, adopted and sought to find a co-existence and meaning between their personal epistemologies (beliefs, knowledge and attitudes) to the ones that they were exposed to in the US educational system. From the findings, the FLTAs did not overtly reject the new frames presented to them on language teaching but sought to find meaning and relatedness with their prior personal educational philosophies.

Another way of interpreting the study's findings is through the sense-making process components suggested by Spillane, Reiser and Reimer,³⁸ namely, policy signal about teaching and learning, contexts and affect. In this study, guidance on teaching and learning policies came from Fulbright and host institution orientations. The term contexts here pertain to how the FLTAs interpreted their teaching practices through interactions with students, mentors, and university features. Lastly, affect involves the beliefs and attitudes of FLTAs, and how these were adjusted, embraced, or tolerated throughout the fellowship period. The dynamic and multilevel nature of the FLTAs' experiences interpreted through the lens of Luttenberg et al.³⁵ and Spillane et al.³⁸ that frameworks provide a transformative and agentic understanding of how teaching knowledge construction encompassed prior experiences, wisdom and reasoning ability, as applied in actual situations.¹⁰ Simply put, the 'appropriate reactions and priorities, patterns of social interaction with colleagues, learning environments in school, and local workplace norms all influence teacher sense-making'.³⁴ The FLTAs held a sense of ownership and agency about their instructional practices in the face of a new pedagogy as they were reflective and often critical of the innovations they were learning and what

these held for their own personal reference frames and identities as second language teachers.

The findings of this study confirmed that structured teaching programmes, such as the Fulbright orientation, mid-year meeting and university-based induction, were critical as a theoretical foundation for the FLTAs. More importantly, like studies that give prominence to the idea of craft, experiential and wisdom knowledge such as Uzum,^{13,20,22,28} the findings of this study acknowledged the FLTAs' abilities to connect theory to real-life teaching practices while attending to their contextual nuances. The findings point to the importance of a sociocultural approach to knowing how to teach, anchored by an apprenticeship model that was drawn from the context, mediated learning and collaboratively significant activities structured within a programme curriculum.

Drawn from Lave and Wenger's¹⁰ SLT, such an apprenticeship model was based on the insight that FLTAs develop professional knowledge by being involved in advanced individual activities and residency in their community of practice. Such a process guarantees that FLTAs not only obtained knowledge but also the ways of being situated in and on the action of teaching. The conclusions drawn from this study were interdisciplinary in nature, as they explored the process of teacher professional development by incorporating insights from the fields of social sciences, psychology and education.^{10,17} The FLTAs' explanation of the sense-making process included transformational, emotional and cognitive elements.^{20,39} It required integrating new instructional frames as well as personal frames of reference, situational demands, adaptation and accommodation.^{17,40} The sense-making process was also considered in the study in terms of policy signals, settings and affect. The findings offer a picture of how teaching knowledge was created through prior experiences, contextual interactions and reflective practices by relying on these frameworks. To link theory to actual teaching practices, the study emphasised the value of structured training programmes, sociocultural perspectives and an apprenticeship model.^{17,20}

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the practices and processes that shape the knowledge construction journey of FLTAs on different continents and within different contexts. The findings of this study were transdisciplinary as they encompassed various disciplines and perspectives in understanding the knowledge construction process of FLTAs. The study integrated elements from teacher education, intercultural communication, second language acquisition and cultural studies. The findings highlighted the convergence of personal epistemology, cross-cultural experiences and formal teaching preparation practices in shaping teaching knowledge. The study emphasised the importance of reflective practices, cultural transmission, and the integration of theory and experiences in professional knowledge development. Through their descriptions of

how they developed teaching knowledge in US institutions, Husani, Nguyet, Isabella, Mariana and Mayuree indicate a convergence of personal epistemology, cross-cultural experiences and formal teaching preparation practices. Like previous studies that focused on how the FLTAs' programme enhanced the participants' intercultural communicative competence⁴⁰; the Fulbright experiences and how they enhance second language knowledge for participants⁴; the reconstructed FLTAs' teacher identity posts their fellowship.¹¹ Rather than fragmenting these funds of knowing, the FLTAs described knowledge constructed from reflection on experience that was continuously formed through transactions within the context of their academic and practical realities of the lecture room. This situated perspective of developing teaching knowledge brings to the fore the understanding of how different contexts give rise to various ways of knowing, like previous studies such as Crawford and Anya³⁹, Kirkgoz¹ and Uzum,²⁰ which were interrelated and woven into personal teaching epistemologies and disciplinary literacies.

The findings described in this article should also be construed within the context in which the FLTAs developed their professional knowledge, and in which they practise their trade. Firstly, in line with studies such as Arndt¹⁹ and Uzum,²⁰ the findings affirm that professional knowledge construction results from problematic and challenging experiences that are inherent in the epistemic characteristic of educational settings as both social and cognitive environments. For example, Mariana was confronted with alternative ways of teaching Portuguese that challenged her pedagogical content knowledge and personal epistemological orientations. Instead of dwelling on this tension between her beliefs and practices, Mariana used this opportunity to reflect on how different conditions reoriented instructional discourses. In this reflective position in the activity of teaching, Mariana processed the role of external input – of theory and the experiences of others – to undergird her practice.

Secondly, illuminating the theoretical moorings of this study, the findings show that cultural transmission was a source of teaching knowledge.^{20,22,28} The cultural aspect of professional knowledge construction was integrated into the apprenticeship structure of the FLTA programme. Lastly, as a novel finding, the study provides a description of how planned activities, apprenticeship, and authentic and personal experiences provide the foundation for professional knowledge construction across continents. Based on the findings of this small-scale explorative study, there was merit in understanding the teaching knowledge construction in different contexts afforded by exchange programmes. Future studies could explore other higher education exchange programmes to gain further understanding of how teaching unfolds as a situated phenomenon.

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Competing interests

The author declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contribution

N.M. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This study explores the post-programme professional development of former participants of the Foreign Language Teaching Assistant (FLTA) programme. Ethical clearance was not required for this study as the participants were alumni of the programme who had previously signed consent forms allowing the use of their data for research purposes. Moreover, the study design and procedures ensured the protection of participants' rights, autonomy, privacy and confidentiality, as well as minimised the risk of causing harm or distress. The data were collected through a confidential survey, and all identifiable information was kept securely and anonymised during analysis and reporting. The study adhered to ethical principles and standards of academic integrity, and all efforts were made to conduct the study with utmost sensitivity and respect for the participants and their experiences.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

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