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Understanding foreign language teachers' practical knowledge: What's the role of prior language learning experience? *

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Abstract

Teachers' practical knowledge is considered as teachers' general knowledge, beliefs and thinking (Borg, 2003) which can be traced in teachers' practices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) and shaped by various background sources (Borg, 2003; Grossman, 1990; Meijer, Verloop, and Beijard, 1999). This paper initially discusses how language teachers are influenced by three background sources: teachers' prior language learning experiences, prior teaching experience, and professional coursework in pre- and in-service education. By drawing its data from the author's longitidunal study, it also presents the findings of a cross-case theme emerged from the investigation of three English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers' prior language learning experiences. The paper also discusses how the participation in studies on teachers' knowledge raises teachers' own awareness while it informs the research.

Key words: Foreign language teachers, English as foreign language teachers, teachers' practical knowledge, prior language learning experiences, foreign language teachers' development.

Özet

Öğretmenlerin pratik bilgileri, öğretmenlerin genel bilgisi, inanışları ve düşünceleri olarak kabul edilir (Borg, 2003), öğretmenlerin pratiklerinde gizlidir (Connelly & Clandinin, 1998), ve çeşitli öz geçmiş kaynakarıyla biçimlenir (Borg, 2003; Grossman, 1990; Meijer, Verloop, and Beijard, 1999). Bu makalede ilk olarak, dil öğretmenlerinin bilgisinin üç öz geçmiş kaynağından etkilendiği tartışılır: geçmişteki dil öğrenim deneyimleri, hizmet öncesi ve hizmet içi mesleki çalışmaları, ve öğretim deneyimleri. Ayrıca yazarın uzun süreli bir çalışmasından alınan vakalar arası bulgulardan, İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğreten üç

* **This paper was drawn from the author's dissertation research.**

öğretmenin geçmişteki dil öğrenme deneyimleriyle ilgili bir tema sunulur. Bu yazı öğretmenlerin kendi bilgileri konusunda yapılan çalışmalara katılmalarının araştırmaya bilgi sağlarken aynı zamanda öğretmenlerin kendi farkındalığını nasıl arttırdığını da ele alır.
Anahtar kelimeler: Yabancı dil öğretmenleri, İngilizce'yi yabancı dil olarak öğreten öğretmenler, öğretmenlerin pratik bilgisi, geçmişteki dil öğrenme deneyimleri, yabancı dil öğretmenlerinin gelişimi.

1.0. Introduction

In the last two decades, a great deal of research has been conducted to explore teacher knowledge in general education, second language education, and applied linguistics fields (Borg, 2003; Elbaz, 1981; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Golombek, 1998; Johnston & Goettsch, 2000; Meijer et al., 1999; Meijer, Verloop & Beijard 2001; Shulman, 1987). Although these studies have been significant in furthering researchers' understanding of teachers' practical knowledge, what Meijer et al. (1999:60) call, "the knowledge base of teachers," there is still a lack of research particularly in the fields of applied linguistics and second/foreign language education.

The premise that teaching is a profession raises the issue of how to explore the knowledge of that profession (Meijer et al., 2001). Tom and Valli argue that (as cited in Meijer et al., 2001:171) although "teachers and some teacher educators stress the importance of teachers' practical knowledge …it is not clear how that knowledge can be integrated into a codified knowledge base." Similarly, Shulman (1987) argues the importance of this research in his study:

> Practitioners simply know a great deal that they have never even tried to articulate. A major portion of the research agenda for the next decade will be to collect, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of teachers for the purpose of establishing a case literature and codifying its principles, precedents, and parables (p:12).

2.0.Definition of teachers' practical knowledge

Teachers' practical knowledge have been interpreted differently in various studies although they share some similarities. In Borg's (2003) study, teacher's practical knowledge is included in a general framework of teacher cognition and explained as "what teachers know, believe, and think" (p:81). Elbaz (1983) argues that teacher's practical knowledge "encompasses first hand experience of students' learning styles, interests, needs, strengths and difficulties, and a repertoire of instructional techniques and classroom management skills" (p.5). For Connelly & Clandinin (1988), teacher's "personal practical knowledge is found in the teacher's practice. It is, for any teacher, a particular way of reconstructing the past and the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation" (p.25). It is also practitioner's personal understanding of the practical circumstances of their work environments (Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986).

The teacher's practical knowledge is also shaped by various background sources, such as professional coursework, teaching experience, disciplinary knowledge, apprenticeship of observation derived from time spent in school, personal characteristics, frequency, nature of reflection, and the school context (Borg, 2003; Grossman, 1990; Meijer, Verloop, and Beijard, 1999).

3.0. The role of background sources on teachers' practical knowledge

In his review of teacher cognition in English language teaching, Freeman (2002) argues the influential role that background plays in shaping teachers' learning. By referencing the work of Clandinin (1985 as cited in Freeman, 2002), he states that, "If, as Clandinin had said, teachers' knowledge encompassed the sum total of their personal and professional experiences, then clearly that background must somehow interact with and potentially shape any new learning teachers might do" (p:6). It may be inferred that as the background knowledge shapes the teachers' new learning, it eventually influences teachers' practical knowledge.

In her research on English teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, Grossman (1990) established a conceptual framework she believed would be the sources affecting the development of teachers' pedagogical content knowledge: apprenticeship of observation, covering the years of observations the teachers have done in their secondary, high school, and the undergraduate classes, disciplinary background encompassing the teachers' subject matter knowledge in their disciplines, teacher education courses, and classroom experience. To identify the patterns found in 13 experienced language teachers' practical knowledge

underscoring the teaching of reading comprehension (Meijer et al., 1999), the researchers defined six background sources that were assumed to affect the content of language teachers' practical knowledge: personal characteristics, frequency and nature of reflection, prior education, years of experience (in teaching), the language taught, and the school context.

In the field of second and foreign language research, Borg (1998; 1999) in his two related articles investigates the relation between an EFL teacher's pedagogical systems, teacher cognition and grammar teaching. One finding of his studies was that the teacher's instructional decision-making was influenced by his knowledge of context, educational experience, and teaching experience. Johnston's and Goettsch's (2000) study exploring the knowledge base of ESL teachers with a focus on grammar teaching concluded that teachers have been primarily influenced by two sources: their educational background, "ranging from middle and high school grammar classes to graduate course work in linguistic courses focusing on the structure of English" (p:446-447) and their teaching experiences.

That emphasizes three background sources that affect language teachers' practical knowledge and their classroom practices: language teachers' prior experiences as language learners, their prior experiences as language teachers, and their professional coursework. Although contextual factors are mentioned as one of the sources in several studies cited above, it can also be investigated as part of teacher's practical knowledge.

3.1. Language teachers' prior language learning experiences

The influence of prior language learning experiences of language teachers on their knowledge of teaching and practices has been recently recognized in various studies in second language education and applied linguistics (Borg, 2003; Carter, 1990; Elbaz, 1981; 1983; Freeman, 1991; Freeman & Johnson, 1998; Meijer et al., 2001; Numrich, 1996; Peacock, 2001). For instance, Borg states that

> Teachers' prior language learning experiences establish cognitions about learning and language learning which form the basis of their initial conceptualizations of L2 teaching during teacher education, and which may continue to be influential throughout their professional lives" (p:88).

Meijer et al. (1999) regard prior experiences as part of the teachers' background variables that potentially affect teachers' practical knowledge. For Ulichny (1996), since the teachers' beliefs about their students and learning are formed by their prior language learning and teaching experiences, these beliefs structure 'the knowledge base' for teaching. Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, and Thwaite (2001) also argue that teachers' classroom work is highly

influenced by their prior experiences as learners starting from their early childhood. Grossman (1991) concludes her research on secondary English teachers' subject matter knowledge by saying that

> …Prospective teachers do not enter teacher education as blank slates; they arrive with an extensive "apprenticeship of observation" in teaching methods (Lortie, 1975) and with prior knowledge and beliefs about their subject areas (p:260).

Golombek (1998) made a similar observation in her study on college ESL teachers' personal practical knowledge and discussed how teachers' language learning experiences have affected their classroom practices. Two ESL college teachers in the study carried negative language learning experiences and turned them into positive ones for their learners. One of the ESL teachers in the study recalled one of those moments when her teacher corrected her mistakes while she was trying to speak: "I could talk like anything, but when he started to check my grammar… I became terrified speaking in his class 'cause I know that I was going to be corrected…" (p:454). As she would not want her students to live through the same painful experiences, she adopted a reverse strategy: "I just […] I wouldn't want somebody doing that to me, so I can't do that I guess" (p:454) and applied it to her own teaching.

Freeman's (1991) longitudinal study addresses foreign language teachers' perceptions of classroom instruction with a focus on changes as they took part in an in-service graduate program. One of the participant teachers in this study recollected how her experiences in her foreign language class shaped her classroom instruction: "It seemed like the only way to do it [Spanish teaching]. That's the way I had gone from seventh grade all the way through college and, you know, that was normal. And I had learned that way and there I was teaching Spanish, and these kids would do the same" (p:443). Their narrative accounts summarized how the teachers' instruction had been influenced by their language learning experiences.

3.2. Language teachers' teaching experiences

The second source of influence on teachers' knowledge is their experience as professionals. Nespor (1987), in her study on the role of beliefs in the practice of teaching, gives a structured framework on teachers' beliefs. One of these categories, the episodic structure, was related to prior experiences of teachers. Nespor found out that, "A number of teachers suggested that critical episodes or experiences gained earlier in their teaching careers were important on their present practices" (p:320). Similarly, a Spanish teacher in Moran's (1996) study described how she reflected upon her experience as a Spanish language learner

in her practice and how she was influenced by her teaching experience with the help of her students' reactions to it. All these experiences resulted in changes in her classroom instruction. Consistent with this example, an ESL teacher in Ulichny's (1996) study also reported on how her prior experience as an ESL teacher was as significant as her educational beliefs in her classroom practices.

The brief discussion of this group of studies has shown that the teachers have been influenced to some extent by their prior experiences as language learners**,** which Lortie (1975) defines as 'apprenticeship of observation,' as well as their experiences as second/foreign language teachers. These accumulated experiences, whether they are positive or negative, help the teachers shape their classroom instruction.

3.3. Language teachers' professional coursework in pre- and in-service education

The studies investigating the effects of professional coursework on second/foreign language teachers' practical knowledge are divided into two groups, focusing on pre-service and in-service teachers. Amarel and Feiman-Nemser (1988 as cited in Carter, 1990) explore teacher trainees' viewpoints on the knowledge required to teach successfully in their classrooms. The study revealed that what concerned the students most were "management, feeling at ease in front of the students" (p:294). It also reported that the students considered "practical experience as the most important factor in successful teaching" (p:294). Carter concluded that these students "appeared to devalue what might be learned in professional coursework in advance of their formal study in it" (p:294). Similarly, Peacock's (2001) longitudinal study, investigating the belief system changes of pre-service ESL teachers, reported that there had been little change in the trainees' belief systems about various aspects of second language learning at the end of their three-year pre-service training.

The results of the studies conducted with teachers in in-service education appear to conclude differently from the studies related to teachers in pre-service education. For instance, one of the findings of Freeman's (1991) study indicated the positive change of the in-service foreign language teachers as they started to learn a shared discourse, which turned out to be most apparent in the last phase of the program. Cabaroglu and Roberts (2000) explored the development of the belief systems of modern language student teachers in a year-long postgraduate certificate of education program. Most of the student teachers in this study already had teaching experience in languages. The study showed that there had been a positive development in the belief systems of 19 student teachers out of 20.

In the context of the studies reviewed in this section, professional coursework can make relative sense for the student teachers who have had teaching experiences and/or who are in in-service training. However, student teachers who have not had this experience tend to rely on their own experiences as language learners to conceptualize what language learning and teaching is. We might further argue that student teachers turn to their own language learning experience to close this gap rather than to their professional coursework, which is more theoretical.

4.0. Method

Qualitative, multiple case studies approach was used to address a broad research question.

What background sources influence EFL teachers' practical knowledge and classroom instruction?

4.1. Research Context

The study was conducted in a large, well-established research based public university's English language school in Turkey. The school provides intensive English language education to freshmen students whose language proficiencies are inadequate to follow the English medium program or read academic texts in their respective departments. In this one-year intensive English language program, the students develop their reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills from 20 to 30 hours a week, depending on the student's level of language proficiency. At the end of the academic year, the students take a final exam to determine their eligibility to start their undergraduate program.

4.2. Participants

The three participant teachers, Rena, Zeynep, and Deniz, were selected by convenience sampling and were asked to be involved in this study. However, three major criteria were established to choose the participants in the study: a) working in the same university, b) having at least four years of teaching experience, and c) teaching English at an intermediate level. During the data collection period, all the teachers were working in the same school, had extensive amount of teaching experience in various secondary and post secondary schools in Turkey, and were teaching intermediate level English. Except Rena, both teachers had BA and MA degrees in English Language Teaching (ELT).

4.3. Data collection

The data in this paper was drawn from a larger study investigating three EFL teachers' practical knowledge. It was collected from multiple sources: twenty classroom observations for each teacher, thick field notes with pre, during, and post phases in every observation session, three formal interviews, five to seven informal, unscheduled interviews, two video-taped classes, and two stimulus-recalls for each participant teacher. In this paper, the author did not include the data derived from informal interviews, video-tapes and stimulus-recalls to investigate the effects of background sources on EFL teachers' practical knowledge and classroom instruction.

4.4. Data analysis

The codes and subcodes were created from the transcription of the formal and informal interviews. The codes and subcodes were then grouped into a number of categories and themes for each participant teacher in the study (Carspecken, 1996). The emerged categories and themes were compared with the conceptual framework drawn from the author's literature review and were found consistent. The author then wrote a preliminary analysis for each teacher which helped in case and cross-case analysis.

Observational tapes for each teacher were listened to at the end of each class session, summarized and added to researcher's thick-field notes. Each data for the teacher was kept individually. Immediately after the data collection, the author continued listening to the classroom tapes that would eventually help in partial transcriptions. The transcribed data was then coded and grouped into a number of categories and themes for each teacher.

The source of rigor in this study was maintained by prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, member check, and triangulation.

5.0. Results

After an analysis of interview and observational data, the following background sources were found to be influential in EFL teachers' practical knowledge and classroom instruction: teachers' prior language learning experiences, prior teaching experiences, and professional coursework in pre- and in-service education. This paper presents one cross-case theme, early experience in learning English, that emerged from the investigation of teachers' prior language learning experiences.

5.1. Case One: Rena's Early Experience in Learning English

Rena started learning English when she was in a prestigious public school, which was known as one of the most competitive English-medium, secondary schools in Turkey. She graduated from that school with a good English language proficiency that enabled her to enter an English medium department without any hard work.

Thinking back on her own experiences in learning English, Rena remembered how reserved she was in speaking and how she refrained from using the language even in her university classes (Interview 2, December 2004, 98). She believed that her limited opportunities and encouragement to practice English in her early years of learning was the reason behind her hesitation in communicating with her current learners. She might have underestimated herself, however, as the author observed her to be a fluent communicator and a patient listener. Her perception of her shortcomings was so powerful that she repeatedly commented on them.

Rena's limited opportunities to speak English in her prior language learning years also informed her pedagogical decision making and led her to remind her students to practice their oral skills as much as they could. The motive for her was to help them not to live through the same negative language learning experience as she did when she was learning English.

5.2. Case Two: Zeynep's Early Experience in Learning English

Zeynep's language learning journey started late compared to the other teachers in the study. Her views toward learning and teaching languages evolved not during her secondary schooling but during her undergraduate education. However, going back to her early years of teaching, Zeynep reminisced about an English speaking colleague and his trouble understanding the Turkish EFL learners, followed by Zeynep's assignment to that position to alleviate the ongoing misunderstandings and problems. One of the key factors that helped her in her profession was the empathy she built between her prior language learner self and her students.

> ...The process that I had experienced is the same process these students are experiencing now...You are in an advantageous position of being able to understand their problems better, you have a closer connection to the students and producing solutions related to that. (Interview 1, November 2004, 13)

Zeynep believed that being a language learner herself helped her understand her learners better. She also shaped her classroom teaching with the strategies she carried from her own language classes.

5.3. Case Three: Deniz's Early Experience in Learning English

Deniz's English language learning could be traced back to her private elementary and secondary schools. Her typical English language class revolved around intensive grammar teaching, with the frequent use of mechanical exercises, chain drills, and reading-comprehension activities. Compared to grammar and reading instruction, speaking, writing, and listening were neglected. Although she was content with her language learning experience, she also added that in the later stages of her schooling, the teaching should have been more inductive and 'skill-based.' (Interview 1, November 2004, 18) Similar to Rena, as a former language learner, Deniz commented on the frustration she felt from not being able to speak comfortably in her language class.

> D…[As a language learner] to answer a question was okay but times when you had to say more than a few words were intimidating for us because the teachers generally corrected the errors immediately. (Interview 1, November 2004, 52)
>
> S: Hmm. This is an interesting point. (Interview 1, November 2004, 53)
>
> D: When you were interrupted constantly after you spoke or sometimes even before you ended up your sentence, you start saying, maybe it is better not to speak up. (Interview 1, November 2004, 54)

As a teacher, Deniz used her own experiences of being a former language learner to help her students. While doing that, she remembered her language learning experiences and applied the instructional strategies she believed would be helpful to her students and reversed the strategies she regarded as negative. For instance, in error correction, instead of correcting the students' mistakes immediately, she either waited till the end of the class to summarize that day's commonly made mistakes or requested the student to repeat the same sentence to provide an opportunity for self-correction. Therefore, her experiences, even the ones she considered negative now, guided her to act in a way that would make her students learn better.

6.0. Conclusion and Implication

The teachers' active, ongoing, and negotiation-based knowledge has been partly developed and shaped by their prior language learning experiences. When the teachers experienced a discrepancy within the context of teaching or when they struggled to understand their learners, their identities as former language learners helped them in the process of their decision-making and instruction.

In the process of interviews and their analyses, the author realized that when the teachers started sharing their experiences shaping their teaching, the process of sharing gave them the chance to talk about and understand their knowledge, perhaps for the first time. This belief was also supported by Rena's comment during one of the informal discussions, in which she briefly stated that the interviews helped her understand how she taught, who she was as a teacher, and what she wanted to do in her teaching. Similarly, when the author discussed prior language learning experiences with Zeynep, she mentioned how she never had the chance before to dwell on her learning experiences and reflect on their effects on her current practices (Interview 1, November 2004, 58). As also suggested by other researchers (see Breen, 1991), the teacher educators should provide self-reflection and collaboration opportunities for EFL pre- and in-service teachers to examine their belief structures, sources influencing the teaching and their understanding of their teaching and their selves in a neutral and non-threatening environment by using the vignettes derived from teachers' practical knowledge research.

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