

The Novice Years of TESOL Teaching

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Framing the Issue

Many TESOL teacher educators, teachers, students, and administrators assume that once novice TESOL teachers have graduated from their teacher education/training programs, they will be able to apply what they have learned in their lessons during their first years of teaching. The impression is that it is, or should be, a straightforward and easy process: novice TESOL teachers put the theory and methods they learned into practice when they begin their teaching careers. After all, the reasoning goes, all these foundations, theories, and methods courses from the teacher education program should work and be useful, otherwise why would they learn such details if they would not be useful to them during their teaching careers. Anyway, if you know the subject you should be able to teach it, such reasoning continues. However, many experienced TESOL teachers know better, as they have learned the hard way that the TESOL teacher education program is one experience, but the first years of teaching are a whole other experience that not many teacher education programs prepare their graduates well to face. Indeed, for many novice teachers, who have just completed their teacher education program (including the practicum) and have just commenced teaching in an educational institution, the transition from the teacher education program to the first years of teaching in real classrooms has been characterized as a type of “reality shock” (Veenman, 1984) as they attempt to adapt to their new workplace and try to survive what turns out to be a “sink or swim” type of process (Varah, Theune, & Parker, 1986).

Unfortunately, similar findings of novice TESOL teacher woes during their first years have also been reported, with many of them left to cope on their own without much guidance or support from either the programs they have graduated from or the school/institution in which they are placed (Artigliere & Baecher, 2017; Farrell, 2016, 2017). As a result of having to face many difficult challenges and increasing anxieties during this time, many novice TESOL teachers feel a sense of frustration, inadequacy, stress, and isolation (DelliCarpini & Gulla, 2009). This is a very worrying trend because although novice teachers are said to bring

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with them fresh enthusiasm, new idealism, and new training and teaching approaches that can only improve the profession, they report feelings of disappointment as they suddenly see “the missionary ideals” formed during their teacher education program quickly being replaced “by the harsh and rude reality of classroom life” (Veenman, 1984, p. 143). In TESOL, as DelliCarpini and Gulla (2009, p. 6) have noted, although novice teachers report having high expectations on their first day of school, they soon discover that the “dismal” conditions they are immediately faced with decrease their enthusiasm for work. Unfortunately, research has indicated that 24% of *all* novice teachers in the United States leave teaching within the first two years of starting their job, 33% drop out after three years of teaching, and between 40% and 50% leave the teaching profession within their first five years on the job (Joiner & Edwards, 2008). Thus, it becomes clear that only the most determined can survive their first years and that, without more support, we will continue to lose our best and brightest TESOL teachers (Farrell, 2016).

Making the Case

As mentioned above, the transition from the teacher education program to the first years of teaching is a complex one and often results in a shocking wake-up call for novice TESOL teachers that not all is what they thought it would be while they were in their teacher education programs. Indeed, not only is “shock” a common term in the literature to describe how novice teachers see the transition, but it also seems to be a worldwide phenomenon for novice teachers regardless of the subject matter they are teaching. In all of these contexts, after their first experiences in real classrooms, novice teachers have had the common “shock” of some kind of collapse of their ideals and expectations that were built up by during their teacher education programs, which may be thus called a “reality shock” or a wake-up call. Novice teachers who experience such a reality shock then begin to wonder why they chose teaching as a career and this shock impacts their sense and feelings of belonging to the profession, which in turn influences their capacity to teach effectively during this first year. Their expectations and dreams become shattered and suddenly novice teachers begin to question their self-worth. If the differences between their expectations and the reality of the first year are large (i.e., if they are adversely affected by the transfer), then novice teachers will struggle in the transition period, which in turn will lead to stress, which in turn adversely affects their teaching—leading to a negative outcome for their students and possible teacher attrition. Consequently, the transition shock is something that should be tackled within every profession, but especially the teaching profession if we are to have any hope of retaining our best teachers.

This means that TESOL as a profession must begin to ask some hard questions about what is happening to our novice teachers and how we can better understand their experiences. If we do that, we can do more to intervene and increase teacher retention. One important question that must be asked first is: Are the reality shocks

that novice TESOL teachers report they experience primarily the result of being inadequately prepared in their TESOL teacher education programs (the result of a lack of practical preparation) and/or the consequence of a lack of support from the school/institution in which they are teaching during their novice years?

Some years ago Tarone and Allwright (2005) noted that second language teacher education programs may be at fault because they may not be delivering relevant content that novice TESOL teachers can implement in real classroom settings; they stated that the “differences between the academic course content in language teacher preparation programs and the real conditions that novice language teachers are faced with in the language classroom appear to set up a gap that cannot be bridged by beginning teacher learners” (Tarone & Allwright, 2005, p. 12). So there may be a discrepancy between the content of the TESOL teacher education programs and what novice TESOL teachers actually have to face in the schools/institutions. As a result, many novice teachers report a disconnect between what they were provided with during their TESOL teacher education programs and the reality of what they are experiencing in the schools.

Of course, the schools/institutions themselves have a responsibility to provide support of some nature for novice teachers in their first years so that they can adjust to a new environment. Some schools have induction programs for novice teachers to help them through these adjustments, with some even appointing mentors, but this is not uniform across all schools. Indeed, research has also cautioned that the mere appointment of a mentor is no guarantee that the novice teacher will be successfully socialized into the school (Farrell, 2003). Farrell’s (2003) case study of the socialization and development of one novice TESOL teacher into the profession, for example, revealed that even though a mentor was officially appointed by the school, the teacher never had any further contact with this mentor beyond the introduction on the first day.

What is clear is that novice TESOL teachers are far from the finished product as they make the transition from learning to teach to teaching to learn in their early career years, and as such have to work on several more dimensions of learning to teach before they can teach effectively. The challenge, however, is how to accomplish these two complex tasks at the same time—continuing to learn how to teach while teaching others to learn. How then can TESOL as a profession help novice TESOL teachers to get over the transition shock and adapt successfully to their new teaching contexts?

Pedagogical Implications

The TESOL profession cannot wait in the hope that novice TESOL teachers’ enthusiasm or vocational call to teach will get them successfully through the first years after graduating from a teacher education program. As a profession TESOL needs to better prepare novice TESOL teachers to have as smooth a transition as possible from their TESOL teacher education programs to their first years of teaching. Most recent research on the experiences of novice TESOL teachers seems to indicate that

the experiences of their first years of teaching are mediated by two major types of influence: the nature of the TESOL teacher education program they have graduated from, and their socialization experiences into the educational culture generally and the institutional culture more specifically. The nature, content, length, and philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of their TESOL teacher preparation program will impact early teaching.

TESOL teacher education programs must decide how to prepare novice TESOL teachers for the “transition traumas” of their early career years on the job (Farrell, 2016, 2017). For example, the theory/practice gap is pointed out as a perennial problem that persists in TESOL teacher education programs (Farr & Riordan, 2017), with many novice TESOL teachers reporting that their expectations of applying what they have learned in teacher education courses are being quickly overcome by organizational and institutional responsibilities that leave no room for application of their newly gained knowledge (Artigliere & Baecher, 2017). As research in general education has pointed out, teachers who are more satisfied with the quality of their preparation program are “significantly less likely to leave teaching after their first years in the profession than those who were less satisfied” (DeAngelis, Wall, & Che, 2013, p. 349).

The first approach addresses the issues of transition raised above by making direct linkages to teaching in the first year in teacher preparation courses. While some language teacher educators may well include such references in their individual courses, currently there seem to be few courses devoted explicitly to this area. An alternative to this current hit-or-miss approach would be the addition of a course, perhaps entitled *Teaching in the First Year*, which deals directly with the experiences, challenges, and needs associated with novice teaching. As Farrell (2006) suggests, course content might include the development of skills in anticipatory reflection where novice teachers have opportunities to discuss and thus become more aware of what the transition from the teacher education program to the real world of the classroom might mean. Specific activities could involve analysis of written case studies from different contexts that follow the story structure framework outlined in Farrell’s study. Teachers in preparation could also be asked to create a profile of the school in which they intend to teach, discuss their teaching issues with the current teachers, and observe classes before they take up full-time employment. Where this is not possible, practicing language teachers could be invited as guest speakers to discuss and respond to questions of practice, or videos of classroom practice could be used for analysis of the teaching approaches.

Research has indicated that novice teachers who are mentored in a formal manner tend to be more effective teachers in their early years, since they learn from guided practice rather than depending on trial-and-error efforts alone, and that they also tend to leave the teaching profession at a rate lower than non-mentored novices (Malderez & Bodoczky, 1999). Mentoring, which is known to affect how a novice teacher adjusts to teaching, is defined as a situation where “a knowledgeable person aids a less knowledgeable person” (Eisenman & Thornton, 1999, p. 81). Mentors play important roles in schools/institutions

when helping novice TESOL teachers shift from a position where their TESOL teacher education program knowledge was emphasized toward their socialization into the community of practice of teachers in the school/institution. Malderez and Bodoczky (1999, p. 4) describe five different roles that mentors could play in order to provide such on-site support and assistance to novice TESOL teachers during their first years of teaching: (1) models (who inspire and demonstrate), (2) acculturators (who show them the ropes), (3) sponsors (who introduce them to the “right people”), (4) supporters, and (5) educators.

The second approach involves building stronger partnerships between the TESOL teacher education program and the school/institution in which the novice TESOL teacher is placed. At present, many learner TESOL teachers are educated in a “silo” type of process where they graduate and begin teacher careers completely separate from their initial program and teacher educators and are left to their only means of survival: conforming to the standards of practice that exist within the schools they enter, many of which may differ completely from what they learned in their teacher education program. TESOL teacher educators can monitor their graduates’ development during the first years and this knowledge could be used to better inform the curriculum of TESOL teacher education programs. Thus establishing school–teacher education partnerships is important, because developing an effective knowledge-base for TESOL teacher education requires TESOL teacher educators to have an adequate understanding of schools and schooling and the social and cultural contexts in which learning how to teach takes place (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). As Freeman and Johnson (1998) have pointed out: “Studying, understanding, and learning how to negotiate the dynamics of these powerful environments, in which some actions and ways of being are valued and encouraged whereas others are downplayed, ignored, and even silenced, is critical to constructing effective teacher education” (p. 409). In such a manner, all stakeholders can work together to nurture the novice TESOL teacher during these early first years of teaching so that they not just survive, but also thrive as TESOL professionals throughout their teaching careers.

In closing, for the novice TESOL teacher, the first years of teaching can be anxiety provoking because they involve a balancing act between learning to teach (i.e., furthering what was started during the TESOL teacher education program) and also attempting to become a “real” teacher within an established culture in a school. The transition shock from the TESOL teacher education program to the first years can be mitigated by providing realistic and effective TESOL teacher education programs to better prepare novice TESOL teachers for a smoother transition as well as for schools/institutions to partner with TESOL teacher educators to provide more support for novice TESOL teachers to thrive in their early career years.

SEE ALSO: Action Research and Teacher Inquiry; Critical Friends: How to Develop Effective Critical Friends PD Groups; Identity, Investment, and TESOL; Reflective Practice for Language Teachers; Second Language Teacher Education and Future Directions; Teacher Education Programs in Preparing NESTs and NNESTs; Trends in Teacher Development Programs

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