A Case Study of Adaptive Expertise in L2 Teaching at a Japanese University

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Abstract

One characteristic of experts is their ability to adapt to new situations. Using the framework of adaptative expertise, (Hatano & Inagaki, 1984), I investigated how one second language (L2) teacher at a Japanese university adapted to a new teaching context. Based on interviews, I examined how this experienced teacher used his pre-existing knowledge to overcome challenges in the new context. Using adaptive expertise as a conceptual framework provides important implications for L2 teachers, who are often confronted with shifting conditions of instruction as well as teacher educators and administrators who closely work with them. This paper reports preliminary results on this single case study of an experienced EFL teacher in a Japanese university during the process of transitioning to a new teaching context.

Keywords : adaptive expertise, teacher development, L2 teaching

Introduction

A person who is considered an expert can demonstrate a superior performance in their domain (Berliner 2001). That is, expertise is exhibited under certain conditions, such as for audiences in familiar contexts. According to Hatano and Inagaki (1984), two types of experts exist, including routine experts and adaptive experts. Routine expertise relates to abilities to accurately and effectively complete tasks by repeatedly performing them. In cross-sectional studies, researchers often have compared novice and experienced teachers in different aspects based on the assumption that experienced teachers have more sophisticated routines (Farrell & Bennis, 2013; Gatbonton, 2008; Richards, et al., 1995). For example, experienced teachers are able to easily choose an activity from a repertoire, present it in a comprehensible manner, and achieve an instructional objective effectively. However, routine experts are limited to solving only familiar problems (Hatano & Inagaki, 1984). Moreover, this cross-sectional approach to examining expertise been criticized because it does not elucidate how teachers develop expertise (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Johnson, 2005). Other

studies focus on this aspect of expertise (e.g., Tsui, 2003, Asaba, 2019) and found that teachers develop expertise through problem-solving, which requires them to work beyond their competence.

More recently, researchers have been investigating another type of expert known as adaptive experts. These experts maximize their abilities and knowledge in a flexible manner in order to solve new and challenging problems (Atkinson, 2020; Hatano, 1996; Hatano & Inagaki, 1984). Drawing on this model of adaptive expertise allows researchers to investigate expertise as a process, in which they attribute problem solving to be the key in developing expertise (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993; Tsui, 2003). Researchers have taken an approach to data collection that takes place over an extended period of time, often consisting of multiple class observations and interviews in order to understand how teachers adapt to new situations. In these studies, researchers often make connections between participants' most current practices and their recollection of previous experiences. For example, Lee and Yuan (2021) examined their participants' adaptive expertise by comparing teachers' recollections of past experiences as writing instructors in relation to their most current teaching based on classroom observations of their lessons. They found that the teachers continued to solve problems in new contexts by utilizing expertise they had developed in other contexts.

Although previous research points to the importance of adaptive expertise, no researchers to this day have examined L2 teachers as they transition to a new context in real time, how adaptive expertise leads to expansion of knowledge, or factors that can affect the development of adaptive expertise. Therefore, the following research questions were investigated:

Research questions

1. What are the characteristics of adaptive expertise demonstrated by one experienced L2 teacher at a Japanese university as he makes a transition to a new position?
2. How does utilizing adaptive expertise lead to the expansion of teacher knowledge?
3. What contextual factors facilitate or hinder the process of teachers developing adaptive expertise?

I used adaptative expertise as a tool to examine problem-solving of an EFL teacher at a Japanese university. For this paper, I focus on the first and the third research questions and report on the preliminary findings.

Participant

I relied on criteria suggested by Palmer et al. (2005) for selecting a participant who was likely to demonstrate characteristics of adaptive expertise The criteria included factors such as experience,

education, and recommendations from those who are knowledgeable of the teacher's performance. I identified one participant who met the criteria for this study.

The participant for this study, Keith (pseudonym), is an American male teacher and has a Master's degree in ESL from an American university. Prior to data collection, his teaching experience included EFL classes both full-time as a limited-term contract teacher and a part-time teacher at four programs in three universities in Japan over the course of approximately for fifteen years. He had previously participated in my other study (Asaba, 2019). He had just started a tenure-track position at a private university in the western part of Japan at the time of the data collection.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews with the participant were conducted. The first interview took place prior to a semester to examine the participant's teaching experiences and beliefs about L2 teaching. During the semester, I conducted three interviews in the beginning, the middle, and the end of the semester. The participant was asked to reflect on his teaching and explained his practices as well as different aspects of his teaching, such as a curriculum, materials, and students. A final interview was conducted at the end of the semester. The participant was asked how he adapted his teaching to different aspects of the job, and what he has learned as a result.

Data analysis

I uploaded the video recording of the interviews onto Microsoft Stream and then downloaded a machine-generated transcript. I listened to the recordings multiple times and revised the transcription as I listened to them. For excerpts that I considered related to research questions, I revised them as accurately as possible. I summarized the parts that were less relevant, such as the participant going off topic, discussing details of other classes, and making jokes.

For the initial analysis, interview data was analyzed inductively. The inductive approach involved analyzing the data by focusing on specific pieces of information and by making connections among them for meaningful patterns (Hatch, 2002). How the participant applied his existing knowledge to responding to new problems as well as factors that affected the process was examined.

Preliminary findings

I identified two themes related to adaptive expertise, including making classroom-level changes and pressure to get a tenured position. First of all, Keith's expertise in adapting to a new context concerned micro-level changes related to his teaching rather than macro-level changes at the level of program and curriculum. When making decisions about how to approach his classes, Keith relied on

his experience of working with students from different programs and fields of study. Particularly, he considered the needs and interests of students at the new university. For example, he had previously taught students who majored in international topics and aimed to study abroad. Some of the students also hoped to work in international settings upon graduation. In order to meet these specific interests and needs of students, with his colleague's help, he created two courses. One focused on academic English skills, and the other focused on career-related English skills. At the new university, he took a similar approach. He explained that in one class, he was not given any guidance as to how to teach it. Therefore, he took the initiative to design a content-based class around themes related to his students' major so that students would find studying English meaningful. As seen in this example, he utilized expertise he had developed previously to adapt to a new context.

Furthermore, Keith adapted his expectations for students in the new context. For example, he explained that he noticed that a lot of the writings that his students submitted as a part of an assignment in a presentation class "were fantastic", which was unusual. As he read them carefully, he realized that many students were not making typical errors that Japanese students would often make in their writing, such as subject and verb agreements and poor word choices. He suspected that most students had used a translation site or plagiarized their essays. However, he did confront the students or assign them a failing grade them as he would have in his previous schools. Instead, he gave minor penalties and indicated in his written feedback comments that some parts of their writing seemed to have been translated from Japanese, and that they should write it in their own language next time. When justifying his reasons for doing this, he explained that he was aware that students in this program did not take any writing classes, and they probably did not know that using a translation site or plagiarism was inappropriate unlike students in other programs he had worked with. As shown in this example, rather than simply following routines that he had developed previously, he adapted his teaching based on the type of students he had in the new context.

However, changes that Keith had made at the time of data collection were limited to his own classes. Even though he discussed problems at a program-level, he did not make or propose making changes in the program. When asked about his reasons for this, he responded, "I am not gonna take on any serious battles until I get tenured." This avoidance for making changes at a program-level was related to the pressure he felt to get a tenured position.

The second theme concerns the pressure to get a tenured position, which hindered his development of adaptive expertise in teaching. Keith was hired as a tenured track instructor, and he was expected to apply for a tenured position in his second year. This factor that he was not guaranteed a tenured position affected his teaching. Almost in every interview, he discussed his status as a tenured track teacher, and said that he needed to be careful. For example, he went into work even when it was

unnecessary. When asked why, he responded as the following:

> I'm tenure track, and I feel like I should (go into work as often as possible). I want to make sure I'm there. You know, I'm kind of known as being there and making an effort. You know, I still don't really know anyone, so I want to make sure get to know people.

He continued to explain that it was also important for his colleagues to approve his promotion. He said, "I want to be seen by the faculty as being friendly and hard-working... It is my big chance to upgrade my career so I'm just going to do everything I can." He also discussed how he was under pressure to publish more while admitting that it was not his passion. That was because he needed to earn points through publications in order to get his promotion. In addition, he felt he needed to improve his Japanese so that he could understand meetings conducted in Japanese. In fact, he was taking online Japanese lessons about how to write email messages and read a textbook in Japanese from two instructors every week at the time of data collection. The pressure he felt in order to get his promotion kept him from attempting to make any curriculum and program-level changes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, even though Keith demonstrated his adaptive expertise in terms of making changes in his teaching to meet the needs and interests of students, the changes were limited to his own classes. Considering the fact that I conducted interviews in his first semester at the university, it is understandable that he focused his energy in adapting his teaching rather than tackling program-level issues. However, at the same time, it was evident that the pressure he felt to get promoted for a tenured position also prevented him from utilizing aspects of his adaptive expertise. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to follow-up with this participant to examine how his status might influence his use of adaptive expertise, especially once he achieves tenured status.

Even though I have illustrated some of the characteristics of adaptive expertise that one experienced teacher in a Japanese university demonstrated as he transitioned to a new university, this study has several limitations. First, all the interviews were conducted only in one semester. In order to examine how someone develops adaptive expertise, it is necessary that I continue to examine this teacher over the course of several semesters. The second limitation concerns relying on one data source. I was originally intending to conduct classroom observations in order to examine his teaching practices. However, due to COVID-19 and the switch to emergency remote teaching, most of his classes were conducted online. Therefore, in future studies, I would like to examine his teaching practices in the classroom to better understand his adaptive expertise through his interactions with

students. Finally, this is a single case study. It is necessary to examine multiple participants who teach in various teaching contexts to understand how they deal with different types of contextual factors and how they develop adaptive expertise under different circumstances.

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日本の大学での第二言語教育に関する
適応的熟達者のケーススタディー

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要旨

　熟達者の特徴のひとつは，新しい状況に適応する能力である。この研究では，適応的熟達者（Hatano & Inagaki, 1984）の枠組みを用いて，日本の大学のある第二言語（L2）教師が新しい教育状況にどのように適応していったかを調査した。インタビューに基づき，この経験豊かな教師が，新しい環境での課題を克服するために，既存の知識をどのように利用したかを検討した。適応的熟達者を概念的枠組みとして用いることは，指導条件の変化に直面することが多い第二言語教師や，彼らと密接に関わる教師教育者，管理者にとって重要な示唆を与える。本稿では，日本の大学の経験豊富な EFL 教師が，新しい教育環境に移行する過程におけるケーススタディの予備的結果を報告する。

キーワード：適応的熟達化，教師の発達，第二言語教育