

Expert and Novice Language Teacher Differences

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Several researchers have examined within the context of cognitive psychology the differences between novices and experts. However, relatively little attention has been given to expert/novice differences in teaching (Berliner, 1986; Lee & VanPatten, 1995). Although these studies have uncovered differences in teaching in areas such as mathematics, classroom management and science, very few have focused on second language teaching. Consequently, the purpose of this case study is to examine what differences exist between expert and novice second language teachers.

There are several reasons why examining teacher differences is important. First, the study of experts' performances can be a starting point in the creation of teacher-training scenarios for novices and can provide an initial framework for novices to rely on until they achieve their own expertise. Second, some experts are not able to articulate their knowledge in a way that can be useful for novices. Therefore, these studies can help to make explicit the experts' knowledge, presenting it in a way that can be grasped by the novices (Berliner, 1986). Third, it might be possible to find intrinsic differences between novice and expert teaching in the field of second language acquisition and teaching in the other fields of study mentioned above. If unique characteristics can be isolated and described, it can lead to a better understanding of how teacher trainers can more efficiently turn novices into experts.

Review of the Research

From the review of previously mentioned studies done in this area, it is possible to draw some conclusions with regard to expert/novice differences in teaching.

1. Novices tend to have literal views of events, whereas experts make broader inferences based on their previous knowledge about teaching. In a study reported by Berliner (1986), in which novices and experts were asked to describe what they thought was happening in a picture of a classroom situation, novices tended to provide literal descriptions. In contrast, experts made inferences, applying their knowledge to give deeper meaning to the classroom situations.

2. Experts categorize problems to be solved at a higher level of abstraction. Novices, on the other hand, classify problems according to surface characteristics (Berliner, 1986). For example, expert teachers seem to consider the difficulties that might arise in a classroom from a broader perspective than novices.

3. Experts tend to have beliefs about teaching that are subject to change according to the classroom situation. According to Borke and Livingston (1989), expert teachers rely on a larger amount of interrelated knowledge about facts, principles and experiences than novice teachers. As a result, experts are able to draw upon a more elaborated and interconnected schemata when they are engaged in different pedagogical practices. In addition, experts' schemata are hypothetical and probabilistic rather than fixed and formulaic. Therefore, experts are more able to confront the variety of situations they encounter in a classroom.

4. Experts differ from novices in their lesson planning. The knowledge many teachers use for planning is contextual, that is, their decisions are situation specific. In this case, expert teachers are more selective in the information they use for planning, considering the intrinsic characteristics of a particular classroom situation (Borko & Livingston, 1989).

Expert teachers also use an interactive knowledge that allows them to determine what activities will produce the desired outcome. Experts encourage a shared understanding with students. Rogoff (1990) has termed this shared understanding *intersubjectivity*, which she defines as a "shared understanding on a common focus of attention and some shared presuppositions that form the ground for communication" (p. 71). This is certainly a necessary condition for language teaching in which communication is the main goal of instruction.

In the following case study I intend to explore the differences between how second language teaching experts and novices think and act in an educational setting. The goal is to add data of a more qualitative nature to the existing research as well as to see if the differences intrinsic to teaching in other areas are also found in second language teaching.

Method

A novice and an expert second language teacher at a major midwestern American research university were interviewed. The novice teacher (NT) had majored in the specific language she taught. She had not taken any education courses during her undergraduate studies and had only one month of teaching experience. During the time of the study she was enrolled as a

first year graduate student in the same language and taught a first year undergraduate course.

The expert teacher (ET) had an undergraduate degree in Education in Foreign Languages and Applied Linguistics. She was enrolled in the third year of a graduate program. The ET had taught for six years both in high school and at the undergraduate level and had given instruction in two different languages.

Data Collection

I used a semi-structured interview for both teachers. Each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. The preliminary questions explored their backgrounds. Second, the subjects were asked to describe their students and their perceptions of strong and weak students. Third, the subjects answered questions concerning their beliefs about language teaching. Fourth, they were asked to think aloud while they planned their next lesson. Finally, I explored the subjects' perceptions about the difficulties of teaching and their recommendations to first time teachers.

Results

In this section I report the conclusions of my analysis of the teachers' responses to the interview questions concerning students, second-language acquisition, lesson planning, and difficulties in teaching a second language.

Descriptions of students

The teachers were asked questions referring to the descriptions of the students and their perceptions of strong and weak students. Following are quotes from the novice teacher and the expert teacher.

NT: I have some of them (the students) that are outgoing and a few that are really reserved. The ones that are reserved, I can't really tell what their goals are but the ones that are outgoing I know that what they want is really a good grade.

ET: The good student is cooperative in class, the good student is the one who is open to learn, motivated or open to improve...he gets involved in communication. The poor student is impenetrable, he is not interested and does not let you strengthen his interests. Linguistically he has not learned any languages before and is not elastic.

In these quotes, both the NT and ET revealed that they use categories to identify differences between students. In both cases, for example, they gave equal importance to the expression of interest in the class as a characteristic of good students. However, the ET emphasized the importance of the language history in learning a second language, "A poor student has not learned languages before and is not elastic." This belief coincides with the finding of some studies in which multilinguals seem to be more advanced than monolinguals or bilinguals in organizing linguistic stimuli because of superior automatic processing skills (Nation & McLaughlin, 1986). This would indicate that the ET has an understanding of the factors involved in effective second language acquisition.

Another difference found was that the ET related the categories to her actions in the classroom, "The poor student does not let you strengthen his interests." In this way, the ET considers that she might have an effect on the students. In contrast, the NT described the students as separated from the classroom situation and did not make any reference to how she could develop a working communicative relationship with the students. This belief probably has a strong impact on the types of instructional practices each teacher adopts in the classroom.

Teachers' beliefs about second language learning

In this section I analyze the teachers' answers to the question *How do you think people learn a second language?*

NT: I truly believe some people get it and some people have to work for it. I learned the language through memorization. I memorized the whole verb and vocabulary. I think some people can do that. I think other people learn it practicing or using it...I think memorization helps you to learn it and then you need to practice it to make it natural.

ET: There are many ways of learning a second language. There are different patterns depending on the students' goals and education. I think the most successful way of learning a new language is through full immersion. What the mechanism is? I don't know. It doesn't matter anymore. New theories do not give a macro theory, what happens in the black box doesn't matter. Language learning takes place whatever that is. What is important is to try to find ways of affecting and making changes. Maybe the theory of universal grammar may apply. If you are exposed enough and you have motivation to learn...I think it is a matter of an inside system and an outside system. Something that is important is the context that [sic] is lacking in the new theories. It is important. It is a matter of human communication.

There is a difference in the level of conceptualization of second language learning between the NT and ET's belief. The NT seems to have a sparse conceptual scheme of learning a new language (memorization and practice). This resembles, in a simpler way, the underpinnings of audiolingual methodology.

In contrast, the ET integrates different aspects of several theoretical approaches used to understand second language acquisition. The later development of theory and research in second language acquisition has been characterized as mainly concerning three themes: (a) the importance of the social situation, (b) the importance of individual differences, and (c) the interaction between person and situational variables. According to McLaughlin, this reflects the "logical outgrowth of

developments in theory and research in second language learning" (McLaughlin, 1980, p. 332).

In a similar way, I have identified the same three themes in the ET's conception of second language acquisition. With regard to the importance of the social situation the ET states, "I think the most successful way of learning a new language is through full immersion." Later the ET adds, "It is a matter of human communication." In this statement the ET seems to recognize that language learning occurs not only in simple formal instruction but also results from social interaction in other contexts. In the following quotation, the ET considers the importance of individual differences, "There are many ways of learning a second language. There are different patterns depending on the student's goals and education." This is similar to what research has revealed about the differences in second language acquisition learning styles (Lee & VanPatten, 1995). Finally, the ET considers the interaction between personal and situational variables, "I think it is a matter of an inside system and an outside system." Apparently for this teacher, both situational and psychological factors such as personality and cognitive aspects are important variables in learning.

From these two teachers, it is possible to observe differences in the complexity of their schemata. As a result of her experience and training, the ET demonstrates in her interactionist view of learning a much more interconnected schema than the NT. Interestingly, this development in a teacher's thinking from learning based on memorization and practice to learning seen from an interactionist view seems to

follow the same development of theory and research in second language learning in general.

Planning a lesson

To be able to identify the cognitive processes involved in planning a lesson, I asked the teachers to think aloud while planning. Following is an extract of their accounts.

NT: We are starting a new section about how you feel and stuff like that. Let's see here... (looks at a book). I don't know a very good way to do it but maybe we could read these things and let them look at the picture so they will understand. I can go over that verb *to feel* in the third person... We will do activity A. Today's lesson will be pretty much from the book I am afraid. For activity A, I have cut up magazine pictures with different expressions of people and I ask them *How does he feel?* So this will help them understand.

ET: I have to consider this part: the house and the earth. There are some readings in the textbook. This reading is very demanding and boring although it is very interesting to me. It is about the environment. The article is horrible. I have to introduce it. I'll try to see if they are connected with the idea that women are more pro-nature than men. I also have to teach some grammar and these puzzles. First I have to talk about the house. I have to use this puzzle. I am going to try and make a logical sequence. From the house, I will go to the environmental topic. And I will connect the house to what I have done before: *I like and I don't like*, I will use this... It is also Monday so students have to be woken up. This is usual for them. I can use an activity where they have to find an ideal roommate, it's like a *sign here please* activity. But before this... It is an activity I find useful. I give three minutes to write about the roommate. I have to do a quick survey of who has a roommate. I am sure that then they will ask *What does roommate mean?* I will use other students as a resource. I will give them 3 minutes and check time. It is free writing.

The NT tends to use step-by-step planning mainly following the book's order. In contrast, the ET follows a cyclical, interactive and recursive plan. The ET considers not only the aspects to be covered during that lesson but also what must be taught for the whole week or period. In this case, the ET tries to make connections between the immediate and general goal of this section. Following the plan directly from the book

prevents the NT from considering the situational factors that might affect the students' understanding. On the contrary, the ET makes a prediction about the specific situation of the students in the particular lesson, "It is also Monday so students have to be woken up." Additionally, the ET considers the students' background knowledge, for example, "I will connect the house to what I have done before."

Another situation specific consideration is time limits. The NT does not mention in the planning process how much time needs to be invested in each aspect of teaching. On the other hand, the ET includes the amount of time students need to perform the task. This would seem to indicate a higher-order organizational strategy at work.

Difficulties in teaching a second language

The NT and ET were asked what they considered to be the most difficult aspects of teaching a new language. Their responses are listed below:

NT: I think getting them to participate can be difficult but it is not always difficult because there are always people who do. I think the hardest thing for me is teaching grammar. It is hard to explain and explain it in another language that they do not understand.

ET: The most difficult thing is to learn the channel of communication of the students. You are not taught this. Learn the interrelation of the students with the level of communication that they are working on. We need to find some way to communicate with them using the target language. I need to discover ways to make the input comprehensible without falling back to using their native language. Also...to learn how to motivate them and develop their interest has been challenging.

In a new and difficult situation, the NT seems to be more concerned about competency for giving explanations. This concern seems to follow the belief that the improvement of

explanations will lead to better learning by the students and, therefore, improved teacher competence.

According to Lee & VanPatten (1995), when teachers assume the role of experts, they fall into the category of the Atlas Complex. That is, the instructor assumes the main responsibility for the students' learning. In the area of second language learning, this assumption follows audiolingual methodology because the instructor assumes the role of the language expert, particularly in grammar, and thus becomes the provider of the fundamental language rules.

On the other hand, for the ET the main goal of instruction is developing communicative competence. This means that the role of the teacher then becomes that of a resource person and architect, promoting interaction between the members of the group (Lee & VanPatten, 1995).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the differences between an expert and a novice second language teacher. The results of this study support previous literature on expert/novice differences in teaching and other domains. The NT showed more literal and general views of events, a narrower conception of teaching, step-by-step planning, and a lack of consideration for the specific aspects of the context. In contrast, the ET revealed higher levels of abstraction and inference in her perceptions, an interactive and recursive type of planning and a consideration for the specific aspects of her classroom context.

With regard to the intrinsic nature of second language teaching, the ET used knowledge about important factors involved

in second language learning such as experience in another language to describe her students. In addition, her perception of second language learning manifested an interactionist point of view which is in agreement with recent theories of second language teaching (Lee & VanPatten, 1995).

These different beliefs concerning second language acquisition undoubtedly have an impact on the instructional practices used by the teacher. Richardson, Anders, Tidwell and Lloyd (1991) have suggested that there is a strong relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices in the classroom. However, it is not clear how these beliefs interact with the instructional practices when the materials used by the novice teachers follow a different approach than their beliefs. Thus, what impact would a communicative language teaching program have, for example, on the novice teachers' beliefs and vice versa? Further research is also necessary to determine how novice teachers become expert teachers and the factors involved in this process.

Finally, the implications of this study do not provide guidelines about how novice teachers should think or act. However, they aid teacher-educators to understand the underlying beliefs of instructors in their professional formative processes to become expert teachers.

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