



# Reflecting on ESL teacher expertise: A case study

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## Abstract

Some teachers have been regarded as experts only because of their years of experience in a classroom, but the number of years of teaching experience does not necessarily translate into expertise. Within the field of TESOL teacher expertise is still a very under-researched topic. This paper attempts to contribute to the literature on ESL teacher expertise by examining the experiences of three experienced ESL teachers as they reflected on their work over a 2-year period in a teacher reflection group with the aid of a facilitator (this author) as part of their professional development. The findings identify and discuss five main characteristics of teacher expertise in order of frequency: Knowledge of Learners and Learning, Engage in Critical Reflection, Access Past Experiences, Informed Lesson Planning, and Active Student Involvement.

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## 1. Introduction

Some say that an ‘expert’ is a person who performs his or her job (regardless of the particular field) in a seemingly effortless manner so much so that it looks automatic and easy. Others may consider that individuals can reach expertise after years of experience with a common statement as: “He/she has many years of experience” thus implying that this person has reached the stage of expertise by virtue of his or her experience. If this were the case, then we can say that anyone in a profession who completed *X* number of years (we could set a finite number of years) could be considered an expert. However, expertise as an efficient, effortless and automatic state or based on years of experience have now been questioned by some researchers (e.g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Tsui, 2003). It is difficult to define exactly what an expert is in all domains because the term is arbitrary and subjective in nature to particular domains and skills. Indeed, some have gone so far as to say that experts make intuitive judgments that “defy explanation” (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986, p. 3). Given these definitional difficulties scholars in different fields of specialization have attempted to identify specific characteristics of expertise in their particular domains. This is also the case in the educational domain where researchers in different disciplines (e.g. science, mathematics) have attempted to identify vital characteristics of expertise so as to better inform their teacher education and development programs. The idea is that developing teachers at all levels can be taught these representational skills of experts.

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Within the field of English language teaching (ELT) teacher expertise is still a very under-researched topic (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010). This is a very important focus of ELT research because it can contribute to our general understanding on how English language teachers develop, especially as we consider what distinguishes expert ESL teachers from others who are still developing. Thus and because of this paucity of research on ESL teacher expertise, this paper sought to identify vital characteristics of ESL teacher expertise. Specifically, this paper examines the experiences of three experienced (each has over 15 years teaching experience) ESL teachers over a 2-year period as they reflected on their work in a self-initiated teacher reflection group with the aid of a facilitator (this author) as part of their professional development. The paper attempts to outline specific features of ESL teacher expertise exhibited by the three teachers during the regular group discussions, interviews and journal writing.

## 2. Expertise

Expertise has long been considered as having something to do with the quantity of knowledge a person has about a particular topic. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) agree, but they also point out that this does not mean possessing “just a headful of facts” (p. 30) about a particular topic; it also has something to do with the quality of that knowledge. As Johnson (2005) points out “it is the quality of knowledge that is important” in terms of possessing the “‘judgment of promisingness’ [where] the expert knows which avenues are likely to be promising and which may turn out to be dead ends” (p. 13). Johnson (2005) also highlights the seemingly effortless performance on the part of experts because of their knowledge: “Those who have knowledge do not need to think so much, while those lacking the knowledge base are forced into the harder route” (p. 15). However, Johnson (2005) and others also caution that “the apparent ease of experts often belies immense effort” because they “work long hours... and they tend to set standards for themselves and others that are always at least slightly beyond reach” (pp. 15–16).

Along with knowledge and all that entails, experience (i.e. length of time) performing a task has also been suggested as contributing to expertise. Within the field of education too, expertise has been equated with years of teaching experience, but the whole idea of experience leading to expertise has been questioned by various researchers (e.g. Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Johnson, 2003, 2005; Tsui, 2003, 2005, 2009). Indeed, in some professions the opposite has been discovered. In medicine for example, researchers discovered an inverse relationship between experience of a physician and the quality of care provided (Choudhry et al., 2005). So the whole notion of expertise is complex and difficult to define across all disciplines, because as Hoffman, Shadbolt, Burton, and Klein (1995) have noted, “how expertise is constituted, and how it is exercised, all depend on the domain” (p. 131). The domain in focus in this paper is teacher expertise and in particular ESL teacher expertise.

## 3. Teacher expertise

Similar to other fields, much of the early studies on teacher expertise compared novice and expert teachers and what they do and think in the classroom in a variety of teaching fields such as science (Clermont, Borko, & Krajcik, 1994), mathematics (Borko & Livingston, 1989; Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986), physical education (Housner & Griffey, 1985) and music education (Standley & Madsen, 1991). In each of these studies teacher expertise has been linked with specific types of teacher thinking and behavior with expert teachers seen as demonstrating ‘superior’ teacher behavior in such areas as understanding classroom events, and possessing particular routines for instruction and classroom management (Berliner, 1986; Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986). Such research suggested that expert teachers’ instructional behaviors have developed from possession of ‘advanced schemata’ where pedagogical content knowledge and subject matter knowledge is combined so that experts can successfully negotiate classroom events in more elaborate ways than novice teachers can (Shulman, 1986). For example, in the case of expert math teachers Leinhardt and Greeno’s (1986) research suggested that expert teachers have a large repertoire of routines and they even had several forms of each routine that they can use. Borko and Livingston (1989) discovered that expert mathematics teachers tended to look at the big picture when planning and included yearly plans when developing weekly lessons. In addition, science teacher experts and physical teacher experts seem to have a more elaborate understanding of the content they deliver to students than novice teachers and are also better able to represent abstract concepts in their lessons (Clermont, Borko, & Krajcik, 1994; Housner & Griffey, 1985).

Of the limited research conducted in English language teaching, Tsui (2005, 2009) has noted two main characterizations of teaching expertise: as a ‘state’ and as a ‘process’. Expertise as a state looks as characteristics associated

with a teacher after years of teaching experiences whereas expertise as a process examined teachers' development of different characteristics over time. Both of these approaches have as Tsui (2005) has observed, produced different characterizations of teaching expertise. Tsui (2009) identified characteristics of expert teachers during different phases of classroom teaching: pre- and post-active phases and interactive phase. In the pre- and post-active phases she noted that expert teachers always start their lesson planning with their knowledge of the students not only as groups but also as individual learners. They are able to exercise autonomy in decision making, they respond flexibly to contextual variations such as student responses, disruptions, and available resources, they are more efficient in lesson planning, and their lesson plans are usually brief. In addition, she noted that expert teachers' planning thoughts show a much more integrated knowledge base and they are able to relate their lessons to the entire curriculum and to other curricula and to establish coherence between lessons. During the interactive phase of teaching, experts are characterized according to Tsui (2009) by how they deal with the complexities of classroom teaching, "Which are typified by multidimensionality, simultaneity, immediacy, and unpredictability of classroom events" (p. 192). As such, because of their experience as teachers, experts are able to recognize patterns in classroom events interpret these patterns in meaningful ways. They are also more selective about what they attend to in the classroom, have better improvisational skills and can draw on a repertoire of routines with automaticity and effortlessness.

In addition, in this paper 'reflection' is seen as a key component associated with understanding the concept of teacher expertise because it can act as tool to bring this usually unarticulated concept to level of awareness. Through self-reflection in a teacher reflection group as is the case in the study reported on in this paper, teachers can relate their experiences to their beliefs, knowledge and emotions in order to as Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) have noted, "to integrate what is socially relevant into their images of themselves as teachers" (p. 114) and thus give us a cleared understanding of the concept of teacher expertise. It is important too for second language teachers to be able to articulate their teaching experiences so that they can as Leung (2009) has noted, become "engaged in reflexive examination of their own beliefs and action" (p. 53). However, it is not usually the case that experienced ESL teachers readily consciously reflect on the different experiences they have had throughout their careers, and so the research reported in this paper is also an attempt to accommodate these reflections.

#### 4. The study

Qualitative research procedures were used in the collection and analysis of the data in the study outlined in this paper (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Because not much is known about the content of reflections of mid-career experienced ESL College teachers in Canada, the study utilized a case study method (Merriam, 2001) that was exploratory and descriptive in nature to arrive at basic information (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). Case study research was chosen as the method of inquiry because it allows the researcher to capture and describe the complexity of real-life events (Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994). Other TESOL scholars have successfully utilized such a case study method for similar types of research (e.g., Clair, 1998; Tsui, 2003, 2009). Thus a case approach was chosen to provide the best path to a descriptive taxonomy of ESL teacher expertise.

##### 4.1. Participants

The three participants (for reasons of anonymity called T1 (teacher 1), T2 (teacher 2), T3 (teacher 2)) in the teacher reflection group were all experienced female ESL College teachers in Canada. Each teacher had an initial qualification in teaching ESL (a BA in Applied Linguistics) and a further qualification at the certificate at a more advanced level (Certificate in Teaching English as a second language). In addition, T1 had an MA degree in Applied Linguistics with a major in TESL. Each teacher had at least fifteen years teaching English as a second language experience. The genesis of the teacher group is unique in that this researcher was approached by the three participants and asked if he would be willing to facilitate their professional development as facilitator of the group through the use of reflective practice.

##### 4.2. Data collection

Qualitative research procedures were used in the collection and analysis of the data in the study outlined in this paper (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Data were collected over a two-year period with regular group meetings during the academic terms of the first year and follow-up meeting and a follow-up interview during the second

year. There were thirteen, two-hour (average) group meetings in total. There was also a follow-up interview at the end of the reflective process in order to clarify previous insights gained. All group discussions and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. In addition, throughout the period of reflection the teachers agreed to write regularly in a teacher journal. The focus of inquiry into teacher expertise was their thinking as revealed during their reflections during the group discussions and journal writing. The main research question this paper seeks to answer is: When experienced ESL teachers talk regularly about their practice in a teacher group, what do they communicate, either explicitly or implicitly, through talk and writing about their ‘expertise’ as ESL teachers and what does this ‘expertise’ look like?

#### 4.3. Data analysis

Because of the sheer volume of data, analysis was ongoing and recursive all during the period of data collection (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2001). For coding of the data, the theoretical framework that was employed in the study was grounded in the existing literature on teacher expertise and followed a two pronged approach: the first was the use of a priori codes intended to explore issues identified in the literature (Jorgensen, 1989). These codes drew on the work of Tsui (2003) which revealed that expert teachers tend to share particular characteristics such as a rich and elaborate knowledge base, ability to integrate and use different kinds of knowledge, ability to make intuitive judgments based on past experience, a desire to investigate and solve a wide range of teaching problems, deeper understanding of students’ needs and student learning, awareness of instructional objectives to support teaching, better understanding and use of language learning strategies, greater awareness of the learning context, greater fluidity and automaticity in teaching, and greater efficiency and effectiveness in lesson planning all of which were used as a prior codes. However, because of the ‘grounded approach’ that the study observed, I also looked for “interesting possibilities from the data and invented codes for further exploration” (Keith Johnson, personal communication, September, 2012).

Specifically, a total of 20,200 lines of text (from group discussions, interviews and journal entries) were scanned, coded, recoded and analyzed for references to issues related to teacher expertise. The characteristics of teacher expertise were then tabulated for the number of occurrences but those characteristics that appeared infrequently (only with a passing comment) were not considered (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Then at the end of the data collection period all data were scanned once more for accurate interpretation of patterns and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to establish the trustworthiness of the findings, I (along with a research assistant) assessed the quality of the data by checking for its “credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that “credible findings will be produced” by “the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the culture, testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or the respondents, and building trust” (p. 301). As the present study took place over a two-year period, this constitutes prolonged engagement and thus “sufficient time.”

### 5. ESL teacher expertise

Globally, five main characteristics of teacher expertise emerged from the group discussions, interviews and teaching journals and were categorized in order of their frequency of occurrence and integrated into a taxonomy of ESL teacher expertise outlined in Table 1 below:

As the *Taxonomy of ESL Teacher Expertise* in Table 1 above shows, a total of five characteristics emerged: *Knowledge of Learners & Teaching, Engage in Critical Reflection, Access Past Experiences, Informed Lesson Planning, and Active Student Involvement*. The frequency count of the occurrences of each characteristic is also included beside each characteristic. Of course, some of these characteristics of expertise may overlap and could conceivably be applied in a different descriptor; they were placed in a specific characteristic because the data suggested that they are the closest representations of that particular characteristic of teacher expertise. I now outline and discuss each of these characteristics in turn.

#### 5.1. Knowledge of learners, learning & teaching

The first and most frequent (211 occurrences) characteristic that the teachers exhibited in their group discussions, interviews and teacher journals was their knowledge of their learners, and learning. This characteristic of teacher expertise included such topics as how the three teachers were sensitive to their students’ needs, moods, motivation,

Table 1  
Taxonomy of ESL teacher expertise.

Characteristic	Definition
Knowledge of Learners, Learning & Teaching (211)	Knowledge of institution policies and how to fit into instruction/sensitive to learner context/environment/sensitive to student diversity/group dynamics/student moods, motivation, learning styles, needs, interests & behaviors
Engage in Critical Reflection (133)	Critical examination & reflection of teaching, beliefs, values & practices
Access Prior Experiences (120)	Aware of self and other teachers/teaching repertoires and routines/past experiences and practices
Informed Lesson Planning (84)	Aware of bigger picture for planning/aware of instructional objectives to support lesson/can anticipate difficulties in lesson/detect failure of student comprehension during execution of lessons
Active Student Involvement (59)	'socializing': part of the profession/not enforced/enjoyed/aware of professional boundaries & teacher burnout

enjoyment, learning styles, and also how they attempted to build relationships and rapport with their students but also how they made sure their students realized that they were responsible for their own learning. This was the most prevalent characteristic in terms of frequency count among all three teachers and is consistent with the literature in general education research which reports that expert teachers are aware of the ability levels and backgrounds of their students and use this knowledge when engaging their students in active learning (Hogan, Rabinowitz, & Craven 2003; Turner-Bisset, 1999). This is also a similar finding within TESOL research where Richards (1998) and Richards, Li, and Tang (1998) noted that expert teachers show a deeper understanding of students and language learning (Richards, 1998; Richards et al., 1998). All three teachers exhibited knowledge of their learners and their context when they were faced with a dilemma of how to balance keeping students happy because they are considered 'clients' by their institution versus pushing them to work hard and do things they need to do to learn the language. For example, T2 said that she felt the pressure to pass students because of school financial reasons and that this feeling triggered bad memories from past schools she worked in that had similar reasons for retaining students: T2 continued:

I feel more so now than when we first started there that the pressure on retention and keeping the customers happy has triggered all those past feelings that we've all been there, we've all worked in those schools: 'we've got to keep the customers happy. We've got to keep them paying their money and that kind of thing.'

For T2 this issue required her to use all her experience as a teacher to try to find a balance between trying to keep students happy while at the same time getting them to do the things they need to learn the second language. As T2 said: "I think there is a big conflict between keeping people happy and helping them to learn what they need. I think you need to balance them." T1 agreed and said: "You definitely need to balance those two things because you can teach them what they need to know but they may not enjoy it. If they don't enjoy it they will go somewhere and learn what they need to know in a place that they do enjoy it." T3 also agreed and commented that as experienced ESL teachers they have to be realistic and understand that their students are clients as in a business; she continued: "I think they can be both. You can also have learners who are clients and you can provide them with the service that you are supposed to be providing them with and still be an educator." Then T2 cautioned that it is not easy to balance this idea of students as customers because as she commented: "You can also start to believe that everything that the students want is the right thing and that's the danger." T3 agreed and suggested: "The customer is always right? No. I don't go for that." However, all three realize that the administration may have a different idea for paying ESL students. As T1 noted:

Then it affects your whole school because if administration sees the numbers and the dollars and that becomes more important than the learning, not to say that happens with us because I don't think it does. But you have to be constantly aware of it because it is easy to go that way.

Indeed, T3 suggested that even though they might have to retain students for the schools' financial reasons it will not help the student learn English and so they noted the ESL teacher must try to find some balance here; as T3 noted: "Ultimately that doesn't serve them well. They aren't learning for the sake of learning. It's a balance of learning English and qualifications which is fine. You can have both. You can learn English and get a piece of paper."

Embedded within this topic is the dilemma of trying to teach their students English while also trying to retain them given their institution's pressure stated above. They noted that they always had to structure classroom tasks, topics and

activities with both in mind: teaching them English language while at the same time “entertaining students for retention purposes.” However, they said that finding a balance between both meant having to constantly manipulate the content of their lessons so as not to make them seem too boring and this they noted was always a challenge; as T2 noted: “I really wonder if the classroom tasks, topics and activities I perceive to be entertaining or enjoyable are actually enjoyable to my learners.” T1 added that she wondered about the value of entertaining and if this was really necessary: “What is the value of the entertainment factor? What is the value of the actual learning? And how do the two go together in my classes?” So T1 said that achieved such a balance by giving her students choices about what topics they were interested in at the beginning of the semester; she said: “Some people like to read science and some don’t so I have them at the beginning do a survey of their interests so when I’m planning I can incorporate them.” However, she said that she does not necessarily cover all their topics during the semester because she noted that she obviously cannot cover 30 (the number of students in her class) different topics in a 15 week semester but also because she will choose some topics they may have omitted that she thinks necessary they cover.

The important point here is that this teacher included her students in her decision making and informed them about what (and why) she was going to do in her reading classes by taking them through the process: “I just make them aware of the process that I go through” and then as she says she will not have to listen to comments later in the course if they feel bored about a particular topics: “I don’t want to deal with it later where they are all ‘I’m bored of this topic. I don’t like this topic’”. These findings show evidence that all three teachers exhibited what [Shulman \(1987\)](#) calls general pedagogical knowledge related to the “broad principles and strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject matter” (p. 8). The findings also indicate that the teachers not only have mastery of their subject matter, but that they are able to manipulate it and present it in a variety of ways so that they can not only teach what they need to teach, but also keep their students happy.

## 5.2. Engage in critical reflection

The next most frequent (133 occurrences) expert characteristic was how they all engaged in some form of critical reflection and critical examination of their own practices. Included in these reflections is their stated desire to further investigate a wide range of teaching issues they are interested in. Indeed, it must also be stated that some of this interest arose from their current reflections on practice within the teacher reflection group reported on in this paper, and some from their reflections gained from attending conferences. In this study reflection for teacher expertise is considered the same as for research in general education and defined as “continuous learning through experience” ([Sternberg and Horvath, 1995](#), p. 13). Such type of reflection was exhibited by all three ESL teachers as they attempted to continuously expand their knowledge as themselves as teachers by engaging in self-monitoring so that they could provide better learning opportunities for their students ([Webster & Schempp, 2008](#)). This is also a similar finding in TESOL research where [Tsui \(2003, 2009\)](#) concluded that expert language teachers often engage in reflection and conscious deliberation; all three teachers reported on in this study were seeking some sort of continuous renewal by critically reflecting on their practices.

All three teachers said that they realized that critical examination is a very important part of being an experienced ESL teacher. They suggested that it is valuable because it allows them to examine their “methods, techniques, tricks, relationships with students, and how their job fits into their lives” (comment by T1). T2 mentioned that she felt the continuous need to examine her teaching because she felt it has become too automatic for her over the years and as a result she wondered if she really understood what she was doing; she reflected:

Am I ‘Reading’ my students correctly? Has this process become so automatic, so sub-conscious, and so intuitive that I don’t know? Do I rely on my experience too much when making decisions? Maybe I should be making this process more conscious for both myself and my students.

Another reason they said that they wanted to critically examine their practice was that they wanted to be able to compare different methods of teaching so that as T3 noted, “they could better control their decisions about which method would provide better learning opportunities for their students.” One such method they discussed was trying to get their students’ input and feedback to help them solve problems in their classrooms. The teachers said that they felt that discussing issues with their students and asking for their ideas and suggestions is a good method to resolve any problems in the classroom such as which method works or does not work, whether students enjoy a certain activity, or participate in activities. With this approach of including their students in their reflections and decision making, the

teachers found that students gained a sense of responsibility to their own learning when being asked for their input and ideas. T3 relayed an example of this:

Yesterday I sat down with my class as I had 20 minutes of class left and I said: ‘Okay, how much do you enjoy class?’ So I put them in groups and I asked them, how important is it to you to have enjoyment in your class? And then what kind of things that are done in class is valued? It was sort of this even balance of “well, if I’m not enjoying it it’s boring” and I said, ‘Wait a minute, is the opposite of boring enjoyment or interesting?’ They went “Oh!” They stopped and looked at me.

T2 also agreed it is a good idea to include their students and to encourage them to reflect on their own learning; she said: “It’s good for them to explore it themselves and to reflect.” Her example of this occurred in one class when she asked her students to comment about their preference for pair work or group work. T2 continued: “I said, do you want to work in pairs, or groups of three, or groups of four and I let them choose.” When they had chosen T2 then asked them to reflect on their choices: “At the end, I asked them. Why didn’t you want to work in pairs? Why did you choose threes? We just talked about it. I don’t think I would have done that before. I would have just said, I’ve decided we’re going to work in a pair.”

The teachers also all agreed that professional development sessions, discussions with others, and collaboration with other teachers are all great ways to reflect on their practice because they help find solutions to problems they might be having. T1 noted: “I’m very interested in how teachers can help each other. I see great potential for team building and collaboration coming out of something like this.” T1 continued to recount how she and another teacher collaborated on how to teach a reading class that semester and how they set this collaboration up; T1 remarked:

We are both teaching reading so we are going to choose some material that would be appropriate for both Level 3 and Level 4 and then teach a lesson with it. We are not going to tell the other what we are going to do with the material and then observe each other to see what we did. Just for fun and curiosity.

The teachers said that they really appreciated collaboration and felt that it is something that should be done often because it can help minimize one’s workload and helps teachers be consistent in terms of grades and what students across all sections are being taught. In all, the teachers felt that collaboration with peers is like having small professional development sessions and helps them add variety in their lessons.

### 5.3. Assess prior experiences

The next most frequent (120 occurrences) expert characteristic was their ability to access and make use of their prior experiences. The literature in educational research suggests that expert teachers understand the concept of prior knowledge, their own and their students’ prior knowledge and can access both when teaching and that this contributes greatly to learning (Jegade & Taplin, 2000; Meyer, 2004; Westerman, 1991). Indeed, in studies on teacher expertise in general education Ericsson and Smith (1991) have suggested that “access to aggregated past experience is the single most important factor accounting for the development of expertise” (p. 30). In the study reported on in this paper the teachers showed their knowledge of prior experiences, the different trends and cycles of their classrooms, and themselves as ESL teachers in different ways. They showed that they possess the ability to make intuitive judgments based on their combined past experiences, and the ability to integrate knowledge from a wide range of sources such as professional journals, conferences, and their colleagues’ comments. In addition, they all seem to have a wide repertoire of routines and strategies from past experiences from which to call upon.

T1 and T2 noted that they tended to teach to a pattern in their own classes that follows the cycle of the semester; as T1 noted: “I think the teaching term does go in a cycle for teachers and students” and this happened at the beginning of the second semester when T2 noted, “I’m at the beginning of the cycle that I described last term.” All three teachers then reflected on the pattern they observed where they moved from being a “nice teacher” to being “strict teacher” and this usually occurred after the mid-term exams. T1 reflected that she noticed that in all their classes that the students’ attitudes had changed after the mid-terms in any given semester and so had the teachers’ way of teaching; she said:

We all noticed last week that after midterm exams the students were getting tired. Students haven’t done the homework in W’s class this week and they didn’t do the homework last week and this week for me either. They’re absent more or coming late. T2’s cracking the whip, and T3’s having hissy fits.

T2 also noted the change in her attitude towards her students after the mid-term period each semester and that this usually happens if her students do not do what she wants them to do; T2 observed: “We all seem to have similar issues with our groups of students that we tried so hard to love and motivate before the exams and now we’re all coming down on them. I thought that was very interesting and also a very familiar pattern. I think it often happens that way.” T3 agreed and suggested that this trend happens every term; T3 continued: “it happens all the time. It’s not just this term. It’s the same pattern every time. Sometimes it starts earlier and right away you notice it.”

All three teachers also seem to possess the ability to make intuitive judgments about their practice based on past experiences and are comfortable with these decisions as T3 noted: “I think it’s perfectly fine to rely on your experience.” T3 then explained that it is not just blindly following these past experiences but doing so in a professional manner; T3 continued:

You would rely on it [past experience] in a professional way, not just to say ‘I’ve always done this. It’s always been that way. This is my experience. I know this pattern is the same all the time therefore I don’t have to change.’ I think you know as a professional, from your experience the things that worked and not worked and why they haven’t happened.

T3 and T2 noted that this was not always the case with some of their colleagues even though they may have years of teaching experience. For example, T2 talked about one of her senior colleagues (who since retired) always followed the book, “page-by-page and she delivered the same thing all the time, for years, no change.” T3 then remarked from her conversations and observations of both T2’s and T1’s classes during the period of reflection reported on in this study, she knows that both do not do the same thing each semester or each year; as T3 observed: “I know that you do not follow routine. I know that you are focused on your students. You know what needs to be done but you present it to them in a way as adult learners that they can manage it to make it their own experiences.” T1 then stated that they also make teaching decisions based on their accumulated experiences of how to “read their students’ reactions” in class when she suggested that they look for clues from their students’ reactions. T1 noted:

We use all our experience to observe their behaviour in class, their facial expressions, and body language and we try to judge if learning has taken place. Sometimes, but rarely, we get direct verbal feedback. More often than not it is those subtle clues that we pick up as we make our way through our class: the little signs, or not so little, that let you know that something is “working” or “not working” and then the decision about what to do next.

The teachers then revealed that they are able to call on a wide repertoire of routines and strategies when making instructional decisions as T1 noted: “there is no one method that we know that works every time but you want to make sure that whatever you’re doing that your students are engaged in it.” She then said that she uses both her “experience teaching as well as some old stand-bys in my filing cabinet.” She continued: “My stand-bys are my ‘bag of tricks’ that consists of all the ideas, lessons, strategies, approaches, techniques, even jokes that have worked, and didn’t work, over the last 15 years.” However, rather than use these haphazardly she remarked that she uses them “in a principled manner”; she continued:

I don’t use them all the time with every group of students or with every course I teach. I select them carefully and pull them out when I think it is appropriate. Yes, I have my own philosophy to teaching (however conscious or subconscious it may be) but this is reflected more concretely in my day to day choices, my practices, and preferences in teaching. I am not an indiscriminate user of tricks in the classroom.

T2 said that she makes use of her repertoire of routines according to her students’ needs and her own preference as a teacher. T2 stated: “We all try different things according to what we know of our students, our own personalities and preferences, and what has worked in the past to motivate and engage our students in learning.” T2 also reflected that her teaching approaches and routines have been part of her teaching for a long time and that she has been aware of how she changes them depending on the context she was teaching over time; she said: “These approaches and strategies have evolved over time and have been retried and refined in various teaching contexts.”

#### *5.4. Informed lesson planning*

The next frequent (84 occurrences) expert characteristic exhibited was their informed lesson planning. Lesson planning in this study included such lesson planning attributes as planning with efficiency, with comfort, with ease;

ability to anticipate events of a lesson; strategies for focusing on lesson planning; not dependent on the original lesson plan if the lesson takes them in a different direction and to accommodate their students' needs, challenges and interests. This expertise characteristic also included incorporating student responses into their lesson planning and also their ability to anticipate problems before they occur. However, if problems do occur all three teachers suggested that they have the ability to respond and rectify the situation. As Sabers, Cushing, and Berliner (1991) have noted in the literature on general education, expert teachers have a general understanding of the learning processes involved in a particular lesson and, consequently, can "respond effortlessly, fluidly and appropriately to the demands of the situation with which they are confronted" (p. 65).

When planning lessons, the teachers said that they always consider their students' needs, interests, abilities, and the levels of difficulty of the materials and take all these factors into consideration when designing lessons and that they are not afraid to change the lessons if they don't go according to plan. All three teachers said that they tended to focus on the bigger picture when planning which enables them to develop appropriate teaching strategies geared towards the needs of their students, a similar finding in TESOL research discussed by Tsui (2005, 2009).

The also teachers said that they believed that over-planning their lessons is not good and that sometimes they noted that lessons that are not planned out carefully or detailed can "end up being better lessons than very structured, rigid, lessons" (T2 comment). T1 noted that she tries to find some balance between focusing on content to be delivered and bringing her personality into a lesson when she plans. For this she has decided that less planning is best because the lesson tends to go smoother for her. T1 commented: "I have to find my own time that I relate to my students during the less, some kind of balance between content and being myself. I find that, you know how when you don't prepare too much things go better." T2 agrees and reflected that some of her best classes were not well prepared beforehand; T2 remarked:

Sometimes my best classes are the ones I have not spent much time planning for. Funny how that goes! Of course, this is not always the case. I think, in my case, the fact that I have taught reading numerous times might have something to do with my success despite a lack of careful planning.

They also reflected on the notion that over the years, their views towards lesson planning have changed. They spend less time on planning now compared to when they started off because they all came to a realization that it's not worth spending copious amounts of time planning a lesson as the actual execution of a lesson is more often than not different from what they originally intended it to be. T3 reflected this opinion when she said: "I certainly don't plan my lessons the same way that I used to at the beginning of it all, of course." Though they still find lesson planning to be time-consuming, frustrating, and unfruitful sometimes, they do enjoy lesson planning and feel personal satisfaction when good planning comes to fruition in the classroom. Again it comes to the issue of balance and T2 reflected this when she said:

It's just that balance and if that's how much time I have, that's how much time I have. I leave the ESL classes often not a hundred percent feeling, not content with what went on, feeling that there were other things that I could have done if I just had some more time I could have done this or I could have done that and it would have been so much better. I write it down and I say, next term I am going to do that.

### 5.5. Active student involvement

The fifth most frequent (59 occurrences) expert characteristic was active student involvement. Active student involvement in terms of teacher expertise included the teachers' positive views of keeping involved with their students outside of class. This is also reported in the general education literature on teacher expertise because active student involvement is an indication that the teachers care about their students and this has been seen to have a positive influence on student motivation, participation and learning (Noddings, 2006). The teachers in this study used the term "socializing" to represent their caring, and they all noted socializing benefited their students' development and helped to prevent any problems their students would encounter because of moving to another country and the cultural adaptation issues associated with this. T2 remarked that she socializes with her students willingly: "It's a voluntary thing. You choose to do it because you want to form a relationship with your students over a period of time." In agreement T1 remarked: "Helping the students outside of class is not in the job description. It's not part of the job really. Nobody asks us to do it. It's something you do because you like your students."

They noted that they are happy to have more opportunities to get to know their students better because they genuinely care about and for their students' well-being. For example, T2 said that part of their professional practice as ESL teachers goes beyond classroom teaching: "it goes beyond the classroom, our relationships. It's part of creating a whole environment for them and building a community for them." T2 continued to comment on the importance of such a community for international students in order to help them acculturate better into a new country: "It is a part of building community and making them feel comfortable and help them acculturate better." Within TESOL [Hawkins and Norton \(2009\)](#) have also noted that "language teachers are often the first contacts that newcomers (immigrants, migrants, and refugees) have in the target language community, and they serve as social mediators and informants in the new environment."

## 6. Discussion

The present study involved an investigation of three experienced ESL teachers for instances of expertise (as outlined in the literature review) exhibited in group discussions, journal writing, interviews and reflections over a two year period. Analysis of this intensive case study has yielded five expert characteristics or features across all three participants. All five expert characteristics of the three teachers are corroborated by previous studies of teacher expertise in general education studies. In addition, most previous studies on ESL teacher expertise compared expert to non-expert teachers (e.g., [Tsui, 2003, 2009](#)) but the study reported on in this paper compared experienced ESL teachers at similar advanced stages in their professional development and provides a more descriptive and inclusive understanding of ESL teacher expertise. The study reported on in this paper thus builds on this research by presenting a taxonomy of ESL teacher expertise of the expert characteristics that emerged from the group discussions, journal writing, interviews and reflections as a theoretical framework to further examine the complex nature of expertise in ESL teaching.

The five main characteristics of ESL teacher expertise outlined above should be seen in a holistic manner because they are not isolated as each is linked to the other and each builds on the other. As mentioned above all three teacher showed evidence that they are masters of their trade as they not only know their subject matter content but they are also able to present it in a variety of ways so that they provide personalized instruction thus providing overall optimum learning opportunities for their students. In order for them to be able to achieve this, [Shulman \(1987\)](#) maintains that expert teachers must not only possess many different kinds of knowledge (content, curriculum, pedagogical content, knowledge of learners and learning), all of which the teachers in this study exhibited but also have the capacity to "transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students" (p. 15).

I am also aware that these five characteristics may be not unique to the teachers in this study and many teachers at different parts of their career may exhibit similar characteristics. From the analysis of the literature on expertise related to English language teachers (e.g., [Tsui, 2003](#)) all three teachers seem to be showing all five features together that are characteristic of a teacher expert. All three teachers are knowledgeable of their learners and learning, they critically examine their own teaching, teaching materials, knowledge received regarding teaching and access their accumulated past experiences, and they value, understand and participate in collaborative relationships with colleagues to make informed decisions about lesson planning and lesson delivery. They also participate in, and value, socialization of and with their students by attending to extra-curricular activities and student acculturation. It is this last characteristic, active student involvement that may be a unique finding to this study as it is not covered in the studies on teacher expertise in general education research. Throughout the group discussions all three teachers demonstrated that they had an extensive knowledge of their individual students. I would suggest that this extensive knowledge along with their caring approach to their students' well-being that included taking into consideration their difficulties, language and cultural differences, their interests and aptitude is also a function of expertise in teaching English as a second language (TESOL).

In addition, the taxonomy presented in this paper not only provides a more holistic way for understanding the general characteristics in ESL teacher expertise, it does so without making every experienced ESL teacher a presumptive ESL teacher expert. As was noted earlier in this paper, experience by itself is not enough to result in expertise. Indeed, some people repeat behaviors without learning from them, so there must be something else along with experience that contributes to reaching expertise. The results of this study suggest that it is experience that embeds "balance" that may have contributed to the expertise of the three participants. This word came up in all five

characteristics of teacher expertise discussed above; however in order to achieve such *balance* the teachers agreed that it is necessary to be self-aware and to take a step back and reflect on this need to find balance within these five characteristics. So it seems that ESL teacher expertise not only involves experience that embeds *balance* but also involves a simultaneous level of self-awareness.

Of course, they were afforded this opportunity for developing self-awareness and reflection within their self-initiated teacher reflection group. In such a group the teachers constantly asked such questions as “What do I do?” “How do I do it?” “What is the result of what I do?” “Will I change anything?” and “What is the impact of what I do?” T3 summed up what they constantly strive to balance in their practice: “It’s balancing what I want you to learn or what I think you need to learn or that you expressed a need to learn.” T3 and the other two ESL teachers exhibited such self-awareness as that involves characteristics as reflexive self-observation, self-monitoring, and even self-control especially when it came to reflecting on their emotional states throughout the period of reflection (Zimmerman, 2006). Even though the teachers tended to use such terms as “cracking the whip” and “throwing a hissy fit” at different times this shows a level of self-awareness that included awareness of their emotional states and that this also may be necessary if one wants to reach the state of expertise (Dreyfus, 2001). As Dreyfus (2001) has noted, emotions may also be an essential for expertise: “Only emotional, involved and embodied human beings can become proficient and expert” (p. 173). However, there is not much in the literature on expertise about the emotions of experts so perhaps this may be an interesting area of research for others to pursue in future studies.

One of the distinguishing features of the teachers reported on in this paper is that all three teachers actively sought ways to reflect on their practice and as Tsui (2009) points out: “It is the resistance to automaticity and continuous learning that distinguish the expert from the non-expert” (p. 190). In other words these teachers did not blindly follow or rely on routines nor did they try to solve problems they encountered at any superficial level; in short they are not “experienced non-experts” (Tsui, 2003, 194). Through conscious deliberations in their teacher reflection group which involve group discussions and journal writing, these teachers were able to theorize from practice so that they could develop personal understandings and interpretations of this knowledge in their particular context. Similar style teacher reflection groups may also have an important role to play in helping teachers develop. Such teacher reflection groups can be incorporated into professional development programs because they provide a forum whereby experienced teachers can make explicit the tacit knowledge that they have gained from all their years of teaching experience. Indeed, teachers at all levels can consider reflecting on and incorporating the five characteristics of expertise noted above into their own teaching as they may assist in the more rapid development of their teacher expertise. It is also reasonable to suggest that in teacher development programs ESL teachers be encouraged to take on such activities as to constantly update their subject and pedagogical knowledge, to engage in critical self-reflection, to collaborate with colleagues in order to discover new information about teaching, to access and critically examine past experiences, to reflect on their lesson planning, and how (and if) they socialize outside class with students so that they can push themselves to the “edge of their competence” (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993, p. i).

One final aspect of the taxonomy of ESL teacher expertise discussed above is the consideration of the possible sequence of these teachers’ acquisition of the five domains of expertise. While the data cannot give a clear indication of the sequence one could suggest that the frequency count of each could be taken as an indication thus pointing to the following order of acquisition of teacher expertise: 1) *Knowledge of Learners & Teaching, and Learning*; 2) *Engage in Critical Reflection*; 3) *Access Past Experiences*; 4) *Informed Lesson Planning*; 5) *Active Student Involvement*. Indeed this may seem to be a logical order of acquisition as knowledge of learners and teaching takes time to build up and only after such time can teachers begin to critically reflect on all of their experiences as they then begin to consciously access their past experiences and really get to know and understand their students’ needs both inside and outside the classroom. However, I cannot be sure of this sequence and I can only really speculate (and hypothesize) the above order but future studies could focus specifically on the order of acquisition of the five domains of ESL teacher expertise from the above hypothesis. Indeed, by identifying specific acquisition sequences of ESL teacher expertise, such research could help contribute to the development of ESL teacher expertise on a more rapid trajectory.

## 7. Conclusion

The findings of this case study suggest that teaching experience does not automatically translate into teacher expertise unless teachers consciously and actively reflect on these experiences. In addition, experience that embeds

“balance” may also have contributed to the expertise of the three participants. The teachers were constantly attempting to achieve some kind of “balance” within and among the five main characteristics of teacher expertise identified from the group discussions, interviews and teacher journal writing: *Knowledge of Learners and Learning, Engage in Critical Reflection, Access Past Experiences, Informed Lesson Planning, and Active Student Involvement*. This researcher is well aware that the results of the case study may not provide the basis for prescription for all experienced language teachers wishing to engage in reflective practice because results are specific to a small group of three experienced ESL teachers in Canada; however, much of what is described and discussed in this case study may have relevance for other individual ESL teacher’s practice and context.

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