

English Language Teacher Knowledge and the Classroom Practices

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ABSTRACT: This paper previews the research about teacher knowledge and cognition among English Language Teachers and presents a pilot study resting upon the assumption that a gap between teacher professional knowledge and classroom practices exists. 10 teachers from a language center volunteered to become the subjects of this study. A sample Teaching Knowledge Test (TKT) part 2, classroom observations, teacher interviews and student feedback formed the data for this study.

Keywords: EFL, ELT, teachers' cognition, teachers' knowledge, classroom practices.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teachers' cognition, their professional knowledge and its impact on classroom practices has attracted many scholars. Borg (2009) for example, is interested in teacher cognition which covers what teachers think, know and believe and also the relationship of these mental constructs to what teachers do in the language teaching classroom. Teachers' cognition, knowledge, techniques, methods and styles are the sources behind the understanding and learning process of their learners. The teacher is the key facilitator between learners and the knowledge. If teachers do not apply their knowledge into their classroom practices, the gap between what they know and what they do in classes might easily lead to failure.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The primary concern of teacher cognition lies with the unobservable dimension of teaching - teachers' mental lives. The notion is not new and the historical background goes back to 1945 (Borg, 2006). The professional coursework and the teaching experience which could be possessed during pre-service and in-service phases of the field have a significant effect on the formation of teacher cognition. Since teacher cognition is linked to teacher knowledge, it is important to know what scholars say about it:

Teacher knowledge became the main concept related to teacher cognition. The types of knowledge defined in the literature can be categorized as; pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) and practical knowledge (Elbaz, 1981). Shulman brings in the importance of the process of pedagogical content knowledge formation which lasts longer than anybody can think of. Elbaz, on the other hand, focuses on the practical knowledge of teachers. Elbaz has conducted a case study examining the practical knowledge of an experienced high school teacher to find out how this practical knowledge was held and how it was used. He also wanted to find out how this practical knowledge grew and changed in time. Elbaz (ibid, 1981), categorizes knowledge in three areas: teacher's practical knowledge which comes from instructional routines, classroom management and others; personal knowledge about self and professional self, and interactional knowledge which derives from the interactions with others in the environment (p.48).

In their review of what "knowing" is, Mason and Spence (1999) find teacher knowledge as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon and they call it "knowing" They categorize it into three types: the fact of knowledge itself, knowing how to teach that knowledge by using the necessary techniques, and knowing how to organize actions. Mason and Spence believe in distinguishing knowing from other kinds of knowledge because its absence disables teachers (or learners) from responding and acting (pp.136-138). Indeed, it is the know-how that brings knowledge and practice together. Teachers' knowledge is valuable so long as it is practiced. Mason and Spence also bring in the idea that understanding and acting should be distinguished. They believe that understanding or knowing does not mean that teacher is able to perform this in his/her classroom practices or vice versa (pp.142-143). The authors of this paper found this dilemma rather attracting for the present study.

Munby, Russell and Martin (2001), claim on this issue that our understanding of teachers' knowledge has turned from prescriptive to practical since we cannot judge on teachers until we see their practices in their classrooms. However, they point to the fact that we lack empirical studies concerning teachers' knowledge.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Having read the literature related to teacher knowledge, cognition and classroom practices, the authors of this study decided to conduct a small scale pilot study to see the correlation between teacher knowledge and classroom practice in a context where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL). A sample Teacher Knowledge Test (TKT) module 2 results, classroom observation notes,, teacher interviews and student questionnaire analysis formed the primary source of data.

TKT is an internationally recognized test of the skills an English teacher needs to be successful in teaching English to speakers of other languages. It is a highly respected qualification from Cambridge English Language Assessment., operated as part of University of Cambridge Local Examinations syndicate (UCLES). TKT has three modules checking upon teacher's knowledge on language and background to language learning and teaching; lesson planning and use of resources for language teaching; and managing the teaching and learning process.

10 experienced EFL teachers (6 male and 4 female) working in a language school volunteered to participate in this study, The sample TKT Module 2 consisted of 80 questions lesson planning and use of resources for language teaching.

The researchers grouped the questions into 6 points and assessed the participants' classroom practices according to these six points:

- Point one: Activities and aims: (questions 1-19, 55-60 and 68-80)
- Point two: Lesson plan headings and examples: (questions 20-27)
- Point three: Stages of a lesson plan: (questions 28-33)
- Point four: Teachers' assessment aims and methods: (questions 34-40)
- Point five: Pronunciation problems and solutions: (questions 48-54)
- Point six: Learners' course book problems and solutions: (questions 61-67)

The answers to these questions would enable the researchers to check upon the teachers' knowledge about lesson planning and use of resources for language teaching, and managing the teaching and learning process.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The EFL teachers (10) who agreed to cooperate organized classroom observations for the authors of this paper .The classroom observation notes on the six points mentioned above, the sample TKT (2) results, teacher interviews and the student feedback enabled the researchers to do a comparison of teacher knowledge and classroom practices in this context.

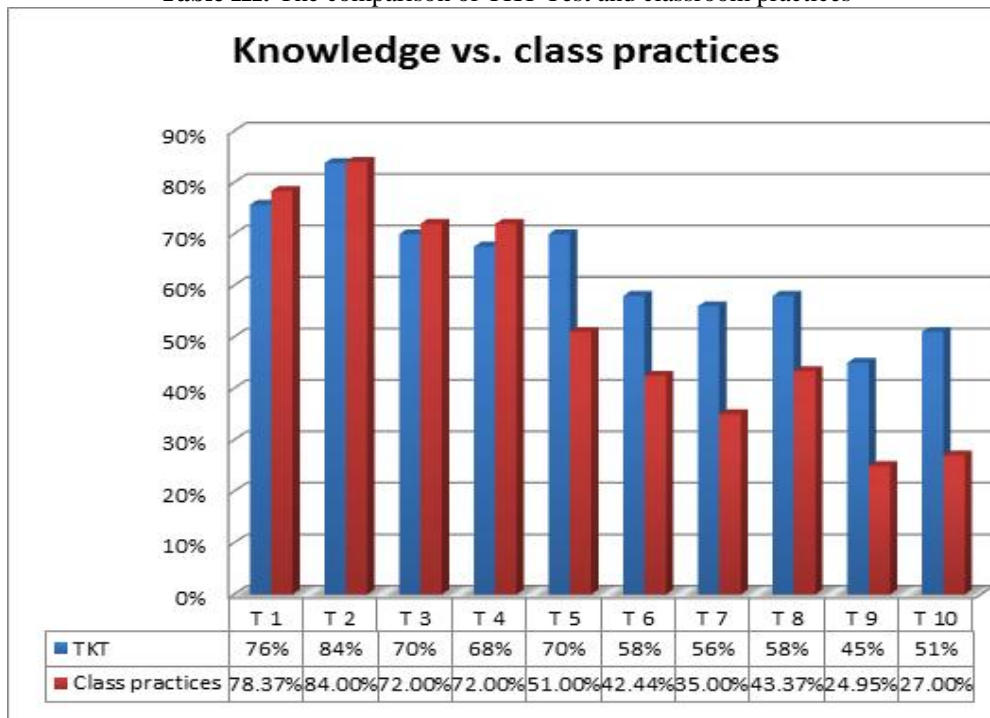
Table I: TKT results

Teachers	Correct answers out of 80	TKT Correct answers' Out of 100
Teacher 1	64	80%
Teacher 2	64	80%
Teacher 3	54	67.5%
Teacher 4	51	63.75%
Teacher 5	51	63.75%
Teacher 6	46	57.5%
Teacher 7	43	53.75%
Teacher 8	42	52.5%
Teacher 9	29	36.25%
Teacher 10	29	36.25%

Table II: Classroom practices

	Point 1	Point 2	Point 3	Point 4	Point 5	Point 6
Teacher 1	78%	89%	69%	80%	80%	90%
Teacher 2	84%	89%	33%	85%	85%	100%
Teacher 3	75%	75%	55%	50%	75%	80%
Teacher 4	72%	65%	52%	60%	72%	72%
Teacher 5	51%	55%	60%	50%	40%	55%
Teacher 6	42%	40%	40%	60%	20%	50%
Teacher 7	35%	50%	20%	60%	20%	10%
Teacher 8	43%	50%	40%	40%	40%	50%
Teacher 9	25%	40%	0%	30%	0%	10%
Teacher 10	27%	40%	0%	10%	0%	10%

Table III: The comparison of TKT Test and classroom practices



When teachers’ knowledge and classroom practices are compared to one another, T1, T3, and T4 classroom practices are higher than their results in TKT. This means that they showed up their knowledge in practicing but not in the TKT. For T2, her correct answers and her practices on them are equal. That means she showed no gap between her knowledge and her practices.

However, for T5, T6, T7, T8, T9 and T10 the gap between their knowledge and their classroom practices is obvious. For instance, T9(see table III), who has got the lowest point in TKT, out of 45% of correct answers, she practiced almost half of what she knows (24.95%).

As a result of the 10 teachers’ classroom observations, it is seen that 84% of the knowledge is practiced in their classes. Let’s have a closer look at the results to simplify what is said above:

The TKT sample test results for Teacher 1 (Turkish nationality, 15 years of experience) and Teacher 2 (Tunisian nationality, 5 years of experience) were the same - 64 out of 80 (80 %). The class observation notes correlated with the TKT results. Their classroom practices were as good as their professional knowledge in the TKT. According to the 6 points, correct answers for teacher 1 is 84.3%, and 80,16% for teacher 2. In the interviews, they both stated that they would like to do further academic studies. These teachers possessed the knowledge types stated by Elbaz (1981) "teacher’s practical knowledge, personal knowledge about self and professional self, and interactional knowledge" (p.48.) There was almost no gap between their knowledge and classroom practices (see table III). Their knowledge was similar to what Mason and Spence (1999 p.2) cite from Ryle (1949) "knowing" as; knowing -that (factual), knowing-how (technique and skills) and knowing- why (re-constructing actions). These three knowings form the basis of teachers' knowledge defined by Shulman (1987). Teacher 2 confessed in the interview that she did not like planning and her score for point 3 was 32 %. Although her classroom observations showed that he knew- how and why and acted out well.

The results for Teacher 3 (Turkish nationality, 10 years of experience) was remarkable. In the observation it was recognized that his pronunciation level was advanced. In the TKT concerning the questions about pronunciation problems and how to deal with them, he answered all the questions correctly, and there was no gap between his knowledge and his classroom practices in point 1. However, in other points he did not score well enough. The student feedback was positive. The overall scores showed that (see table III) his practices were better than his knowledge in the TKT. This proves the literature where the pedagogical and practical knowledge differences are discussed (Shulman,1987 and Elbaz,1981). This evidence also supports Mason and Spence (1999) who distinguish between understanding and acting.

Teacher 4’s score in TKT is 51 out of 80. In his class observations it was noticed that he was giving a lot of ideas to his learners on how to memorize the new vocabulary (TKT point 6). There was no gap between his professional knowledge and his practices for that point. However, for the other points his knowledge was average. His classroom practices, similar to T2, were better than his TKT knowledge (see table III). The student feedback was positive.

V. CONCLUSION

The starting point of the analysis is at the macro level addressing the main first question of the research: “how much professional knowledge do the teachers possess?” The sample TKT results display that only 4 teachers possess satisfactory professional knowledge (59%), and 6 teachers do not (41%).

After the analysis of teachers’ cognition and knowledge on the one hand, and the researchers’ notes on their classroom observations on the other, the answer to the second research question: “is there a gap between teachers’ professional knowledge and their classroom practices?” showed that a gap between knowledge and practice existed. The low performance of 6 teachers out of 10 also proved the gap between knowledge and practice. T9, who has got the lowest score in TKT (45%), and also the lowest (24.95%) in classroom practices for example displayed a big gap. However, other factors effecting teacher performance also needs to be researched.

Considering the above results, the research confirmed the directional hypothesis about the gap between what EFL teachers know, and what they do in their classroom practices.

We believe this small scale pilot study helped 10 subject teachers to draw their attentions on their knowledge and cognition on one hand and on their practices on the other. However, limited in its scope, the account calls for a further inquiry and a serious academic discussion within the field of foreign language didactics about why teachers find it difficult to apply their knowledge to their classroom practices.

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