

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS' EXPERIENCE AND THEIR TALK RICHNESS: A CASE STUDY OF IRANIAN EFL TEACHERS

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to address the relationship between teachers' experience and the richness of their talk in an EFL classroom context. The participants were four male EFL teachers who were divided into inexperienced and experienced groups. To collect the required data for this study, the researcher observed the classrooms as a non-participant and made audio-recordings from one lesson of each teacher. The measure of lexical variation which is a type-token ratio was used to assess the lexical richness of teachers' talk. The findings showed that experienced teachers used less number of types and tokens in their talk in comparison to their inexperienced counterparts which is attributed to reasons such as different approaches of experienced and inexperienced teachers toward communicative approach, the teachers' own language learning experiences and background knowledge, the various teaching history of teachers, and different type of relationship between teachers and students.

Key Words: teacher talk richness; teacher experience; lexical variation; type-token ratio.

Introduction

Second language (L2) teacher education has seen an expanded development and complexity in the most recent two decades. A large number of studies which look at different parts of teacher education and behavior from professional, cognitive, social, as well as contextual viewpoints is currently accessible (e.g., Bartels, 2005; Borg, 2003; Burns & Richards,

2009; Johnson, 2009; Richards & Farrell, 2005; Tedick, 2004; Tsui, 2003). The point of all these studies has been to give us a general picture of what teachers do in the classroom. As Gatbonton (1999, p. 35) states, "it is clear that these studies have contributed greatly to the current understanding of the teaching process, its procedures and methodologies and as a result have had an impact on teacher training". However, keeping in mind the end goal to pick up a more profound understanding into the teaching process, these investigations of teachers' classroom practice should be supplemented with investigations of teachers' talk inside the classroom context. Since all dimensions of classroom process include teacher talk and it assumes numerous parts in L2 classrooms, study on teacher talk has dependably been a standout among the most vital parts of classroom research (Rahmani Doqaruni, 2015).

Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that teacher talk has been of extensive enthusiasm for understanding and attempting to develop second language teaching pedagogy (e.g., Cullen, 2002; Seedhouse, 2004; Walsh, 2002; Yanfen & Yuqin, 2010), it is intriguing to realize that a large portion of the previous studies have approached teacher talk by using either experienced or inexperienced teachers as sole subjects. However, as Gatbonton (2008, p. 163) makes it clear,

Although one can gather insight from novice teachers' thinking and behavior independently of experienced teachers and vice versa, examining both sets of teachers together in the same study allows one to compare them on very specific points and identify more clearly how they differ or how they are similar to each other.

Although the previous literature is suggestive (see the literature review section), few, if any, studies have thrown any light on lexical richness of classrooms of experienced and inexperienced teachers. There is no doubt that investigating such issues would be of great benefit for understanding the teaching processes inside the classroom contexts and the development of teachers. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to address the association between teachers' experience and the richness of their talk in EFL classroom contexts. To meet this objective, the following research questions were formed:

1. What are the significant differences in the richness of the talk by inexperienced vs. experienced teachers?

2. What might be the possible reasons for these differences?

Literature Review

The researchers have investigated the relationship between teachers' experience and distinctive parts of their behavior inside the classroom context from alternate points of view in the field of L2 education. Mok (1994), for instance, conducted a case study with 12 experienced and inexperienced ESL teachers to explore their significant concerns and changing perceptions after some time. She distinguished five common categories of concern such as teachers' self-concept, attitudes, teaching strategies, materials used, and expectations. She additionally claimed that the various perspectives expressed by the inexperienced teachers on teaching suggested that they gradually moved beyond the classroom and viewed their profession in a broader context more rapidly in comparison to the experienced teachers who progressed more slowly. Akyel's (1997) comparative study of experienced and novice ESL teachers showed that experienced teachers managed a more extensive scope of instructional alternatives in response to their students in comparison to novice teachers who interpreted learner responses as deficiencies. In addition, it was found that inexperienced teachers favored the flow of instructional activities and were worried with the appropriateness of their instructional techniques. The findings were in accordance with the previous literature as the research in L2 teacher education had suggested that less experienced teachers were worried with classroom administration and keeping up the stream of instructional schedules (Johnson, 1992; Numrich, 1996). Richards et al. (1998) were interested in how novice and experienced teachers arrange the same reading lesson. They found that novice teachers were not able to see the advantages of using a story as a part of a reading lesson because of their limited understanding of the nature of L2 reading.

Tsui's (2003) study of four ESL teachers with different levels of experience and expertise demonstrated that novice and experts are qualitatively distinguished on numerous critical perspectives such as planning and decision-making processes. Taking into account this finding, she proposed that one can form hypotheses about deficiencies in the novice teachers' pedagogical knowledge by distinguishing what parts of pedagogical

knowledge are lacking in the novice teachers' repertoire but existent in their experienced counterparts. This in turn may prompt changing teacher training programs to fill the gaps. Mackey et al. (2004) asserted that teachers' use of incidental focus on form techniques is affected by teachers' experience to a vast degree as experienced ESL teachers make use of more incidental focus on form techniques than novice teachers.

Gatbonton (2008) examined the categories of pedagogical knowledge of novice ESL teachers and compared these categories to those found for experienced teachers in her earlier study (Gatbonton, 1999). The results of her study showed that the pedagogical knowledge of novice teachers were comparable to that of experienced teachers regarding major categories such as language management, procedural issues, and handling student reactions and attitudes but not in terms of details within these categories. She then asserted that the fact that the novice teachers were like the experienced teachers may suggest that they had already been in the process of acquiring many skills expected of experienced teachers. Pouriran and Mukundan (2012) reported the findings of an empirical study that examined whether EFL teachers' use of incidental focus on form techniques was affected by their level of experience. They found that experienced teachers were different from less experienced teachers in terms of type and frequency of corrective feedback types they used in their classes. Moreover, the results uncovered that experienced teachers used incidental focus on form techniques more as often as possible than novice teachers which has previously been reported in the literature (e.g., Mackey et al., 2004).

Methodology

Participants

The participants were four EFL teachers who were teaching general English courses in two private language institutes in Babolsar, northern Iran. All teachers were male and their ages ranged from 23 to 47. The literature in L2 teacher education has revealed that experienced teachers are those with many years of teaching behind them, with many interpreted in various studies as at least four to five years (e.g., Gatbonton, 1999; Tsui, 2003, 2005). Novice teachers are those who are still undergoing training, who have just completed their training, or who have just commenced teaching and still have very little (e.g., less than three years) experience behind them. In accordance with the previous literature, the participants' teaching experience

in this study varied from less than 3 to more than 15 years; two of the teachers with less than three years of pedagogical practice were labeled as less experienced and the other two teachers with more than fifteen years of pedagogical practice were viewed experienced. All four teachers had completed their B.A degree in English language and gone through Teacher Training Courses in the institutes in which they were teaching. All the participants consented to taking part in the study.

Data Collection

To collect the required data for this study, the researcher observed the classrooms as a non-participant and made audio-recordings from one lesson of each teacher. One class at pre-intermediate level was selected from each teacher. Each class had between 10 to 15 students who were between 14 and 20. A tape-recorder was used for making the audio-recordings of the whole class. An MP3 Player/Recorder was also put near the teacher in each class both to record whole-class interaction and to capture teacher's voice more clearly. Using the above-mentioned method, seven hours of naturally occurring data was obtained from the four teachers participating in this study. The audio-recordings were then fully transcribed and analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Procedure

In order to explore the linguistic richness of teachers, their talk was examined using the measure of lexical variation (LV) introduced by Laufer and Nation (1995). LV is the type-token ratio which is used to assess the lexical richness of teacher talk. In other words, LV ratios show the diversity of words in teacher talk. The higher a ratio, the fewer repetitions there are. Its calculation is straightforward:

$$LV = \text{no. of types} / \text{no. of tokens} \times 100$$

In this study, *types* were defined as all the different words in the corpus, and *tokens* as the total number of running words. *Type* was taken to include both the base form and all its derivations, despite any differences in orthography and pronunciation.

The LV offers a macro-picture of the teachers' lexicon and has been used in a number of fields such as child language development, language impairment, second language acquisition, literacy development, authorship studies, forensic linguistics, stylistics, and others (McKee et al., 2000).

Data Analysis

In order to find out whether teachers' talks differ from each other significantly in terms of the tokens and types, Chi-Square test was employed. SPSS software was used to run the statistical analyses. In addition, the data were also analyzed qualitatively to find the reasons for possible differences between the experienced and inexperienced teachers regarding the richness of their talk.

Findings

Table I below shows the LV ratio of the 4 teachers. The low LV ratio implies that the teacher talk was not lexically rich.

Table I: LV of Individual Teachers

| Teachers | Types | Tokens | LV Ratio |
|----------------------------|--------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Experienced Teacher 1 | 612 | 3575 | 17.11% |
| Experienced Teacher 2 | 392 | 2220 | 17.65% |
| Inexperienced Teacher 1 | 641 | 3363 | 19.06% |
| Inexperienced Teacher 2 | 581 | 3015 | 19.27% |

Table 2 presents the total number of tokens and types used by both experienced and inexperienced teachers. As can be seen, experienced teachers have used 5795 tokens. This number, however, rises to 6378 for their inexperienced counterparts. As it can also be seen, the types employed by inexperienced teachers (985) are almost 10% more than those of experienced teachers (811).

Table 2: Tokens and Types by Teachers

| Tokens | | | Types | | |
|-------------|---------------|-------|-------------|---------------|-------|
| Experienced | Inexperienced | Total | Experienced | Inexperienced | Total |
| 5795 | 6378 | 12173 | 811 | 985 | 1796 |

As Table 3 shows, the LV ratio of experienced and inexperienced teachers varied. Lexical variation ratios were higher for inexperienced teachers (15.44%) than their experienced counterparts (13.99%). This finding shows that the experienced teachers' classes are lexically poorer than those of their inexperienced counterparts.

Table 3: Lexical Variation of Experienced vs. Inexperienced Teachers

| | Types | Tokens | LV Ratio |
|------------------------|-------|--------|----------|
| Experienced Teachers | 811 | 5795 | 13.99% |
| Inexperienced Teachers | 985 | 6378 | 15.44% |

The Pearson Chi-Square p-value in Table 4 shows that inexperienced teachers have used significantly more tokens than experienced teachers have ($\chi^2=726.529$, $df=168$, $p<.05$). Answering the first research question, there is a significant difference in the number of words employed by inexperienced and experienced teachers.

Table 4: Chi-Square Tests

| | Value | df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) |
|------------------------------|----------------------|-----|-----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | 726.529 ^a | 168 | .000 |
| Likelihood Ratio | 840.895 | 168 | .000 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | 128.728 | 1 | .000 |
| N of Valid Cases | 1419 | | |

a. 223 cells (87.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .26.

Howell (2002) suggests that Phi and Cramer's V are good measures of effect size to use for the Chi-Square test. Table 5 provides these effect size numbers. As Phi and Cramer's V are percentage variance effect sizes,

both indicate a high level of the variance in the data, respectively 71% and 50%.

Table 5: Symmetric Measures

| | | Value | Approx. Sig. |
|--------------------|------------|-------|--------------|
| Nominal by Nominal | Phi | .716 | .000 |
| | Cramer's V | .506 | .000 |
| N of Valid Cases | | 1419 | |

Discussion

As the findings show, experienced teachers have used less number of types and tokens in their talk in comparison to their inexperienced counterparts. This might be due to some reasons such as the following:

First, communicative approach and student-centered teaching are encouraged at the present time and teachers are asked to talk less and instead provide students with more opportunities such as assigning them to play roles, tell stories, and debate to increase their target language output that improve their target language proficiency. In fact, to inspire students to speak more in class is viewed as an imperative part of a teacher's job. In other words, a good language teacher forms pair/group work activities and makes his/her students talk in class, while a poor one does the greater part of the talking all through the class. This is due to the fact that the center of second language teaching process has changed from teaching to learning and the course of teaching should be student-centered. Thus, too excessive teacher talk should be avoided in L2 classes and teachers should take the roles such as a guide, a manager, a counselor and a facilitator. However, as the previous literature has shown inexperienced teachers in the initial years of their profession are for the most part concerned with establishing an appropriate degree of discipline and control, covering the required material on time and preparing for the examinations (Akbulut, 2007; Pennington & Richards, 1997; Richards, 1998). These might prevent them from applying more central procedures that are crucial in L2 teaching settings. In other words, communicative and learner-centered goals for instruction are overshadowed by the inexperienced teachers' solid feeling of their commitment to cover the required syllabus material and dealing with discipline issues inside their classroom context. These concerns in turn make them hold a teacher-centered approach rather than a learner-centered one. Pennington and

Richards (1997) criticize the insufficient real teaching experiences provided in the TESL courses for this deficiency and believe that,

These factors of inexperience, which make teaching a difficult and even overwhelming task, are magnified for those who are teaching in a second language and to second language students. Thus, in an effort to survive the first year in their comparatively difficult teaching circumstances, the [inexperienced] teachers in the present study would naturally seek ways to reduce the degree of complexity, inefficiency, and effortfulness associated with their early teaching attempts. One way of doing this was to move away from broadly conceived communicative goals and to focus more narrowly on the textbook and the syllabus (pp. 172-173).

It seems that the findings in the present study are in line with the previous literature as the inexperienced teachers have talked more, in comparison to their experienced counterparts, to compensate for their lack of practical and theoretical skills of conducting classroom in a communicative approach.

Second, it is worth noting that teachers' own language learning experiences and background knowledge might have an effect on their practices (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). Woods (1996) introduces the concept of BAK (i.e. a mixed view of beliefs, assumptions and knowledge) and believes that a teacher acquires these issues through experiences as a learner and a teacher from the earliest starting point. Akbulut (2007, p. 3) describes how teachers' background knowledge underlies their performance:

They [teachers] first choose the global schemata that satisfy their general goals and then choose lower level goals with the associated schemata to achieve higher level performances. These schemata is primarily shaped by the interaction of pedagogical coursework and the reconstruction applied by the individual teacher who is also considered as a *thinker* in contrast to previous traditional arguments in the literature, which considered teachers as *tabula rasa*.

Thus, it can be concluded that since both experienced and inexperienced teachers in the present study have undergone through different

experiences both as a learner and a teacher, the amount of types and tokens they use in their talk is a reflection of their own learning experience and, not surprisingly, are significantly different.

Third, another reason for different patterns of teacher talk between experienced and inexperienced teachers can be attributed to their cognition. Considering teacher development as a continuum, we can put inexperienced teachers and experienced teachers in the early and later stages of this continuum, respectively. Taking this continuum into account, it is not far from reality to contend that the thinking and classroom behavior of experienced teachers are likely to be more stable and less variable in comparison to their novice counterparts. Gatbonton (2008, p. 162) believes that, "the stability arises because they [experienced teachers] already have had ample opportunities to deal with recurring issues and, consequently, have had occasions to retain what works and eliminate what does not". Thus we can infer that due to the fact that the experienced teachers in the current study have been confronted with different teaching contexts during their professional career, they have become more aware of details that can affect their performance and students' learning opportunities. As a result, it should not come as a surprise to see that they are profoundly watchful about their own particular styles of talk. This might justify the more conservative approach of experienced teachers for their talking pattern inside the classroom context. In contrast, being in the beginning stages of their teaching career, novice teachers can be characterized as more changeable, although it is very likely to increase stable elements in their knowledge over time. In this way, the experienced teachers' less use of types and tokens in the present study might be explained by the longer teaching history of them.

Last but not least, the relationship between teachers and students is worth considering as it might have affected teachers' talk. As Bullough et al. (1991) state, inexperienced teachers are mainly concerned with forming relationships with their students and dealing with classroom management. Only later, they are able to focus more on the pedagogic needs of students in their classrooms. In other words, the inexperienced teachers seem less preoccupied with matters of language system and learning process and more concerned about the learner as a person in the early stages of their profession. When they talk about learning they put emphasis on using learner-friendly material, on combining the students' interests with the language, on making the learning process fun and less complicated for the learner, and finally there is emphasis on the learners' individuality. As Rahmani Doqaruni's (2015) study also shows, novice teachers are obsessed

with negative reactions of the students' behavior, namely that the students are unhappy, that they are anxious, that they are undisciplined, and that they do not like to collaborate with their peers. In contrast, experienced teachers' focus is mostly on the students' general classroom conduct and doing the exercises from the text books. He makes a relationship between these different behaviors of novice and experienced teachers and their more and less use of communication strategies in their talk, respectively. Rahmani Doqaruni (2015, p. 11) describes the reason as the following:

They [inexperienced teachers] were distracted from their teaching most of the times and always put themselves in different and unexpected situations and contexts which persuaded them to use more CSs [communication strategies] in their talk to convey their meaning. In other words, these teachers used to create new contexts and situations in their classrooms and make use of their personal experiences to elaborate on the subject matters at hand rather than teaching what they were supposed to.

The same reason can be true for inexperienced teachers in the present study, however from another perspective as these teachers have used more types and tokens in their talk in comparison to their experienced counterparts.

Conclusion

In order to gain a deeper insight of teacher talk richness, this study examined the use of types and tokens by EFL teachers in their talk. The rationale for this exploration is that understanding the teaching process and the development of teachers is incomplete unless the teachers' classroom behavior, especially their talk, is taken into consideration. Despite such an importance, however, there are relatively few studies that address such an issue.

In this study, transcripts of language classrooms were examined and word-counts on these transcripts were carried out. It is believed that such word-counts can give us some idea of the richness of the vocabulary being used by the teachers in their classes. The results of the present study showed that the number of types and tokens the inexperienced teachers employed in their classes were significantly more than the experienced ones. The large

number of different words would suggest that the inexperienced teachers were providing a relatively rich lexical environment for their students in comparison to a smaller number of different words used by the experienced teachers. The authentic data provided here based on observations of real classes are hoped to reinforce “the links between research and teacher development, creating in teachers an awareness of the contribution which research in their own classrooms can make to their professional growth” (Borg, 1998, p. 281).

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