

## Sink or Swim: Surviving the First Years of Language Instruction

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### Abstract

Teacher attrition is a major issue in various school systems around the world. This is directly related to the experiences novice teachers (NTs) have during the first years of work in diverse educational contexts. Most of the experiences of beginning teachers reported in the literature come from the field of General Education (GE) whereas in the field of Second Language Education (SLE) studies are more recent. It is surprising to find that most of the accounts in the literature refer to the reality shocks or the sink or swim process new teachers are exposed to when they start teaching. The following paper explores the challenges experienced by novice teachers found in the literature of GE and SLE, explains the main reasons behind these shocks experienced by language teachers, and attempts to find solutions to this concern.

### 1 Introduction

“What have I gotten myself into?” is probably the question many novice English language teachers ask themselves during their first years of work (Shin, 2012). The experiences lived during the practicum and the first years of teaching instruction are unforgettable (Farrell, 2012). Just like getting married, divorced, having a baby, or other major life events. I have very vivid memories of my practicum and the first years working as a school teacher and lucid memories of my former student teachers’ narratives when they taught for the first time and I worked with them as their mentor. School contexts are diverse. Consequently all experiences will vary (McNally & Blake, 2012). Some memories are rewarding while others are worth forgetting but what I can rescue from all these years as a teacher trainer and mentor is that social support is crucial (Shin, 2012).

Most of the literature related to novice teachers’ (NT) experiences comes from the field of general education. Studies are vast and make reference to varied aspects such as how NTs from different subject areas manage their work and support in schools (Ulvik, Smith & Helleve, 2009); how newly graduate math teachers make use of diverse assessment tools (Bobbit, Horn, Ward & Childers, 2011); the expectations teacher educators and schools administrators have of novice teachers (Reynolds, 1995); the perceived problems of beginning teachers in schools (Veenman, 1984); and studies which contrast senior and NTs’ classroom decision making (Westman, 1991) or the role and effect of mentoring beginning teachers (Delaney, 2012; Ianc-Haddad & Oplatka, 2009; Loftrom & Eisenschmidt, 2009).

As for English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL), Farrell (2008a), Borg (2008), and Pennington and Richards (1997) have acknowledged that not many studies have reported the NTs experiences in ESL or EFL, so the purpose of this paper is to make an account from the existing

literature in English language teaching (ELT) of the main experiences lived by beginning English teachers.

The main guiding question in this paper is: What are the most salient experiences of ESL/EFL novice teachers in their first years of language instruction? To respond this question, the conceptual framework I will use to frame this paper will be Dewey's (1938) principle of experience. According to Dewey (1938), the way in which we make use of the physical and the social surroundings helps us to construct meaningful experiences. To Dewey, "experience is a moving force" that does not evolve inside a person alone as it "influences the formation of attitudes of desire and purpose" thus "every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had" (Dewey, 1938, p. 39). Novice teachers are immersed for the first time in different school contexts with diverse school cultures, students, colleagues, parents, and administrative staff. All these elements make the initial teaching experience a rewarding one or one worth forgetting.

This paper will be structured as follows: first, a definition of native teacher will be provided; second, the reality shock of teaching for the first time will be explored; then, novice teachers' experiences in the ESL/EFL field will be categorised and explained; later, the strategies suggested in the literature to diminish the reality shock will be described and the Chilean context will be analysed; and finally, conclusions will be drawn.

## **1. Who is a novice teacher (NT)?**

Inside the school site there are many people who take part in the teaching and learning process, from learners to administrative staff. In relation to teachers we can find senior, novice, and pre service teachers doing their practicum. For the purpose of this paper I will concentrate on novice teachers (also called beginning teachers, newly qualified, or newly graduate teachers) by defining who they are and what they are like.

Definitions of who the NT is vary and offer diverse characteristics. According to Farrell (2012), novice teachers (NT) or newly qualified teachers are "those who have completed their language teacher education program (including the teaching practice [TP]), and have commenced teaching English in an educational institution (usually within 3 years of completing their teacher education program)" (p. 437). On the other hand, Gatbonton (2008) provides a similar definition to Farrell's but extends it by including pre-service teachers in training among NTs as well.

The department of education of the University of West Virginia has developed a document that defines and characterises beginning teachers. The NT is someone who is entering teaching and who "should have a commitment to and skills for life-long learning" (UWV, 2012, p.1). The newly graduate teacher should be an effective communicator, a reflective practitioner, a facilitator with in depth pedagogical and content knowledge; should recognise that "teaching is a professional, moral, and ethical enterprise" (p. 1), should "have respect for human diversity" (p. 3), and should be "liberally educated" (p. 3). The document provides many "shoulds" associated

to the image of the NT as role model yet nothing makes reference to the things novice teachers “should expect to find in the real world”.

Based on my experience as a practicum supervisor and teacher trainer, I agree with Farrell’s (2012) conceptualization and say that the NT is someone who has completed a degree in a teacher education program, has done the practicum, and has between 1 to 3 years of teaching experience. The first three years of experience provide the new teacher with enough pedagogic and teaching tools to swim and survive the first reality shock.

## **2. Teaching for the first time: a reality shock**

Either to experienced or novice teachers, teaching is a complex and demanding process of continuous learning that implies applying different cognitive and strategic skills (Farrell, 2008a; Gulten, 2006; Hagger & McIntyre, 2006). Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) refer to language teaching as a social and mental work which involves twelve dimensions: “physical, emotional, practical, behavioural, political, experiential, historical, cultural, spiritual, and personal” (p. ix). Due to the vulnerability of novice teachers to all the multiple events that take place in the school and the classroom (Ulvik, Smith & Helleve, 2009), the first teaching experiences have been described as a sink or swim experience by Varah, Theune and Parker (1986) or as a reality shock by Veenman (1984).

It is not a mystery that the first years of teaching represent a reality shock or a transitional shock for NTs (Mann & Hau Hing Tang, 2012; XU, 2012; Veenman, 1984). Veenman (1984) defines this reality shock as “the collapse of the missionary ideals formed during teacher training by the harsh rude reality of everyday classroom life” (p. 142). This shock is not a short brief one. It is the day to day assimilation of a complex reality the beginner teacher was not prepared for but which has to be mastered during the first year of teaching instruction. Veenman (1984) made an account of 83 studies in the literature related to novice teachers’ first experiences from 1960 to 1984 and found that the eight most frequent challenges were: “classroom discipline, motivating students, dealing with individual differences, assessing students’ work, relationships with parents, organization of class work, insufficient materials and supplies, and dealing with problems of individual students” (p. 160). Veenman indicates that this shock is caused by two main reasons: personal causes such as wrong professional choice, teachers’ unsuitable attitudes and personal characteristics that do not match a certain school context; and situational causes related to deficient teaching training or a “problematic school situation” (p. 147), for example authoritarian, bureaucratic or hierarchical school contexts. Veenman (1984) concludes that to study the problems that challenge beginning teachers, the person-specific and situation-specific nature of these problems should be addressed as well, so the characteristics of teachers in the different kinds of schools and classroom contexts need further examination.

To Varah et al. (1986), the first year in the teaching profession of an educator is the most crucial time to determine the future of the teacher’s career. During this period newly graduate teachers develop “a survival mentality” and “they have to learn to swim very quickly or sink”

(Bush in Varah et al., 1986) otherwise NTs develop depression, fatigue, and end up leaving the profession (Ryan as cited in Varah et al., 1986). It is very important that the school community assists new teachers –no matter the field- not to feel isolated, to develop confidence, security in teaching and to motivate them to stay in the profession (Varah et al., 1986).

### **3. What happens with NTs in the ESL/EFL field?**

The first year teaching experiences of beginning teachers have been well researched in the field of general education. However, NTs' experiences in the English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) field is a recent area of study (Farrell, 2008a; Borg, 2008; Pennington & Richards, 1997). In order to answer my key question: What are the most salient experiences of ESL/ EFL novice teachers in their first years of language instruction?, I have reviewed the collection of studies edited by Farrell in his book: *Novice language teachers: Insights and perspectives of the first year* (2008) and the papers edited by him in the special 2012 September issue on *Novice Professionals in TESOL* in the *TESOL Quarterly Journal*, in addition to other sources that refer to newly graduate English teachers.

The amount of information on novice ESL/EFL teachers' experiences is varied so I have decided to classify the findings in the following way:

#### **3.1. Teacher Training**

Novice ESL/EFL teachers receive diverse training depending on the context and the country where they have been trained. Baecher (2012) analyses the training received by TESOL graduates in the United States; Faez and Valeo (2012) examine the teacher education of teachers in Canada; Xu (2012) refers to the Chinese context; Farrell (2008b) analysed critical incidents in Singapore language classrooms; Moore (2008) conducted a case study in Cambodia; and Mann and Hau Hing Tang (2012), Pennington and Richards (1997), and Umston and Pennington (2008) make reference to Hong Kong.

In most cases, the shock has to do with the gap NTs find between their teaching formation and the school and the classroom realities (Baecher, 2012, Faez & Valeo, 2012; Farrell, 2012). TESOL programs fail to prepare teachers to work with English language learners (Baecher, 2012). Poor preparedness to teach their first language assignment due to NTs' lack of content knowledge or superior language proficiency from the part of the students were reported by Faez and Valeo (2012). Faez and Valeo also state that NTs find a misbalance between theory and practice and that the duration of the practicum experience influenced their efficacy in the language classroom. In relation to language training, some novice ESL teachers state that they do not receive appropriate training to deal with language learners in the inclusive classroom, i.e. dealing with students with low literacy skills or learning disabilities (Baecher, 2012). However, Moore (2008) reports the case of an EFL beginning teacher in Cambodia who felt well prepared to teach in high school and said that having ups and downs was part of the process.

### **3.2. Language Learners**

Second language learners' low proficiency level of English is a relevant issue for the beginner teacher. The lack of students' comprehension skills leads to classroom misbehaviour, decrease in student participation, and use of the mother tongue to teach the target language (Shin, 2012). Shin states that rather than referring to NTs' incapability to teach the language it is the context that restricts them from succeeding and innovating in the language classroom. Mann and Hau Hing Tang (2012) report in their study that novice English teachers who work in schools where student performance is low, face a lot of behavioural problems, difficulties to motivate students, and learners disrespect the NTs.

### **3.3. Teacher Persona**

NTs' identities and the way teachers see themselves shift from the practicum experience to the working experience (Kincheloe, 2003; Holten & Brinton, 1995; Lim, 2011; Schmidt, 2008). Cook (2009) studied how 10 newly graduate English teachers experience disequilibrium and renegotiate their selves and who they are as persons with the school world. There is an inevitable "sense of imbalance" (p. 275) when language teachers have to decide who they want to be as teachers, what type of authority they want to be, and what type of relationship NTs want to build with the students and colleagues. All this helps them to craft their "public persona as a teacher" (Starks as cited in Cook, 2009). In the UK, Mann (2008) analysed the metaphors NTs used to represent their identities as teachers during the first working year. The study contributed to understand better novice teachers' beliefs and reality. More recently, Xu (2012) studied the "transformation of professional identities" (p. 568) of EFL NTs in China. Pre service EFL teachers form imagined identities during their teacher education that later change during the first years of instruction. New teachers develop their identities through the interaction with the students in the classroom thus once language learners recognise the novice teacher as a teacher and once the NTs establish membership with their class the teacher self emerges (McNally & Blake, 2012).

### **3.4. The Real World**

The beginning years for NTs are arduous ones as they have to deal with social, psychological, and personal pressures coming from the external world (Brannan & Bleinstein, 2012; Farrell, 2008a) Educational institutions have social, economic, and educational characteristics that influence the NTs experiences (Mann & Hau Hing Tang, 2012). NTs have to compete with more experienced English teachers in the labour market, be on probation for a certain amount of time before getting a good teaching post, and face unstable working conditions (Mann & Hau Hing Tang, 2012; Faez & Valeo, 2012). On the other hand, lack of social and academic support from veteran teachers hinder beginning English teachers from innovating in the classroom because they cannot "break away from existing teaching practices" applied in traditional school contexts (Shin, 2012, p. 542). The sooner the NT socialises, adopts the practices and the rules of the school, the sooner the novice English teacher will become a member of the community and be

part of the school's culture (Shin, 2012). This will help the NT to deal with institutional pressures (Shin, 2012) such as the imposed teaching methods used in the school, the materials, the curriculum, and the type of evaluation used for English instruction.

### **3.5. Teaching Strategies**

The teaching practices applied in schools and the characteristics of certain educational contexts influence the strategies novice English teachers use to teach the language (Shin, 2012). Pennington and Richards (1997) studied how EFL teachers in Honk Kong “abandoned much of what they were taught in the BA course by reorienting their teaching universe away from communicative teaching principles and practices towards product-oriented teaching principles and practices” (p. 149). As NTs have not a well-developed automatized collection of teaching strategies, beginning teachers deal with spontaneous teaching situations based on “intuition”, “common sense” (p. 151) and make use of past teaching experiences. Similarly, Baecher (2012) reports that EFL NTs cannot apply what they were trained for in universities (i.e. apply a communicative teaching methodology and create a learner-centred atmosphere) because they face large class size in schools, student demotivation, and the pressure to teach for the test.

Shin (2012), in her study on Korean EFL novice teachers, finds that strongly rooted beliefs about language teaching and learning in the community have a powerful influence on what NTs do in the classroom. Senior teachers' beliefs and language learners' beliefs that the target language is better learnt through the mother tongue and that communication produces chaos in the language classroom made NTs avoid teaching English in English and rely on grammar and translation.

### **3.6. Critical Incidents**

Veenman's (1984) idea of the first years of instruction seen as a reality shock implies that the beginning teaching experience will be marked by a chain of critical incidents occurring in the classroom (Farrell, 2008b; Richards & Farrell, 2012). To Brookfield, a critical incident (CI) in the teaching context is any “vividly remembered event which is unplanned and anticipated” (Brookfield as cited in Farrell, 2008, p. 3). Richards and Farrell (2012) contribute to Brookfield's definition by adding that this unplanned event that takes place during the lesson triggers “insights about some aspects of teaching and learning” (p. 113). Richards and Farrell (2012) and Farrell (2008b) provide examples of CIs experienced by language teachers such as: students misunderstanding the instructions of a task, realising that students are not autonomous language learners, dealing with different proficiency language levels in one class, feeling frustration for being obliged to use a specific teaching method, reluctant students to take part in the language activities, disruptive behaviour during activities, gender issues, e.g. male students avoiding working with female classmates, insufficient classroom space for activities that imply changing the seating arrangement, or students who never do their homework (Moore, 2008). Documenting,

analysing, and reflecting on CIs, enhance knowledge construction and improve teachers' own practices (Richards & Farrell, 2012).

Even though most of the accounts on NTs' experiences during their first years of instruction belong to the field of general education, it is possible to find studies related to the ESL/EFL field in the last fifteen years. It is interesting to notice that most of the studies report challenges that make it hard for the newly graduate teacher of English to begin teaching. In the next section I will refer to what can be done to help novice teachers in the sink or swim process.

#### **4. Diminishing the reality shock**

The first year in the workplace can be an overwhelming experience for any new teacher who is trying to form part of a teaching community. Farrell (2012) recalls how denigrated and emotionally low he initially felt that even leaving the profession crossed his mind after his first teaching experience. Before being able to discover "the joy of teaching" (p. 436), many novice teachers decide to abandon the profession very soon. Teacher attrition tends to occur during the early years of teaching (Faez & Valeo, 2012). Faez and Valeo report that 40%-50% of NTs in North America leave teaching feeling the career was not the right one for them.

In the literature revised for this paper, there is agreement that support and mentoring are crucial in teacher retention in the early years and in teacher adaptation and isolation (Delaney, 2012; Hayes, 2008; Mann & Hau Hing Tang, 2012). Brannan and Bleistein (2012) studied the impact of social support networks in novice English teachers. They defined three types of support that heal teachers from feeling isolated:

##### **4.1. Mentor Support**

NTs mentioned mentor support as a significant aspect for their professional development. The fact of receiving feedback, of being encouraged, heard, and advised was appreciated by new teachers.

##### **4.2. Co-worker Support**

Newly graduate teachers are in constant contact with coworkers at school so co-worker support from experienced peers reduces the shock. The fact of sharing materials and ideas about teaching, discussing classroom management issues, talking about lesson planning, or even being offered emotional support and encouragement helps a lot.

##### **4.3. Family Support**

Finally, receiving family support makes the transition less difficult. Families who heard, encouraged, and praised beginning teachers gave them confidence to go on (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012).

Also, Baecher (2012) suggests TESOL program courses should be redesigned to target the needs of novice teachers so that they do not find the gap between teacher education instruction so overwhelmingly different from the classroom reality. She proposes that “there must be a movement on the part of university-based teacher educators away from conducting studies on teachers, to collaborative inquiry with teachers” (p. 586).

Finally, Farrell (2012) even suggests adding to second language education (SLE) an additional course called “Teaching in the First Years” (p. 440) in which pre service teachers would be given chances for reflective practice so as to be able to deal with future conflicts during the early years in the language classroom.

## **5. ESL/EFL novice teachers in Chile**

Given the massive expansion of English around the world, pre-service teaching training in Chile has been marked since 1998 when the Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) established that English would be the only foreign language taught in the public sector, instruction would be compulsory from grade 5, more weekly hours of language instruction would be introduced, and a new EFL curriculum would be designed based on Krashen’s comprehensible input in which reading and listening would be the main skills developed in the classroom. Later, in 2004 MINEDUC aimed at making Chile a bilingual country. In order to do so the English Opens Doors Program (EODP) was created, English language and methodology training courses for in-service teachers were organised, and the National Volunteer Centre Program (NVC) was developed. The latest mandates from MINEDUC (2012) indicate that English instruction would begin in grade 1 and a communicative approach should be used where learners should be exposed to reading, listening, speaking and writing skills in a balanced manner.

All these measures revealed a shortage of EFL teachers in the country (Matear, 2008; Paez, 2012) therefore the universities (public and private) offering initial English teaching training programs skyrocketed. Today, there are 12 public and 34 private universities training EFL teachers in Chile and the educational training takes between 3 to 5 years (SIES, 2013). In 2010 1,179 newly graduated EFL teachers from diverse teaching training programs entered the work force either in private, public, and semi-private schools (Vivanco, 2012). However, teacher attrition is an increasing concern in education (Farrell, 2012; Losftrom & Eisenchmidt, 2009; Ulvik, Smith & Helleve, 2009). In this context, 40% of Chilean teachers abandon teaching after five years due to poor working conditions, weak leadership in schools, working atmosphere, senior teachers’ attitudes, and little support from the school community (Valenzuela, CIAE, 2014).

Making an account of the experiences of our local English novice teachers was not easy. I found that research done about NTs in Chile is scarce and in the ESL/EFL field it is non-existent. The available studies tend to focus more on initial teacher training in Chilean universities (Avalos, 2005; Fleming & Linero, 2003); the effectiveness of teacher education programs on the

NT's work in the school (Avalos, Tellez & Navarro, 2012), and the unequal distribution of better qualified new teachers in the Chilean school system (Meckes & Boscope, 2012).

There is one study that reports how general education young teachers experience their professional work immersed in the Chilean school context (Avalos & Aylwin, 2007). Avalos and Aylwin (2012) surveyed 242 novice teachers and interviewed and carried out focus groups with 15 beginning teachers working in private, public and semi-private schools. The experiences of Chilean beginning teachers are similar to what has been reported in the literature in GE and SLE. Their main finding indicates that the NTs' work is affected by the type of institution where they find their first job. On the one hand, teachers in public schools reported that they assumed full responsibilities like any veteran teacher from day 1 and that they had to begin their work in isolation with very little assistance because of the work load of senior teachers. On the other hand, teachers working in some private schools indicated they were first observed and accompanied during the first months. However they expressed they had less freedom than their colleagues working in public schools because private schools have a tighter schedule and more control over the contents taught. The professional socialisation of the new teachers in this study varied depending on the school community. Some of them reported they were not taken seriously either by experienced teachers, parents and students whereas others reported having more participation (share their teaching philosophy, propose teaching techniques, contribute with materials or activities that worked with the students) and a more active role (Avalos & Aylwin, 2007).

In a nutshell, the joy or the shock NTs experience can be attributed to various reasons beginning at pre and in-service level. The literature offers a rich account of these factors but I believe two things need to be done. First, the knowledge gained from research conducted about NTs does not seem to spread to the school context. Year after year new teachers experience shock and leave the profession (Farrell, 2012). Research carried out alongside senior and new teachers and mobilising the knowledge that emerges from that experience –through conferences or free access publications- can help bridge the gap between academia and the school reality. Second, we need to look at the novice teacher phenomenon from a more local perspective. Carrying out research and generating knowledge developed in Chile with Chileans will allow us to improve our local flaws.

## **6. Conclusion**

So far in this paper I have provided a definition of who the NT is and the features that characterise newly graduate teachers. I have answered my key question: What are the most salient experiences of ESL/ EFL novice teachers in their first years of language instruction? by exploring the experiences of NTs in the ESL/EFL fields and classifying the information in the literature into six categories: teacher training, language learners, teacher persona, the real world, teaching strategies, and critical incidents. I have also reported on the aspects that would help NTs diminish the reality shock and I tried to explore what has been done in our Chilean context.

Most of people involved in the English teaching profession, mentoring, and teaching training, would agree that it is hard to deny that the first years of teaching are not a bed of roses. Veenman's reality shock seems to cross nations and cultures (Baecher, 2012; Faez & Valeo, 2012; Farrell, 2008b; Gulten, 2006; Mann & Hau Hing Tang, 2012; Pennington & Richards, 1997; Xu, 2012).

To Dewey (1938) new experiences change the conditions under which past experiences were developed. During the early years in language teaching, newly graduate teachers bring with them their background, linguistic, and cultural experiences. Novice teachers make use of the physical and the social surrounding offered by the school community and develop new teaching experiences influenced by the context and past experiences (Dewey, 1938). The value of the studies carried out in the ESL/EFL context help us to be aware of the challenging experiences of beginning teachers and how their experiences influence their career paths.

With this data, teacher trainers, educational institutions, and schools can provide pre service and novice teachers with tools and insights into how to go through the inevitable journey of teaching for the first time. Reflection is paramount during the learning to be a teacher process (Farrell, 2004; Farrell, 2007; Farrell & Jacobs, 2010; Hagger & McIntyre, 2006; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Richards & Farrell, 2012; Richards & Farrell, 2011). Keeping student teachers informed of the experiences and life stories during the early years of instruction "could promote the development of skills in anticipatory reflection (reflection-for-action)" (Farrell, 2012, p. 440). Moreover, the reviewed studies reveal that more work needs to be done jointly between universities and schools and between "arm chair" teacher trainers and senior English teachers at schools. NTs get their degree, most of the time in debt, and are left alone in their career paths, so the support they get while studying should be extended at least beyond the first year in the workplace.

The worrying number of Chilean NTs who withdraw from the profession rings an alarm bell. There is something going on in universities and schools. On the one hand, Chilean universities in their wish to capture various dozens of new student teachers -who will help them survive monetary deficit- shorten their teacher education programs, blend courses, and pay less attention to on-site practice from early years and reflection. On the other, schools in Chile are extremely varied, ruled at will, and many times money driven, of course favouring their owners. NTs get to the profession and find lack of job security, few or almost no hours to plan lessons and assess students' work, appalling working conditions, and little support from principals and peers (Cornejo, 2009; Educacion 2020, 2012; Gonzalez Navarro, 2011). We need to explore more what our novice teachers of English experience in diverse school contexts but we need to make that available to new teachers and the school community. Also, I feel a lot has been written about challenging and rather traumatic events. I would suggest that exploring and studying the positive experiences beginner teachers live, would balance reflection and provide data that would encourage pre service teachers to be prepared for the hard but also for the good rewarding things behind teaching. With this, future NTs can have the tools to transform the horror into delight.

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