Introduction

What is an expert? Many will likely answer that it is a person in any field who performs his or her job in a seemingly effortless manner so much so that it looks automatic and comes from all the years of experience performing this particular job. In the field of education some teachers have been regarded as experts only because of their years of experience in a classroom, but as Tsui (2003) has noted, the number of years of teaching experience does not necessarily translate into expertise. Indeed Woods (1996) has cautioned although “one teacher may have had ten years of experience, another may have had one year’s experience ten times” (Woods, 1996: 270). Within the field of TESOL teacher expertise is still a very under-researched topic (Rodríguez and McKay, 2010). This final chapter then explores all the data presented so far in relation to teacher expertise. I first looked at the literature on teacher expertise and then scanned all the data in an attempt to outline specific characteristics of ESL teacher expertise exhibited by the three teachers. First I discuss what teacher expertise is, then outline the specific characteristics of teacher expertise found in the data, and finally recommend how ESL teachers in mid-career can seek to become expert ESL teachers.

Teacher expertise

In order to address the topic of teacher expertise it is important to first consider what “experience” means and if experience translates into expertise making a person an “expert.” Experience obviously comes from doing something for some time over a person’s career life cycle. As we have already seen in the Huberman (1989) model of teacher life...
cycles there are three main phases in teachers’ life cycles: novice, mid-career, and late-career. In this Huberman (1989) model teacher expertise has been equated with years of teaching, and this has been used by educational administrations and school boards as an indication of achieving some sort of expertise along the way from this experience through classroom teaching and other education duties. Some administrators have also used student achievement on test scores but the whole idea of experience leading to expertise has been questioned by various researchers (e.g. Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993; Johnson, 2003, 2005; Tsui, 2003, 2005, 2009). Indeed, Tsui (2003: 194) has suggested that some teachers can only be considered as “experienced non-experts” because they “rely more on routines as they become more experienced and solve problems at a superficial level.” It is important then to consider what an “expert” is.

Johnson (2003, 2005) suggests that expertise has something to do with knowledge, but not “just a headful of facts” (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993: 30) about a particular topic. As Johnson (2005: 13) suggested, it “is the quality of knowledge that is important” in terms of possessing the “judgment of promisingness” [where] the expert knows which avenues are likely to be promising and which may turn out to be dead ends.” An expert, as Johnson (2005) points out, does not always go about his or her work in a very logical, thorough or systematic way. Indeed, Johnson (2005: 15) suggests when novice-expert studies are compared the findings will likely highlight the effortless performance on the part of experts because of their knowledge: “Those who have knowledge do not need to think so much, while those lacking the knowledge base are forced into the harder route.” However, Johnson (2005: 15–16) and others caution that “the apparent ease of experts often belies immense effort” because they “work long hours...and they tend to set standards for themselves and others that are always at least slightly beyond reach.”

Tsui (2009) maintains that expertise includes a person’s ways of knowing, acting, and being of experts in a particular domain. Similar to other fields, much of the early studies on teacher expertise compared novice and expert teachers and what they do and think in the classroom. Tsui (2005, 2009) has noted two main characterizations of teaching expertise: expertise as a “state” and as a “process.” Expertise as a state looks as characteristics associated with a teacher after years of teaching experiences whereas expertise as a process examined teachers’ development of different characteristics over time. Both of these approaches have, as Tsui (2005) has observed, produced different characterizations of teaching expertise.