

The curse of knowledge

Chris Payne insists that experience isn't everything.

Presumably, all teachers strive to become the best teacher they can be and, perhaps, they also aspire to become an 'expert' teacher. Before discussing how knowledge can possibly be a 'curse', let us first attempt to clarify what we mean by an *expert*, and set out some expert teacher *traits*.

Expertise

Expertise can be a slippery concept to define, but it has often been said that an expert in any given field will have a minimum of ten years' experience, which includes a deliberate focus on skill development of, preferably, 10,000 hours or more. By definition, experts consistently evince a high level of performance in their area of expertise.

Of course, being an expert should not be confused with being *experienced*. I have over 30 years' driving experience, but I don't profess to be an expert car driver, and one look at our fellow motorists will confirm that expertise behind the wheel is a skill that eludes many of us, even the most experienced drivers!

Likewise, teachers who have taught for ten years, but have neglected to hone their teaching skills, may have narrow experience that is akin to the same one year's experience repeated ten times.

Expert teachers

If we believe that effective teaching is an acquired skill, it is in our interest to identify which traits set expert teachers apart from non-experts. John Hattie participated in a large classroom study in which he observed expert teachers and experienced, but non-expert, teachers in action. The overall findings of this study can be found in the book *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn*, but here are some of the traits identified as being associated with expertise in teaching.

Expert teachers:

- have a deeper understanding of the reasons for individual student success and failure;
- can easily improvise when things do not go smoothly;
- are more able to anticipate and plan for the difficulties that their students are likely to encounter with new concepts;
- bring passion to their teaching;
- are more able to provide developmentally appropriate learning tasks that engage and challenge their students;

- possess pedagogical subject knowledge that is flexibly and innovatively employed in instruction.

A teacher who is experienced but is not yet an expert may fail to exhibit any one of these traits, but our concern here is to explore only the last point above: regarding subject knowledge – in other words, what we know about what we teach, such as facts about grammar, lexis and pronunciation.

Knowledge

Gaea Leinhardt, cited in John Hattie's book, notes that '*teaching is the art of transmitting knowledge in a way that the learner receives it*'. Obviously, teachers who are ignorant of their subject area will not be effective in the classroom, and I think it is safe to say that students like being taught by teachers who are not only knowledgeable, but are also motivated and passionate about their subject. But is this preference due to the students' own motivation, or is it linked to actual learning?

Although it seems counter-intuitive, an interesting research finding is that a teacher's depth of subject knowledge has little bearing on the attainment level of their students. Moreover, a teacher with ten years' classroom experience will not necessarily succeed *more* than a teacher who has been teaching for one year, when it comes to enabling their students to reach a high level of English.

The curse of knowledge

Teaching experience and subject knowledge cannot be equated with teaching expertise, because extensive knowledge of a subject does not automatically endow teachers with the skill to teach well. In fact, the more you know about a subject, the more difficult it can be to teach it, because once you *know* something, it is easy to forget what it was like not to know it.

This is known as the *curse of knowledge*, and it can become the curse of unsuspecting experienced teachers, who can easily misjudge the extent to which their students receive the information they convey. So, despite subject knowledge being listed earlier as a teaching attribute, experienced teachers, and to a lesser degree novice teachers, can be 'cursed' by their knowledge because it can create an *empathy gap*, in which they find it hard to look at learning through their students' eyes, making them less sensitive to their students' needs, especially the needs of beginners.

The teacher's knowledge

Thanks to their experience with learners, you would expect experienced teachers to be acquainted with the problems a beginner learner will encounter, yet research indicates that the curse of knowledge is more acute when teaching beginners. The knowledge we possess can affect our ability to empathise fully with our learners' situation.

- Our *declarative knowledge* is knowledge that is consciously known and which we are able to explain, such as how to form comparative adjectives. However, experienced non-native teachers were beginners such a long time ago that they may not remember or appreciate how hard it was to attain their proficient level of English.
- We also have *procedural knowledge*, which is knowledge of something that is not consciously known, so we know how to do something, but we would struggle to explain to someone else how we do it: eg how to ride a bike. This kind of knowledge can make our skill as English speakers highly unconscious or automatic, and this is especially true of native-speaker teachers. The teaching of pronunciation is a case in point. Here, procedural knowledge will only take us so far, and, on its own, it will be inadequate when we need to teach certain sounds, such as /t/, /d/ and /ɪd/, the *-ed* endings of affirmative past tense regular verbs.

Native-speaker and non-native-speaker teachers learnt English in different ways, and while there might be a tendency for native-speaker teachers to rely more on *procedural knowledge* and for non-native-speaker teachers to rely more on *declarative knowledge*, I don't wish to generalise and imply that one kind of knowledge is the sole domain of either.

Let us briefly return to our *driving* analogy. Imagine the following scenario, which might ring a bell:

You are driving home along a familiar route when you suddenly realise that you have no recollection of having driven on a certain stretch of road that now lies behind you. This occasionally happens because your driving skill is so automatic that you barely need to think about what you are doing or where you are going.

In a similar way, experienced teachers who lapse into autopilot may no longer think about or recall the different stages that are needed on their students' language learning journey. But effective teaching is a conscious skill, and automaticity has a detrimental effect on teaching because, once it takes hold, it prevents our skills from developing.

The teacher's assumptions

The empathy gap that the curse of knowledge creates is widened when teachers assume that their learners have prior knowledge they do not possess, or when they overestimate how much the learners know about what is being taught. Then, even experienced teachers can fall short of teaching excellence.

Research shows that teachers:

- are prone to omit material that beginners would find valuable;

- might fail to teach material in a logical manner;
- take for granted that lesson content is appropriately pitched for a particular class;
- can underestimate how much time the learners need to complete a task in class.

Reversing the curse

Clearly, years of experience and comprehensive subject knowledge of English are not enough. They must also be accompanied by pedagogical knowledge, which entails a sound understanding of how to teach effectively and how beginners learn English and of the challenges they face.

Only then will we be able to avert shortcomings like those just mentioned.

If our teaching schedule allows it, an excellent way to truly empathise with our learners is to learn another language ourselves and to get back into the classroom as a student. Being a beginner in a classroom setting is, without doubt, the ultimate experience in empathy for any teacher!

In addition to the aspects of teaching mentioned above, such as task completion time, this can open our eyes:

- to whether the learners are actively engaged in class;
- to the suitability of all the materials we choose to use in our lessons;
- to teacher talking time;
- to teacher wait time;
- to how we set homework;
- to our use of the board;
- to countless other everyday areas of teaching and learning that we would benefit from reflecting on.

Failing this, or as well as this, filming our lessons, or being observed and receiving constructive feedback, are also salutary experiences.



We can't *unlearn* what we already know as teachers, but we can aim to mitigate the curse of knowledge by constantly reminding ourselves what it is like to be in our learners' shoes – lest we lose sight of the complexity of learning a language. ■

Hattie, J and Yates, G *Visible Learning and the Science of How We Learn* Routledge 2014



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