



Surviving the transition shock in the first year of teaching through reflective practice



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ABSTRACT

No profession wants to admit that it 'eats its young' but research in general education has indicated that 24% of novice teachers leave teaching within the first year, 33% drop out after three years and between 40% and 50% leave within the first five years. This indicates that novice teachers may experience a difficult beginning to their teaching career. What is shocking in the field of TESOL is that we do not really know what novice ESL teachers experience in their first year of teaching, yet this knowledge is essential for both teacher educators and novice teachers alike if novice teachers are to successfully navigate this complex first year as a teacher. This paper outlines and discusses three female novice English as a second language (ESL) teachers' perceptions of their experiences during their first semester (14 weeks) of teaching in a university language school in Canada. Results indicate that in the absence of any real inductions program, the novice teacher reflection group they were members of helped the teachers better understand the many shocks they experienced so they could 'swim' rather than 'sink' in their first semester as ESL teachers.

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1. Introduction

Teaching is “the profession that eats its young” (Halford, 1998: 34) is a dramatic statement and of course, no profession wants to admit that it 'eats its young' but the number of novice teachers leaving the teaching profession seem to back this idea up: 24% drop out of teaching within the first year, 33% leave after three years and between 40% and 50% leave within the first five years (Joiner & Edwards, 2008). These are staggering percentages with many negative consequences for all concerned: novice teachers, students, administrators, ministries of education and teacher education programs. Here is one true story that brings these percentages to life:

Monica quit. One year of teaching was more than enough for her. She had looked forward to teaching for years and did quite well in all of her education preservice classes. But she couldn't take it anymore. When her principal questioned her decision, she told him it was the stress. He nodded, shook her hand, wished her luck, and led her to the door (Mandel, 2006: 66).

What is it about that first year that caused Monica to give up her dream of becoming a teacher considering the time, effort and money she and others have put into her training? After all Monica “dutifully went to all of the mandatory workshops” the district designed for new teachers such as “Aligning Your Curriculum to the State Standards” and “Analyzing Student Data to Achieve Proficiency on State Exams” (Mandel, 2006: 66). Perhaps then it was because she could not handle the students?

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However, as Mandel (2006: 66) noted, “It wasn’t the kids. Monica related well to her students and truly enjoyed most of her classes.” What she was frustrated most during her first year was the stress that “no one seemed to understand what she was going through; no one was there to help her survive that first year” with such basic issues as “how to set up her classroom on her first day or how to teach five hours of material in three hours” (Mandel, 2006: 66). More than likely the ideals about teaching that Monica has built up before and during her teacher education program had been replaced as Veenman (1984:143) has noted, “by the harsh and rude reality of classroom life.” As Mandel (2006: 66) suggests, Monica quit not because of problems with students or parents but because of “the inadequacies of today’s system of preparing and supporting new teachers” for the transition from the teacher education program to the reality of teaching in the first year(s).

The above example is one of many in general education as the numbers above suggest, but what about in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) profession?

Although as Mattheoudakis (2007: 1273) has pointed out, “the truth is that we know very little about what actually happens” to novice TESOL teachers during their first year of teaching, early research has suggested that the TESOL profession is also eating its young (as the title of this paper suggests) with reports of 50%–70% of TESOL teachers leaving within the first 3–5 years (Phillips, 1989). Similar research has also backed the idea that TESOL teachers are experiencing difficulties in their first year studies (e.g., Johnson, Harrold, Cochran, Brannan, & Bleistein, 2014; Farrell, 2003, 2007, 2009, 2012; 2015).

Although the inadequacy of teacher preparation is pointed out by many scholars as being a main culprit for beginning teachers quitting, research suggests that it is the quality of the first year teaching that “is more important in retaining new teachers than either the quality of the teacher preparation program or the new teacher’s prior academic performance” (Peterson & Williams, 1998: 730). This “quality” of first year experience is further compounded in the fact that many novice TESOL teachers only receive temporary contracts as a kind of probation, the new reality in many countries including Canada (the context of this case study), which often results in such novice teachers receiving less attention or guidance from the administration who may be reluctant to invest time, energy or resources in induction programs or the like because they are considered as transient.

This paper examines the experiences of three female novice English as a second language (ESL) teachers during their first semester teaching in a university language school in Canada. Although it is good to provide more detailed information about the experiences of novice TESOL teachers in their first year of teaching (or details of the ‘eating of its young’), we as a profession must take the research one step further by also addressing how we can improve the experiences of novice teachers in reality. Thus this paper also outlines how the three female novice ESL teachers used a teacher reflection group to help them navigate through some challenging situations, and especially as they had no induction program in their working setting, during their first semester as novice teachers.

2. From trainee to novice teacher

Many novice teachers (and indeed many teacher educators, administrators and students) assume that once they have graduated from their teacher education programs all they will have to do is apply what they have learned during their first year of teaching. So most arrive at their new school excited, enthusiastic and full of energy or as Kaufmann and Ring (2011: 52) call them, “spark-plug go-getters”, and have high expectations as they begin to fulfil their long desired dream of becoming a teacher. From their very first day however, and unlike in many other professions, novice teachers are asked to carry out all of the same activities as their most experienced teacher colleagues. Once they hit the ground, novice teachers immediately become responsible for “the nuts and bolts of managing the classroom, developing effective lesson plans, addressing the standards, taking roll, collaborating with colleagues. The list is endless” (Redman, 2006: xii). So, from their very first day on the job they are thrown in at the deep end in a sink or swim ‘sink-or-swim’ type situation (Varah, Theune, & Parker, 1986). Yet, unlike their most experienced colleagues, novice teachers have not had a chance to build up a repertoire of skills they can call on when attempting to take on the complete duties as a veteran teacher and so for many novices this transition comes as somewhat of a ‘shock’ (Corcoran, 1981).

Essentially during the first year of teaching, much of the ‘shock’ for novice TESOL teachers centers around their attempts to balance a difficult act between learning to teach (i.e. furthering their knowledge initiated during the teacher education program) while at the same time as developing their conceptions of ‘self-as-teacher’ or their identity as an ESL teacher within an established school culture. The transition shock from the teacher education program to the first year is further compounded by the unknown of a new context of teaching these new teachers must navigate. Thus for many novice teachers life becomes immediately hectic as they try to keep their heads above water. Within TESOL too novice teachers face similar challenges and anxieties during their first year that may lead to feelings of frustration, inadequacy, stress and/or isolation if they are not addressed (DelliCarpini, 2009). As DelliCarpini (2009) has noted, although novice TESOL teachers reported having high expectations on their first day of school, they soon discovered that the “dismal” conditions they were immediately faced with decreased their enthusiasm for work. DelliCarpini (2009: 6) revealed that the novice TESOL teachers in her study reported that from the very beginning they felt isolated because they had the feelings of “sink or swim on their own.” Some teachers begin to feel like failures because they cannot cope and feel so dejected that they leave the profession at enormous cost to all involved. Thus it becomes clear that only the most determined can survive their first year and without more support, we will continue to lose our best and brightest teachers (Farrell, 2009; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

In recognition of the challenges that novice TESOL teachers inevitably face, and that novice teachers will need some kind of support, some schools have introduced induction programs and/or have appointed mentors in order to help novice teachers

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