McBeath, N. (2005). Understanding expertise in teaching: Case studies of ESL teachers. *Modern English Teacher, 14*(3), 84-85.

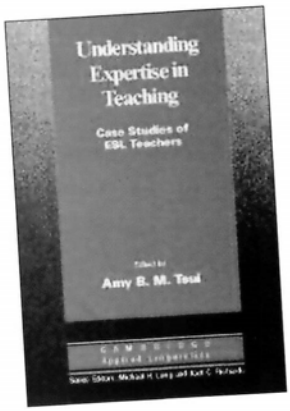
Background Books

Understanding Expertise in Teaching; Case Studies of ESL teachers.

Amy B.M. Tsui

Cambridge University Press 2003

See page 88 for details



There is an old adage that states "Teach students and not materials", but, unfortunately, teacher training programmes often fail to apply that criterion to teachers-in-training. When I was first doing my own teacher training, I was always fascinated by first-hand accounts of life at the chalkface, while my reading lists often suggested far wider concerns like Education and the Working Class.

EFL teaching, by virtue of its global application, has tended to offer more personalized accounts, and in this book Amy Tsui offers a very rich and deep analysis of the teaching practices of four teachers from Hong Kong.

This is not to say, however, that she neglects wider theoretical concerns. In her Overview (pp.6-8) Tsui states that: "This book is written for teachers, teacher educators and researchers who are interested in teaching expertise, teachers' professional development and teacher knowledge in general" (p.6). It would be impossible to satisfy so diverse an audience without a thorough theoretical underpinning, and this is provided in Chapters 2 to 4, where Tsui examines: Conceptions of Expertise; Characteristics of Expertise and Novice Teachers, and Teacher Knowledge.

> *"This book is written for teachers, teacher educators and researchers who are interested in teaching expertise, teachers' professional development and teacher knowledge in general"*

She pays particular attention to the theories of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) and offers their five-stage model for the acquisition of skill; moving from Novice to Advanced Beginner, through Competent and Proficient to Expert. She also endorses their characterization of expertise as "knowing how" rather than "knowing that".

Expert teachers have the flexibility and autonomy to be able to adapt to the multidimensionality of classroom teaching. Novice teachers lack the tacit knowledge that can only be acquired through experience and reflection, with the result that they are less able to respond to the demands of the teaching situation.

This leads us to Schon's (1983) concept of "the reflective practitioner", but Tsui indicates that teachers' personal experiences influence their concepts of teaching and learning, while classroom practices, contexts of work and the demands of the curriculum all impinge on both the management of teaching and learning. The complexity of these relationships is examined in her Case Studies.

Chapter 5, The Case Studies, briefly outlines the linguistic situation in Hong Kong and the specific school situation of Tsui's four informants: Marina, Ching, Eva and Genie. Marina is identified as an expert teacher, Ching and Eva are proficient or competent and Genie was still very much a novice in the field (p.71).

Tsui explains how she collected and analysed her data, and offers a brief consideration of the ethical issues involved in such analysis, before turning, in Chapter 6, to a far longer examination of her subjects' professional development. The biographical data in this chapter shows similarities between the four teachers: "the initial years were particularly challenging … because all of them went into teaching

without professional preparation" (p.134), but differences also emerge. While Ching becomes (over?) concerned with maintaining order and discipline, Marina and Eva extend their range of competence by embracing challenge.

In Teacher Knowledge and Managing the Classroom for EFL Learning (pp.136-137) and Teacher Knowledge and the Enactment of the Curriculum (pp.171-224) Tsui again uses personal narrative to examine how Genie attempted to handle groupwork within her classroom. In her classes, Marina was able to establish the concept of "acceptable and unacceptable noise" (p.142) – acceptable noise being on-task. She was also concerned with maximizing both time and the classroom environment for language learning, and could articulate her decisión-making process in theoretical terms.

Eva and Ching, by contrast, were less able to explore their own knowledge, and attempted to control their classroom environment by focusing on discrete skills rather than on exploiting the environment for communication opportunities.

Genie, however, was the least able to articulate her experiences. Her lack of experience as a teacher was revealed by a reactive approach, where she appeared unable to discriminate between important and unimportant issues, and equally unable to prioritize her objectives. In an interview, she admitted "I teach the way I was taught" (p.218), giving grammar rules rather than practice. There is a complete contrast here with Marina's approach, for Marina's classroom was, effectively, an "English zone", where communicative activities were established and encouraged.

Chapter 9, Taking on the Challenge; Exploring Process Writing, examines the dynamics involved in the implementation of a process approach to writing; a project "which involved ten teachers and fifteen classes of students" (p.243).

This was an initiative by Marina, acting as chair of the English section, to change away from the product approach to writing. She obtained consensus by demonstrating how teachers could implement the new approach and by monitoring their progress, listening to problems, sharing her own experiences and making suggestions where this was appropriate.

Working closely with both Amy Tsui herself, and with Eva, Marina was able to turn process writing into a positive experience for her fellow teachers. Eva came to see process writing as "a process of communication between herself and the students" (p.239), while Ching found that a heavier marking load was counterbalanced by more focused marking, and that was appreciated by the students. Genie abandoned peer reviews altogether, but found that process writing gave her students the chance to "re-express themselves" (p.243), leading to a sense of success.

In the final chapter, Understanding Expertise in Teaching, Tsui attempts to answer three central questions: "What are the critical features between expert, experienced and novice teachers? How does a teacher become an expert teacher? What are the critical factors that shaped the development of expertise?" (p. 245).

She concludes that one critical difference is the ability of the expert teacher "to engage in conscious deliberation and reflection" (p.265). Expert teachers take their own particular work contexts and use personal interpretations to transform knowledge into practical application.

Expertise is a developmental process based, at least in part, on looking for challenges and responding to them with experimentation and exploration. This can be a bruising experience. Repeated failures can be demoralizing, and Tsui suggests that teachers should balance their current level of competence against the kinds of challenge that they are prepared to accept.

So far as expertise is concerned, she suggests that we should distinguish between "multiple and distributed expertise" (p.279). Multiple expertise may, in fact, only apply to certain areas of specialization rather than being an across-the-board term applicable to professions such as teaching or medicine. ESP specialists, for example, may have expertise that is irrelevant to the teaching of young learners, and vice versa.

"Distributed" expertise, by contrast, may be found in any group of individuals, and a collegiate atmosphere that fosters the informal but deliberate pooling of ideas maximizes the opportunity of achieving high-level performance.

The relevance of this to teacher education is clear. Expert teachers who mentor novices must possess the metalanguage "to articulate the basis of their expertise and justify their actions" (p.281). And all teachers must be encouraged to "participate in professional discourse communities so that they can learn from each other" (p. 282).

It is difficult to believe that any teacher could disagree with either of these conclusions.

REFERENCES

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