

*What experienced teachers DO and expert teachers DO
NOT take for granted in foreign language instruction:
A critical incident study*

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Abstract

The article previews an extensive research project on the phenomenon of expertise building among teachers of English as a foreign language in Poland. It presents a pilot study encouraged by and rested upon the assumption that experience of classroom practice is valid yet insufficient a ground for both teacher cognition and expertise to grow. What it takes to articulate well-informed professional judgements — a legitimate necessity in high profile domains — is constantly renewed specialist knowledge and principled intellectual effort, including systematic examination of critical incidents in and outside the classroom. Presumably, when captured and rigorously analyzed, they can enable teachers to take evaluative insight into their performance and cognitive representations, and to transform their experiences into a better awareness of didactic choices they make on a daily basis. The sample incident which the article outlines — selected and investigated by a seasoned university-based teacher of English — interestingly demonstrates how an ill-considered response to an adverse occurrence in class exposes the teacher's competence and yet initiates her quest for understanding of what actually happened, which eventually leads to a clear-cut didactic diagnosis. Limited in its scope, the account calls for a further inquiry and a serious academic discussion within the field of foreign language didactics about how experienced teachers approach what they find problematic, and how their teaching behavior determines their professional status.

Keywords: critical incidents; experts vs. experienced non-experts; diagnostic teaching; expertise building; teacher cognition; professional judgements

1. Introduction

Teacher professional maturity has been long identified as closely related to the stretch of teaching practice. Supportive as it may be, extensive experience does not ensure professional expertise, though. It does increase teacher efficiency in terms of less resource-consuming processes of pre- and interactive decision-making and problem-solving, yet experienced teachers are particularly prone to fall into the trap of developing the so-called *excessive competence*, which Wysocka (2003) interprets as routine-driven professional misconduct. In other words, effortless performance rested chiefly upon automatized procedures and taken-for-granted schemata prevents the growth in competence and turns teachers into craftspeople rather than professionals (Tripp, 2012, p. 7). Therefore, as the title of this article suggests, inferences and choices which experienced practitioners easily make with regard to foreign language instruction and classroom situations are often what expert teachers revisit in pursuit of their better understanding of the foreign language (FL) learning/teaching process. This also implies that it takes more than long years of practice to become an expert in the profession, which, similarly to other highly specialized domains, boasts a multitude of seasoned workers and a handful of masters.

Numerous studies of expertise in teaching have provided grounds to assume that there are substantial differences between expert teachers and experienced non-experts. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993), for instance, observe that the two main divergences lie: (1) in the potency of intellectual effort that the former put in rendering the tasks they deal with into learning enterprises, and (2) in the kind of problems they choose to solve. This means that experts tend to seek opportunities for growth even in familiar teaching undertakings, while experienced non-experts approach problems with a selection of ready-to-use learned patterns (Tsui, 2003, p. 19). Tsui argues that it is the way expert teachers integrate their both practical and theoretical knowledge and utilize it to respond to their context of work that extends their competence and ensures professional development (Tsui, 2003, p. 253).

Without doubt, the issue of expertise building, namely acquiring the ability to generate informed judgements within the domain, is highly relevant to the field of foreign language didactics (FLD). Recent developments in our understanding of effective language teaching place more and more emphasis on how practitioners make sense of the whole process and how they tailor the learning environment, resources, and their own teaching behavior accordingly (Dakowska, 2015, p. 19). Teachers' conscious deliberation remains an important tool to examine their own classroom performance and the accuracy of employed strategies, yet it is also supposed to serve as a stimulus to boost the explication of

their specialist knowledge about FL learning and use. In real life, however, methodical and principled reflection poses a challenge to many a teacher, and experienced practitioners are no exception (Day, 2004; Wysocka, 2003). It simply does not appear to be required in the FL teaching community to expertly justify one's practices. Experience, a good command of the target language and a decent repertoire of teaching techniques continue to be prevalent criteria of didactic mastery (Komorowska, 2011; Tripp, 2012; Tsui, 2005).

This article aims to contribute to the current conceptions of teacher learning mechanisms — an important research goal in FLD — by presenting a study which, first, seeks to confirm Tripp's hypothesis (1993, p. 16) that experienced teachers tend to dismiss theory and instead allow *practical problematics* (i.e., sets of structured practices employed in a similar manner whenever in similar circumstances) to „regulate action in terms of what to do and how, without critically informing that action“, and, second, aims to offer evidence of an action inquiry as a dynamic process, which results in the formation of a well-reasoned diagnosis of a critical incident in class. Tripp (2012, p. 7) argues that consistent attempts to recognize, understand and explain in an academic fashion significant occurrences that constitute teaching experience can successfully inform teacher cognition — the whole of the mental constructs that underpin teachers' knowledge and comprehension of their work. These interpretative operations, intended to account for why teachers do what they do, require that they should re/construct meaning, which, in turn, necessitates a decent expenditure of information-processing power and the imperative integration of all available sources of orientation in teaching, including not only previous experience, but, above all, subject-matter specialist knowledge and proper discourse to represent it expertly.

The case presented here illustrates how a senior teacher of English as a foreign language arrives at an explanation why English philology undergraduates, advanced language users, refuse to speak the target language when working in pairs or groups, and why her initial response to the problem was far from professional. The teacher's account shows a point of transition from the stage where she operated solely on her personal assumptions and experience to the stage where she chose to retrieve relevant external resources in pursuit of deeper understanding of the situation. This implies that without the readiness of the teacher to challenge his or her own thinking and to stretch the limits of cognitive processing, expertise building could never be activated, and it is exactly where the distinction between experienced and expert teachers might come into play. After all, teachers engage in instruction as whole human beings, and as such demonstrate idiosyncrasies with regard to their motivation, intelligence, cognitive competencies, and many more. The characteristic psychological make-up of the teacher exerts influence on the development of his or her

professional expertise, supposedly comparable to the social and environmental forces (Borg, 2005; Waters, 2005). Gabryś-Barker (2012) recognizes the significance of personal attributes but contends that the propensity for reflectivity is not necessarily one of those. It is rather an ability, developmental by its very nature, which, when exposed to training and bound with real-life teaching situations, is likely to be taken to higher levels of competence. She maintains that the practice of diary writing “can effectively stimulate teachers to adopt an active approach to instruction and so to intensify their classroom presence” (2012, p. 249). Similarly, Tripp (2012) sees documented analysis of weighty in-class circumstances as a valuable source of teacher professional knowledge. He also identifies an efficient action inquiry as a process considerably enhancing the formation of versed and skillfully articulated judgements — an undisputed sign of expertise in all domains, including FL teaching.

How teachers confront their knowledge and how they execute command over their own cognition remain fascinating matters to explore. However, the article narrows the scope of investigation to the concept of: (1) expertise as a dynamic process and (2) the role of *critical incidents* (CI) in this process. The latter are interpreted here as unexpected and oftentimes perplexing episodes in the activity of teaching, whose meaning is sanctioned by their structured review, that is a continuous operation of asking questions about the value and personal beliefs they represent (Tripp, 1993). The following sections elaborate on these two issues. The first rests upon the premise proposed by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) that practitioners can actively contribute to the construction of their specialist knowledge. The second explains how the analysis of critical incidents can serve as a basis for this knowledge construction. Both place emphasis on teacher strategic behavior, which, when reinforced by natural disposition and rich experience, maximizes opportunities for learning and the development of professional expertise.

2. The dynamic nature of expertise

The approach to expertise which identifies it as a dynamic affair has long remained in opposition to the one developed from novice/expert comparison studies in the field of cognitive psychology. Focused on the examination of mental processes employed by teachers at two extreme stages of their professional growth, researchers seem to have taken little notice of inherent variation within the groups under scrutiny. Instead, their research findings led to the foundation of detailed performance characteristics of both inexperienced and experienced teachers, and to the omnipresent polarization of these two, seemingly invariable, phases of professional development.

Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1993) study of expertise in teacher writing offered an innovative way of discerning experts. They argued that experts are *active striving people* who work harder than experienced non-experts with regard to their personal involvement in tasks. It was observed that despite a well-integrated procedural knowledge base, which allowed the accomplishment of the assignment at a very low level of cognitive effort, experts intentionally mobilized the energy freed up through the automatization of applied procedures and strategies and utilized the capital to investigate the writing task more in depth. Practically, they attempted to reconstitute its nature and explore the relationships between premeditated and articulated meanings. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1993) used the notion of *channel capacity* to refer to the freed-up mental resources which *high-rollers* (experts) activated in order to challenge and transform, rather than tell, their knowledge in the process of writing. At the same time, non-experts tended to operate within their comfort zones, reducing the task to the level that could be successfully managed by imprinted routines.

Tsui (2003, p. 267), whose study also detected the phenomenon of "problematizing the unproblematic" among expert teachers, accentuates that the renewal of specialist knowledge — a primary condition for developing professional expertise — occurs through systematic laborious intellectual work, which tunefully amalgamates teacher previous experience, his or her educational background, and observation strategies. Interestingly enough, intense information-processing employed by experts has nothing to do with the so called *Hamlet model of reasoning* (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) — painful dilemma-driven thinking operations caused by poor recognition and choice of symptoms to deal with. Experts, on the contrary, first, very fast retrieve schemata that correspond to various teaching/learning situations, and, second, exceptionally skillfully adopt procedures to solve problems at hand. But above all, they are insightful in the sense that apart from the effortless discrimination between relevant and irrelevant particulars or details of classroom occurrences, they can intelligently combine apparently unconnected information and propose new ways of perceiving and clearing hurdles on their professional path. This feature alone allows drawing a distinct line between experienced teachers and experts.

Sternberg and Horvath (1995) in their prototype view of expert teaching nominate three categories of features that define experts. *Insight*, together with *knowledge* and *efficiency*, serve as criteria of consideration. Sternberg and Horvath see this category as a configuration of selective processes, including encoding, combination, and comparison, all of which point to a scope of teacher activity largely fed on teacher cognitive alert, as indicated above. When establishing the validity of category membership among teachers, the gradable structure of each category allows variability in their profiles. This means that category

members can find themselves closer or further from the prototype (i.e., the central tendency of feature values), yet the absence of the feature in question disqualifies their membership entirely. Hence, the view postulated by Sternberg and Horvath (1995), however inexact with regard to the composition of the prototype representation, demands that expert teachers display some disposition towards new interpretations of their daily teaching experiences.

Tsui (2005) goes on to add that, indeed, it takes both a sensitive attitude and cognitive promptness in order to, on the one hand, acknowledge and draw upon one's highly developed efficiency, and, on the other, to see one's teaching practice as an open-ended training process, which embraces opportunities to expand one's competence. Without these, experienced teachers who choose to work on auto pilot are bound to reach a developmental plateau, exposing themselves to the threat of secondary incompetence (Wysocka, 2003). After all, intuition and routinized behavior may not be correct all the time, and teaching skills can easily get out of date (Eraut, 1994).

3. Critical incidents in teacher learning

Daily teaching experience, believed to be the most accessible and potent source of professional maturation, consists of both situations that teachers generate themselves as navigators of the students' learning process and occurrences triggered by external factors, those embedded in interaction with the environment, including principals, colleagues, learners, and/or their parents. Even though every experience carries a substantial impetus for change, not every experience evokes responsiveness in the sense that the learner engages with its purpose and continuity (Dewey, 1938, p. 37). As mentioned earlier, it remains an individual matter what attitude teachers develop towards the intellectual and moral volume of day-to-day events in which they participate. This also means that teachers produce critical incidents to learn from by the way they process an input to a deeper level (Groome, 1999). In other words, the formation of meaning and value is at the service of teacher awareness, maturity and cognition. As Gabryś-Barker (2012, p. 113) puts it, „the stories of critical incidents constitute a powerful vehicle for teachers to move from a state of unconsciousness to a state of consciousness by reacting to critical incidents (CIs) and transforming them into controlled critical events (CEs)“. This occurs through the assimilation of new information that critical incidents yield and the accommodation of existing knowledge so that created/modified schemata could assist teachers in alike situations.

Formative experiences are more often than not embedded in emotionally loaded and disorienting circumstances. They carry a driving force that seeks psychological balance and hence initiates executive activities of the mind that,

when regulated rather than inhibited, aim to transform information conveyed in emotions and feelings into understanding. Swan (2009) recognizes the therapeutic nature of these operations, as they embrace not only cognitive processes, but also the development of emotional literacy in the sense that they prompt questions about standards and values in life. Zhu and Thagard (2002, p. 20) argue, in opposition to Goleman (1995), that thought and emotion are not separate. On the contrary, self- and social awareness underpin human reasoning and interpretative inclinations; without them, the teacher stands little chance of reflecting critically upon previous experiences, and thus of guiding his or her learning towards maximizing the sense of success (Tripp, 2012, p. xiii).

Tripp advocates analyzing one's own teaching practice holistically and granting more importance to its non-cognitive aspect — affective emotions. Thus, he proposes opening the analysis of critical situations that occur during class, outside class or during a teacher's career with establishing emotional composure (Dewey, 1944), a point from where to see their broader social context, that is the institution with its policies and culture, personal relationships within one, its curriculum, one's own contribution as well as the contribution of other participants to the functioning of the place. This frame of reference, within which teachers accumulate both positive and negative experiences, is an elaborate mechanism, yet understanding its constituents can help interpreting critical incidents as illustrations of more generalizable phenomena and creating retrievable meaningful scripts for the future (CEs) (Tripp, 2012, p. 25).

Interestingly, fully automatized conduct of teaching may serve as a valuable source of critical incidents too. What is taken for granted and unthinkingly applied catches many experienced teachers in a trap, not only dictating ways of decision-making and problem-solving, but also stiffening their assumptions and beliefs about instruction. It appears that seemingly trivial classroom moves which several practitioners will ignore may have longitudinal and paralyzing effects on both teachers and learners. By contrast, the search for and the analysis of critical incidents facilitates problematization (Tsui, 2003), that is it invites teachers to pose questions about otherwise unremarkable action, exercise judgement, put forward diagnoses, and consciously refine the existing knowledge representations (Tripp, 2012, p. 22).

All in all, unplanned and often unnoticed circumstances that comprise everyday teaching practice of experienced teachers provide them with an invaluable, yet frequently wasted, opportunity to deepen their understanding of their work and to regulate their professional development. However, the added value of this opportunity cannot be understated. Narratives built by senior teachers upon the significance of their experiences can be of great importance to inexperienced teachers. The latter, who often get anxious handling even most

basic instructional tasks, should learn from the old hands not only quick-fix solutions to problems, but also ways to avoid stagnation and to manage one's own growth. Tripp (2012, p. 43) maintains that planned insight into one's own experience opens teachers' minds; it only takes courage to leave aside familiar interpretations which tend to confirm what was already hypothesized and search for new possibilities.

Gabrys-Barker (2012) outlines a formula of presentation and analysis of critical incidents, in which description of episodes is a mere introduction to a diagnostic task for teachers to accomplish. The checklist below shows a procedure that is expected to bring a clear articulation of how the teacher has verified his or her specialist knowledge through the formation of a critical incident (2012, p. 131):

1. Describe the lesson in which it occurred by presenting a brief sequence of the events that took place.
2. Identify the incident by expanding on the criteria which make it critical (e.g., excitement, involvement, communication breakdown).
3. State why it was critical (e.g., a success, failure).
4. Reflect upon the reasons for the incident having occurred, analyzing its significance and relevance in the given context.
5. Evaluate your response to the incident and its effectiveness (outcome).
6. Interpret the incident and respond to it in relation to relevant views held about a specific aspect of the didactic process in the literature and your own practice.

The case presented in the section below does not precisely follow the formula; nonetheless, it perfectly qualifies as a recount of a critical incident. First, it reveals an interesting transition from teacher's initial authoritative assertions regarding the incident, through mental endeavor to further her understanding of what actually happened, to a professional judgement underpinned by an illuminating insight. Second, it presents an experienced teacher who already comes across as an expert in the field of foreign language didactics in her environment, but who, I believe, is yet to become one via systematic practice of critical incident analysis, initiated with the project. In this respect, the case study is indicative of possible discrepancies among standards by which expertise is judged in real life and the domain of applied linguistics. By the same token, it commences investigation aimed to provide empirical confirmation of this divergence.

4. The case study

4.1. Context and procedure

The approach adopted to report the case of Veronica, an experienced teacher of English, requested to record the manner in which she handled a problematic situation in her teaching experience, places emphasis on "whole person in action,

acting with the settings of that action" (Lave, 1988, p. 17). This means that the collected data and its analysis address the ways the teacher exercises her beliefs, attitudes and knowledge (Woods, 1996) to make sense of her work in general, and of a small segment of her classroom reality in particular.

Veronica has been a teacher of English as a foreign language for 20 years, working in a range of educational contexts, including a state high school, commercial language schools, and the Institute of English Studies at a local university. Her energy, sense of duty and enthusiasm for novelty have always earned the trust and recognition of her supervisors. Unsurprisingly, then, within the first few years of her teaching career, she was appointed the executive manager of language camps in and outside the country, Director of Studies, and coordinator of numerous TEFL-related projects. The nominations, together with Veronica's unbeatable dedication, quickly secured her a good name in the milieu. In a word, passion turned a teacher into a high achiever and an expert in the eyes of many. But did it really?

Veronica's story (see Appendix) is an account of an incident which she identified as critical after she had volunteered to participate in this study and to be introduced to the notion of CIs. Invited to reconstruct her immediate response to its occurrence as well as her thoughts, observations, and conclusions she had about it, Veronica fabricated a three-part report, the analysis of which follows. The structure of the text was not imposed, allowing the teacher to express herself in a most preferable manner, yet she knew the narrative was going to be used as a research instrument and as such was expected to be elaborate enough and thus cognitively fertile. The feedback from Veronica on this distinct experience was more than positive. She proved exceptionally engaged and happily agreed to continue the practice of diary writing for the sake of both scientific examination and, as she put it, "her professional vitality".

4.2. Findings

Veronica begins her narrative with a vivid description of the context in which the critical incident took place. She pays attention to the circumstances that set the scene for the confrontation with the group, going into detail not only about the speaking task and its objectives, but also peripheral conditions such as the time of the year, topic, class opening strategy, characteristics of the students ("as usual, the group eagerly involved in the opening small talk"), and her knowledge of them ("predictably, a few students switched back into Polish"). Part One of the account unfolds to present how the teacher noticed students speaking L1 when in groups, which was in violation of the course requirement to speak English only and how she interrupted the activity to reproach the whole class. The wording she uses, e.g. "fed up", "discipline", "disobedient", "waste of

time", or "play games" reveals how turbulent the situation was in Veronica's eyes. Having expressed straight disappointment that the reprimand failed to work and that the remarks she received from the group made her quit the exchange, the teacher wraps up the paragraph with a strong resolve to find ways to force the students ("break their necks") to comply with the rule.

There is an unidentified time distance between Part One and Part Two, yet the latter initially demonstrates that Veronica still has not developed a sense of perspective about what has happened in her class. She continues to speak about her personal failure ("a blow on the head") and a complete lack of understanding for the motives that drove students' misconduct ("they questioned what legitimized their status", "demonstrably rejected the principle"). About the same time, however, the bitterness, so enthusiastically shared by fellow teachers, started melting, provoking first questions about the value of the experience in her professional life ("what happened served a didactic challenge"). In her narrative, Veronica eventually acknowledges that the incident offered a great learning opportunity, which she was yet to comprehend, and that to do so she needed to revisit her perception of all the causes and effects ("consider all the ingredients"). She closes the second entry of the report optimistically, hoping to apply her knowledge and intellectual vigor, and turn the predicament into an advantage.

In Part Three, Veronica outlines her search for expert guidelines on teaching speaking to advanced learners of English and dutifully points out what she previously overlooked ("the psycholinguistic dimension of speaking", "lack of resources that students could activate to help them through casual conversation"). Out of this revision emerges Veronica's diagnosis regarding her students' avoidance behavior. She enumerates three potential reasons why the problematic group refused to engage in work the way she expected. Among these Veronica places lack of regular feedback on relatively minor tasks like the one in question and its dubious relevance to students, which proves her attempts to see the critical incident as "a representation of something bigger" rather than an unfortunate episode. Veronica concludes her account with a well-defined statement that advanced learners of English often struggle with language deficiencies, which can easily go unnoticed in the flow of input oriented towards higher levels of cognition, while teachers are not always bothered nor able to penetrate and diagnose these deficits.

The data collected from Veronica fully satisfies the expectations of the author in terms of their clarity and relevance. The report is extensive and detailed enough to become a leading exemplar to teachers who, similarly to Veronica, agreed to take part in the research on the professional development of teachers of English as a foreign language.

5. Discussion

As presented above, teachers' analytical accounts of critical incidents are expected to assist the development of their diagnostic skills, that is to stimulate the utilization of available knowledge representations for better understanding and justification of their teaching practice (Tripp, 2012). The assumption is that conscious intellectual effort put in systematic examination of critical episodes in and/or outside the classroom potentially translates into gradual expertise building. Hence, a close look at the sample narrative generated by Veronica aims to detect any signs of initiative on her part to assess and regulate, if necessary, what she knows, believes and thinks about foreign language instruction. Additionally, an attempt has been made to identify the forces that influenced her interpretation of the critical situation at the three subsequent snapshots she provided. On the whole, the report shows, first, that an experienced teacher did fail to act expertly, and, second, that eventually she was able to make a constructive judgement on the situation she encountered as well as her own action, which in turn offers grounds to believe she displays good didactic potential to become an expert.

To begin with, the episode seems to demonstrate a serious collapse of the teacher's pedagogical competence. First, allowing an impulse to guide her behavior, she failed to address what she found problematic (how to stop the extensive use of L1 in pair work), and instead underestimated adult learners in a manner that deviated from authoritative. Second, by addressing the whole group with a reprimand, she proved highly unfair towards those who had complied with the rule of speaking English only. Needless to say, the teacher had every right to confront the rebels. However, shock therapy which she instinctively applied, quite predictably, resulted in even greater rebellion from the audience. The emotional, yet rather unproductive, exchange clearly relates to the context of the situation, which seems to be fundamental here. While regimentation is likely to work with some riotous youngsters, it should definitely be the last measures for the teacher to resort to in a higher education establishment. After all, university undergraduates are granted the status of grown-up individuals and hence deserve to have their autonomy respected, which, when intruded on, will call for defense, even as unsubstantiated as presented in the critical incident. The teacher employed quite a drastic technique to discipline the group and so in return received resistance which she did not seem to fully understand nor accept.

Veronica's determination to "bend the students' necks" and ultimately make them all speak English, not to mention the disapproving comments she shared with her colleagues, clearly indicates how abusive, not to say professionally dysfunctional, her initial thinking was. In a way, she easily recognized that it was necessary for the third-year English students to boost their speaking skills

through tasks exceeding formal language production, but it seems she had done little to induce them to embrace the underlying principle and still less to grasp the way they saw what was demanded of them. Presumably, Veronica was driven by the value that English ought to be the only means of communication in advanced class, which exemplifies an unfounded belief that many teachers share rather than a well-informed premise why it must be so.

A moment of hesitation set Veronica's thinking on a new interpretative track. It remains unknown, however, to what extent this reflective thought of hers, which appeared as early as upon reporting on the incident, was evident of her inclination toward contemplation. Neither is it transparent whether (or how) the remarks from fellow teachers altered her observations, perhaps exercising what Woods (1996) calls a *collective pedagogy*. Successive incidents analyzed critically by the teacher would certainly shed more light on these particulars. What we do know, however, is that Veronica's conscious decision to explore the occurrence methodically fits perfectly into Tripp's (2012, p. xiii) model of *triple loop learning*, where the first cycle entails coming to terms with emotions critical episodes arouse. Tripp uses Dewey's (1944, p. 150) term *emotional equilibrium*, which refers to the individual's unperturbed mental state, indispensable for allowing effective information processing. As a result of regained psychological balance, Veronica could approach the incident from a new perspective. This perspective was broad enough to embrace several constituents of the situation which she previously overlooked, such as her knowledge of the students, of their objectives as well as hers, and/or the institutional context, to recall just a few. Interestingly, before she reached out for any external resources to aid her inquiry, she was already able to name the factors, the influence of which might have been decisive for updated interpretation of the incident. Unfortunately, the recount is not detailed enough to illustrate how exactly Veronica linked the factors to the critical episode. She simply proved to be curious and efficient at quenching her curiosity.

The sources of knowledge which Veronica turned to in order to make sense of the incident and her response included, chronologically, her own assertions and beliefs (i.e., she was intuitively convinced that: (1) there was a way to get her rebellious students speak English, which she made a priority in the course, (2) the priority was valid as the other groups never revolted, and (3) an acute public reprimand seemed justified for the sake of the expected outcome), her work mates (i.e., she received unanimous endorsement from other teachers that the problem lied with the group which proved a nuisance to teach), the coolheaded re-examination of the case (i.e., Victoria came to realise that there was an understanding of the situation which she had never considered, and that this understanding could emerge from her re-processing of all the relevant information), and, finally, a professional resource for teachers (i.e., she restored

knowledge on developing speaking skills in the process of foreign language learning and its psycholinguistic dimension in particular). Even though it is impossible to identify how more or less distinct sources of Veronica's professional knowledge influenced her diagnosis, what she came up with as her ultimate conclusion was extremely different from her initial observations.

This single case shows that a teacher brimming with confidence gained over years of classroom practice can easily fall into the trap of his or her boosted ego and, consequently, view a teaching/learning situation in a substantially distorted way, ignoring otherwise fundamental aspects of professional performance such as thorough and systematic observation of symptoms as well as their professional (academic) rather than instinct-driven interpretation. Veronica, for instance, had a clear idea about the conduct of her speaking course with advanced learners of English, which indicates her outward teaching credibility, yet this idea mainly revolved around her expectations of the students to perform at a high level of proficiency so that they could freely act within all sorts of speaking tasks she designated. She also displayed competence talking about the arrangement of activities and their objectives, but failed to act professionally, interrupting the lesson and responding emotionally to a problem which after all did not manifest itself unexpectedly. Finally, having established rapport with the group through friendly opening chats, the teacher could have come across as a caring partner while all of a sudden she turned into a ruthless disciplinarian. Polar opposites like these can not only ruin the teacher's reputation but also cause traumatic biases against teachers in general.

Broadly speaking, there are three reasons why it is safe to assume that Veronica is capable of utilizing her experience to build expertise. First, she displayed self-regulatory competencies, which prompted her to inquire into the causes of the incident in a principled manner. Second, her speculative reflection preceding the search of relevant resources was rational enough and somewhat in line with the views held in the literature. Finally, she managed to formulate a judgement, which indicates her attempt to put the incident into perspective and convert it into a specialist knowledge representation, which is likely to improve her performance in the future.

6. Conclusion

Extensive experience substantially facilitates expert performance, but expertise requires an additional ingredient, which is the intelligent examination of one's work with the help of specialist knowledge. Teachers who choose to base their professional competence (and morale) on accumulated strategies and once established assertions about foreign language didactics as if refuse to acknowledge

not only the inherent dynamics of processes constituting teaching and learning experience, but also high-powered forces of cultural, psychological, and/or social character, which unstoppably affect these processes. In other words, automaticity and effortlessness developed over, say, 20 years of classroom practice can be advantageous to professional growth and at the same time disadvantageous. Teachers' aware presence in class depends, among other things, upon their sensitivity that helps them to detect and measure properties of daily occurrences and to regulate their responses. When lulled, they fail to distinguish between situations quite representative of previously formed schemata and those which might signify a new circumstance, thereby deserving novel approaches and solutions. Expert teachers prove to remain attentive and intellectually vigilant throughout their careers, while many experienced practitioners never attain this professional standing.

The analysis of critical incidents by teachers, including experienced practitioners, seems to be an effective means of trying to articulate informed judgments about episodes that amount to their teaching practice. However, in order to identify the genuine value of the recommended procedure, extensive research is necessary that will investigate how exactly an exercise of this sort can enhance the development of professional expertise. The case study presented in this article is a prelude to such investigation. Its empirical dimension is particularly encouraging as it allows exploration of theoretical proposals by close examination of incidents located in real life and interpreted by real teachers. Their sequential narratives can provide important data from which inferences may be drawn about the complexity of the phenomenon of expertise building.

Indeed, an inquiry into the way teachers of different ages, backgrounds, school settings, experience, attitudes and knowledge can specifically contribute to their own learning by disciplined inspection of their practices might have important implications for teacher education. If it is confirmed that teachers benefit from their attempts to diagnose and exercise professional judgement, student teachers might possibly make better use of their practicum, gradually orienting it towards examination of their understanding of classroom reality and professional articulation of this understanding. To be efficient in doing so, they should develop reactivity to critical incidents while still in the academia with the assistance of expert trainers. After all, learning the profession can be as adventurous as teaching itself. Both the ups and downs that pre-service teachers encounter on a daily basis may and ought to serve as formative and precious influences, provided they are attended to conscientiously. The incident that Veronica recognized as critical could be seen as such also from the perspective of students. When called forth and thoroughly discussed in language pedagogy courses or seminars, incidents of the kind might help learners to substantially improve their interpretative skills and reflectivity. The instruments students

could use to accomplish the demanding task of registering and scrutinizing potentially important events include systematic diary writing and action research projects. In addition, in the era of technology, a range of software could come both handy and particularly pleasing for this purpose. As part of the teacher training program, regular practice of building professional judgements would surely facilitate successful development of trainees and their future clients. Needless to say, the process of becoming a teacher does not end with a graduation ceremony. However, equipped with appropriate techniques and strategies, inexperienced practitioners might find it a bit easier to face the classroom reality and the challenges it involves. Here the ability to recognize, understand, and transform rocky moments into professional wisdom can save a lot of tension and anxiety, not only on the part of teachers but learners as well.

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Appendix

Veronica's account of a critical incident:

Part 1

After the Christmas break, the third-year students of English returned to my speaking course to continue the topic of freedom. As usual, the Wednesday group eagerly involved in the opening small talk. We had a chat about leisure, which I deliberately navigated at the first speaking task. Divided into three clusters, they were supposed to produce a few questions regarding the topic of freedom for other groups to deliberate about. The objective was simple enough — to orientate the use of English toward the goal by selecting relevant content (addressing both the subject matter and the peers in the class context) and form (linguistically and conventionally accurate interrogative forms). Predictably enough, as soon as the students turned to their partners, a few of them switched back into Polish. I interrupted the activity and told the class in a straightforward yet composed way that I was fed up disciplining them over and over again, that I found their behavior most disobedient, that they violated a course requirement which was to speak English in class only; I also explained that English Studies undergraduates — advanced foreign language users — could not afford to waste their time playing games like this. Shock therapy which often teaches a lesson was all in vein this time. The students' excuses ranged from L1 use as sporadic and completely harmless time-savers in conversation, to their natural rebellion against requirements of any sort. A remark from the group that anyway all the talking was a waste of time made me close the argument. I thanked the group for their comments, but in fact I decided to let things up temporarily and sleep on ways to break their necks in the future.

Part 2

The incident gave me a blow on the head. On the one hand, I thought of it as my personal failure because I could not execute the rule I had made clear from the start. To make it worse, the students demonstrably rejected the principle, and in the same way questioned what legitimized their status. They refused to acknowledge that articulacy in EFL involves much more than producing planned and well-rounded utterances for the purpose of academic presentations or debates. My fellow teachers, to whom I turned for consolation, wholeheartedly agreed with me. They expressed discontent, which only fortified my conviction that my 'Wednesday group' is particularly immature and that I had every right to demand that they adapt. On the other hand, when we were collectively venting our resentment, I started to develop a feeling that what happened served a didactic challenge, and that it was not the right thing to merely complain. Within a couple of days, I managed to subdue the emotions and think of the incident as an important lesson to learn from. I think that was a turning point. I instinctively came to realise that I needed to try and take the situation in stride, as a representation of something bigger. But to do so, it was important to consider all the ingredients, including my students' rebellious replies, who they were, where they came from, the goal of the course, my personal goals and teaching ideology, the institution where we met, its ethos, and many more. I was already certain that my students and I could only benefit from all the disturbance, which in turn allowed me to gradually cumulate my mental powers to deal with the incident afresh.

Part 3

I eventually spent an hour or so reading through teachers' resources and confronting what I knew about the developing of learners' speaking skills. I realized I'd completely disregarded the psycholinguistic dimension of speaking, which rests upon students' readiness for and willingness to participate in communicative situations, even as trivial as informal negotiations with peers. Instead, what I took for granted was a normatively perceived level of proficiency in the third year of studies, which is expected to materialize in the form uninhibited and fluent language production regardless of the task. Apparently, my students lacked resources – previous training/experience as well as knowledge – that they could activate to help them through casual conversation in a free and easy manner. Also, their avoidance behavior might have manifested their reluctance to engage in work, which

- a) was not closely inspected by the teacher, and thus not intended to receive any formal feedback,
- b) they found far from natural in the sense that they had to simulate an informal talk with peers with whom they mostly communicated in L1 outside the classroom, and yet the task did not resemble real-life situations, which made it irrelevant for them in terms of speaking practice they needed/valued,
- c) might have exposed evident discrepancies in grammar and vocabulary use among the classmates.

My final conclusion was that advanced learners of a foreign language might struggle developing the speaking skill the way less proficient learners do, but deficiencies at the advanced level can be twofold adverse. First, they are much more difficult to detect in the course of learning focused on more demanding discourse forms to practice like argumentation or opinion exchange. Second, unattended for a long time, they enhance a false picture of learners' competence, which can cause a lot of distress to both the students and the teacher when eventually unveiled. That is why, it is crucial that the teacher recognizes his/her advanced learners' readiness for speaking and select input and tasks during the course that will both reinforce their strengths and address their weaknesses.