The Erosion of EFL Teachers' Content and Pedagogical-Content Knowledge Throughout the Years of Teaching Experience

Esmail Safaie Asl a, *, Nader Safaie Asl b, Akbar Safaie Asl c

a Linguistics Department, Allameh Tabataba'i university, Tehran, 1997967556, Iran
b English Department, Ministry of Education, Marand, East Azerbaijan, Iran
c English Department, Ministry of Education, Urmia, West Azerbaijan, Iran

Abstract

Theoreticians have long been offering EFL teachers worldwide lots of methodological contributions. But do the teachers ever try to keep themselves in touch with those contributions so as to improve their teaching task? And do they also practically try to enhance their content knowledge as required of especially every non-English teacher of English? There was an attempt to answer the mentioned questions in this paper. To do so, one hundred and fifteen school level EFL teachers in Marand, East Azerbaijan, Iran were studied. The subjects' content and pedagogical-content knowledge were measured through two sets of multiple-choice questions. The results of the investigation indicated that regretfully a remarkable number of teachers possess much less than expected amount of both content and pedagogical-content knowledge, which is also triggered by their amount of teaching experience. That is, the more years they teach, the more amount of content and pedagogical-content knowledge they lose. So a necessity is felt for EFL teachers to be strongly and continuously motivated in order to update themselves in terms of both of the above-mentioned types of knowledge. Both content and pedagogical-content knowledge can be thought of as keys to act as a professional EFL teacher in order to efficiently serve EFL learners.

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1. Introduction

Needless to say, English is globally perceived as an unavoidable language to be learned so as to help the learner be called an international person. Its status has gone so far as that it is appropriately called the global language or undoubtedly the unrivaled lingua franca of the world. Following Kachru (1986, as cited in Murray & Christison, 2011, pp.16-17), English language has created three concentric circles labeled as 1) the Inner Circle (referring to those countries where English is the dominant language and the one first learned by most of the population, used for the discourse of education, politics, business, science and technology, and administration. Such countries include Australia, Anglophone Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States, 2) the Outer Circle (referring to countries such as India, Kenya, Malaysia, and Singapore, where English may or may not be the official language but for historical reasons still plays a role in such discourses, and 3) the Expanding Circle, the outermost of the concentric circles, (referring to countries such as Brazil, China, Egypt, Germany, Japan, or Thailand, where English is widely used as a foreign language for communication with native English-speakers or other EFL speakers.

Iran is located among the last circle countries, where English as a foreign language is mainly used for international discourses. The cycles of English language life in Iran formally run within the educational system from exactly 2nd grade of junior high school and continue to the end of university levels, focusing primarily on reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary aspects with little, if any, attention to pronunciation, listening and speaking abilities. Consequently, as Farhady, Jafarpoor & Birjandi (1994, as cited in Ghorbani, 2009) have indicated, both school and university level EFL learners lack the ability to use it communicatively. It should be highly noted that the students' inability to make communicative use of English seems to be rooted mainly not in the teachers but in the curriculum prescribed by the educational system. Concerning school-level Iranian EFL learners, they are ultimately expected to be able to perform successfully in the final exams measuring principally their grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, held by the examination system under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. The students are naturally not expected to have mastery of aural-oral English. Their success in final exams is an important indication of their teachers' being described as good and professional. According to Jahangard (2007, as cited in Ghorbani, ibid.), (school) teachers in Iran are pressured into shaping their teaching practices based on the demands of nationwide exams. In order to improve the students' performance in exams, expected by their parents, school principals, and most importantly the Ministry of Education, the teachers have to try their best, even through resorting to Persian (Iran's national language) and local languages spoken in the country. Teachers in Iran are, according to Namaghi (2006, as cited in Ghorbani, ibid.), mere implementers of prescribed initiatives and schemes without recourse to their own professional knowledge and experience. The concept of professionalism on behalf of (English) teachers in the context of Iran's pedagogical context is simple: if students' grades in the final exams are good, the teachers become good teachers.

Having pointed out the status of both teaching and learning English in Iran's educational system, especially in school setting, the investigators try to find out how much knowledgeable and up-to-date school-level English teachers in Marand, East Azerbaijan, Iran are. We have limited the study to measuring only two types of professional knowledge possessed by the aforementioned teachers with different years of teaching experience: content knowledge and pedagogical-content knowledge.

The next two sections deal with the above-mentioned types of knowledge and the issue of professionalism around which the present study centers.

2. Knowledge systems

Shulman (1987, as cited in Randall & Thornton, 2001, pp.27-29) lists seven types of knowledge base which are important for teachers, regardless of their subject specialism. EFL teachers, like teachers of any other subject
specialism, are required to enjoy the referred types of knowledge base. In the present paper, only two of those seven types of knowledge base come under the spotlight: content knowledge and pedagogical-content knowledge.

2.1. Content knowledge

This refers to EFL teachers' knowledge of the subject, encompassing their proficiency in English along with their knowledge about the formal aspects of English such as syntax, phonology, and etc. (and maybe culture). In Richards' words, content knowledge refers to what (language) teachers need to know about what they teach (including what they know about language teaching itself), and constitutes knowledge that would not be shared by teachers of other subject areas (2011, p.5). Following Richards (ibid.), this type of knowledge is (one among the other types) what teachers need to know in order to reach their full potential as language teachers. According to Seidlhofer (1999, as cited in Richards, 2011, p.4), research has shown that a language teacher's confidence is (among other factors) dependent upon his or her own level of language proficiency, so a teacher who perceives himself or herself to be weak in the target language will have reduced confidence in his or her teaching ability and an inadequate sense of professional legitimacy.

2.2. Pedagogical-content knowledge

This refers to the way that the target language (i.e. English language in the context of the present paper) may best be presented and learnt, that is, the methodology of language teaching. According to Richards (2011, p.6), pedagogical-content knowledge refers to knowledge that provides a basis for language teaching. It is knowledge that is drawn from the study of language teaching and language learning itself and which can be applied in different ways to the resolution of practical issues in language teaching. It could include course work in areas such as curriculum planning, assessment, reflective teaching, classroom management, teaching children, teaching the four skills, and so on. Freeman (2000, pp. ix-x) points out that studying the methods is invaluable as it is part of the knowledge base of teaching through which teachers join a community of practice resulting in a professional identity and connecting teachers with others so that they are not isolated in their practice. In Richard's words, becoming an English language teacher means becoming part of a worldwide community of professionals with shared goals, values, discourse, and practices but one with a self-critical view of its own practices and a commitment to a transformative approach to its own role (2011, p.27). Prabhu (1990, as cited in Freeman, ibid.) argues that interacting with others' conceptions of practice helps keep teachers' teaching alive and prevent it from becoming stale and overly routinized. Freeman (ibid.) also believes that this type of knowledge helps expand a teacher's repertoire of techniques, which provides an additional avenue for professional growth and helps the teachers deal more effectively with the unique qualities and idiosyncrasies of their students.

3. Professionalism

Following Leung (2009, as cited in Richards, 2011, pp.27-28), there are two different dimensions to professionalism: the first can be called institutionally prescribed professionalism - a managerial approach to professionalism that represents the views of ministries of education, teaching organizations, regulatory bodies, school principals, and so on that specify what teachers are expected to know and what constitutes quality teaching practices. This concept of professionalism in the context of Iran was pointed out above in the second paragraph of Introduction. The second dimension to professionalism is what Leung calls independent professionalism, which refers to teachers’ own views of teaching and the processes by which teachers engage in reflection on their own values, beliefs, and practices. Paraphrasing Pettis (2002, p.393), an (independent) professional teacher has redefined the advent of a new year. For him, the new year begins with the start of a new school year. It is then that he is going to spend more time with teachers, discussing educational issues, finding out about their particular concerns, solutions, innovations, and strengths. It is the time that he becomes particularly aware that he is both a teacher and a learner. He has realized that the development of professional competence is equally long-term and ongoing. According to Murray and Christison (2011, p.200), professional development needs to be sustained and intensive.
and focused on the actual classroom—both knowledge of subject matter and of teaching methodology. In attributing professionalism to English teachers, Ur (2002, p.391) points out some implications: they are a community; they are committed; they publish; they learn; they are autonomous; they are responsible for training new teachers. Crandall (2001, 535-551), in her article entitled as keeping up to date as an ESL or EFL professional, through referring to the wise saying that reads as teaching is lifelong learning (which is itself the best part of teaching), points out that completing an academic (teaching) program is really only the beginning of a lifelong quest to better understand our students, ourselves, our discipline, and the approaches and techniques we can use to help others become competent users of English. She also refers to a number of resources available to stimulate new ideas and help us reconsider old ideas or practices. Here comes the list of some resources: professional associations and organizations such as TESOL and LSA; professional journals such as ELT journal and TESOL journal; publishers such as CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS; internet resources such websites; workshops and seminars; research and collaborative projects.

Based on the preceding two sections, it can be argued that for an English language teacher to claim to be really qualified and professional for the great task of ELT, s/he has no other choice but equip himself or herself with the types of knowledge mentioned in section 2, along with other necessary conditions. Regarding the content knowledge, it is beyond question that non-native English teachers (NNET) do not have to meet the expectations enjoyed by native ones in order to be labelled as professional and qualified. As Canagarajah (1999, as cited in Richards, 2011, p.3) puts it, it is not necessary (for NNET) to have a native-like command of a language (English) in order to teach it well. However, Richards (ibid.) points out that NNETs must have reached a threshold proficiency level in the target language in order to be able to teach effectively in English. He has listed the language-specific competencies that a (non-native) language teacher needs in order to teach effectively. Here comes the list: to comprehend texts accurately; to provide good language models; to maintain use of the target language in the classroom; to maintain fluent use of the target; to give explanations and instructions in the target language; to provide examples of words and grammatical structures and give accurate explanations (e.g., of vocabulary and language points); to use appropriate classroom language; to select target-language resources (e.g., newspapers, magazines, the Internet); to monitor his or her own speech and writing for accuracy; to give correct feedback on learner language; to provide input at an appropriate level of difficulty; to provide language-enrichment experiences for learners.

4. Methodology

4.1. Participants

One hundred and fifteen school level EFL teachers in Marand, East Azerbaijan, Iran were involved in this study. Among them, 65 teachers (or 56/53%) were male and 50 teachers (or 43/47%) were female. The teachers were selected from both junior high school (numbering fifty eight teachers, both male and female) and senior school (numbering fifty seven teachers, both male and female). The subjects' university degrees ranged from BA to MA in ELT. Considering their years of English language teaching experience, the subjects were put into three groups: a) 1-10 years; b) 11-20 years; c) 21-30 years.

4.2. Instruments

In order to measure the subjects' content and pedagogical-content knowledge, a questionnaire was designed. It comprised two sets of multiple-choice questions taken from MA Entrance Exam given by the country's Measurement and Education Organization (MEO) in 2012. The first set of questions consisting of 8 vocabulary, 8 grammatical structure, and 8 linguistics questions measured the respondents' content knowledge. The second set comprising 15 methodology questions measured the subjects' pedagogical-content knowledge. In addition to the mentioned sets of questions, the researchers surveyed the respondents' choice of ELT methods in teaching practice, their being in touch with ELT national and international symposiums, their having access to ELT journals, both
national and international, and their benefitting from other English teachers, books, journals, internet resources through 4 open-ended questions which were also intended to indirectly evaluate the subjects’ writing skill in English.

### 4.3. Data collection procedure

The researchers having had the research permit from the Education department in Marand attended available schools to have the questionnaires filled out. The subjects were convincingly asked to answer the questions at school in order to measure their real being possessed of both content and pedagogical-content knowledge on the one hand and their being in touch with different ELT resources, on the other hand.

### 4.4. Findings and Discussions

The collected data related to two sets of knowledge questions were analyzed using SPSS software, version 16. Table 1 gives the results of studying the two types of knowledge enjoyed by the subjects and shows the descriptive statistics about the subjects’ content knowledge considering their teaching experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>26.61</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>21.49</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statistics in Table 2 attained through ANOVA test indicates the content knowledge mean scores of the subjects having variable years of teaching experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intergroup</td>
<td>466.7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>233.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intragroup</td>
<td>4625</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5092</td>
<td>115</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With F= 5.7 at the significance level of p= 0.001(p < 0/05), it can be concluded that the subjects' content knowledge is variable considering their teaching experience. Teachers with 1-10 years of teaching experience enjoy the most amount of content knowledge whereas those with 21-30 years of teaching experience enjoy the least amount of the mentioned type of knowledge. This finding confirms the fact that with an increase in the years of teaching experience, the amount of content knowledge in Iranian school level EFL teachers decreases.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics relating to the subjects' pedagogical-content knowledge considering their teaching experience. As with the content knowledge, ANOVA test was used to analyze the subjects' pedagogical-content knowledge. The results of the analysis of the subjects' pedagogical-content knowledge are given in Table 4.
Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of experience</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-10</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>28.41</td>
<td>3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-20</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>22.58</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>17.93</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intergroup</td>
<td>289.125</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>144.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intragroup</td>
<td>5226.387</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>46.2</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5515.512</td>
<td>115</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With F= 3.1 at the significance level of p= 0.01(p < 0.05), it can be concluded that, the same as with the subjects' content knowledge, their pedagogical-content knowledge is variable considering their teaching experience. Teachers with 1-10 years of teaching experience enjoy the most amount of pedagogical-content knowledge whereas those with 21-30 years of teaching experience enjoy the least amount of the mentioned type of knowledge. This finding confirms the fact that with an increase in the years of teaching experience, the amount of pedagogical-content knowledge in Iranian school level EFL teachers decreases.

The observed difference between the subjects' scores on content and pedagogical-content knowledge, with the latter one overriding the former one, can be partially attributed to the subjects' participation in in-service training courses. The justification of the mentioned attribution lies in the fact that the in-service training courses focus only on the pedagogical-content knowledge with the content one having been marginalized.

The subjects' responses to four open-ended questions in the questionnaire indicated that they have grown no special interest in updating themselves via attending ELT symposiums, studying their favourite articles in national and international journals and going surfing on the internet for knowledge-boosting purposes. Most of the subjects, especially the ageing ones, could not even name the world-known ELT related journals. So how could one expect them to study the articles published in them in order to boost their knowledge? Moreover, they seem to be uninformed about symposiums held on ELT. They need to be kept abreast of both national and international specialized journals, ELT-oriented websites, and, at least, nationally held symposiums. Considering the method(s) they take advantage of in their classes, a remarkable number of the subjects are not clear on which method they are exactly benefitting from. Regarding their writing skill in English, the subjects manifested obvious grammatical errors unexpected of them. Their pieces of writing also proved that they had been deprived of a rich lexical inventory and flexible syntactic structures.

In terms of the gender of the subjects, T-test results indicated that there was no significant difference observed between two gender groups in relation to their possessing content and pedagogical-content knowledge. The subjects indicated no gender-based significant difference in relation to their keeping abreast of ELT resources such as taking
part in national and international symposiums and benefitting from other English teachers, books, journals, internet resources, either.

The findings of the present study concerning the effect of increase in the years of teaching experience on decrease in the amount of both content and pedagogical-content knowledge on the one hand and saying farewell to ELT resources on the other hand, are somehow in parallel with professional life cycle of teachers as reported by Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) and Day (1999) (as cited in Karaaslan, 2003). Accordingly and broadly-speaking, (English) teachers’ (as applied by Karaaslan, ibid.) professional life cycle runs in the following way; teachers, starting their teaching career, find commitment and feel relatively secure in their knowledge of teaching practice and subject matter, which is called stabilization stage. This stage is followed by monotony, stagnation and disenchantment. Approaching their retirement age, they may show more concern with holding on to what they have, resistance to innovations, and disengagement.

5. Conclusion

In the present study it was found that progressive teaching experience of EL teachers in Marand, East Azerbaijan, Iran does not meet the natural expectation of holding a positive correlation between increasing teaching experience and professionalism. Concerning both content and pedagogical-content knowledge, the possessing of which is essential for an effective and professional English language teacher, the subjects, with no significant difference between two gender groups, especially those approaching their retirement age, suffer from a considerable amount of erosion. In relation to ELT resources such as being in touch with national and international symposiums, having access to specialized journals, both national and international, and benefitting from other English teachers, books, journals, internet resources, the subjects seem to have been standing aloof. On the basis of what went above about the subjects' lack of expected amount of professionalism required of an effective English language teacher and in order to efficiently serve English language learners, English language teachers need to be motivated strongly and continuously so as to qualify as professional and effective English teachers.

References