

Academic Writing at Tertiary Level: Challenges and Strategies for Novice Teachers

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Abstract: This qualitative case study offers an insight to the real issues confronting novice teachers in their day to day routine as language instructors for an advanced English language course. Using the procedure of data reduction, two young lecturers are interviewed following the first few weeks of teaching the English for academic writing course. Experience is seen as an essential element to the success of their teaching and this appears to be their biggest obstacle as it leads to anxiety and pessimism in their teaching ability. Inadequate teaching time and consultation hours are also viewed as problematic areas to the novice teachers. This study also highlights that prior trainings before the commencement of the semester are valued by these novice teachers as they are in need of the right strategies in teaching. Professional help and advice from colleagues and management are also welcomed. Finally, specific recommendations for the future of this invaluable form of inquiry are also offered.

Key words: Novice teachers, English for academic writing, challenges and strategies, commencement, instructors, pessimism

INTRODUCTION

For many novice teachers, the first solo attempt in the teaching profession can be both exhilarating and overwhelming. Green (2006) describes how novice teachers with less confidence become frustrated and driven out from their classrooms. Teacher preparation is becoming more complex. Where language teaching is concerned, there is constantly a need to improve and develop every aspect of teaching pedagogy and content development. The quality of teaching must always be maintained as the priority and for novice teachers who are thrown into teaching advanced language courses, it can pose a great challenge to them who have very little experience and exposure to the particular course.

The issue of quality of education has certainly caught the attention of many especially among policy makers. The Malaysian Ministry of Education's policy is to elevate the teaching profession by increasing the quality of teachers and advancing teaching as a career. The Ministry of Education's goal is to make the teaching profession one that is respected and highly regarded in accordance with the trust given to the teachers to carry out their roles in nation building. It is the natural responsibility for any teacher to ensure that

teaching quality should never be compromised. Steps and strategies can always be taken and explored to ensure that the teaching standard is always at par with the needs of the nations. Thus, it is a concerted effort that involves both the teacher educators at tertiary level and the novice teachers themselves. Kamaruddin Kachar who is a prominent figure of education has this to say about the quality of teaching in Malaysia.

The pronouncement of teaching quality stems from the challenges faced and the great responsibilities education in Malaysia carries from pre-school to higher education, towards the development of skilled human capital for the socio-economic development and the transition towards developed nation by 2020 (Berrel and Kachar, 1997).

For novice teachers teaching in an international setting, the priority is always to create a fashionable conducive learning atmosphere and to make sure that the learning objectives are achieved. At the higher institution level, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education has also delineated seven strategic thrusts including the second one which is improving the quality of teaching and learning. With these thrusts outlined, they pose a formidable challenge for academic staff at universities to keep themselves at the highest quality in terms

of teaching. Effective strategies and continuous development are two main requirements that are key to ensuring that the thrust is achievable at university level. Universities in Malaysia are required to set up what is referred to as Basic Teaching Methodology Course (BTMC) that was meant as an induction course for all newly appointed academic staff who joined the university. The main objective is to equip the novice lecturers with basic andragogical knowledge and skills, pertinent current pedagogical strategies as well as the latest technology and innovations in teaching and learning (Othman and Dahari, 2011). The course is meant for all newly appointed lecturers who have with or without them, a basic degree in teaching or education.

Statement of the problem: The teaching landscape for English teachers at university level offers a greater challenge compared to the schools. With the introduction of new English courses such as the English for Academic Writing (EAW), there were questions of teacher readiness and proficiency especially among the young lecturers. Language instructors at tertiary level often face this problem with very little mercy from the management as expectations run high on them. There is simply too much to be done in a day for a normal lecturer from lecturing to tutoring from preparing examinations to marking scripts and from researching to writing. Novice teachers at universities certainly need to air their grievances and seek help in fulfilling the current demands of teaching especially when it involves the teaching of second language learning in an international setting. While, the research literature on newly qualified teachers is growing, we do not yet know enough of the challenges that novice teachers at tertiary level face in the Malaysian context (Senom *et al.*, 2013; Othman *et al.*, 2008; Kabilan and Izzaham, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative to explore some of the problems novice language instructors face especially in advanced English language classrooms. It is also vital to investigate what possible steps are necessary to address this issue of helping the novice teachers to become competent instructors in their language classrooms.

Objective of the study: The primary purpose is to investigate the problems faced by the novice teachers at a language centre who are thrown into teaching advanced courses for undergraduate students. The secondary purpose of the study is to look into the potential help that can be relayed to the problems as perceived by the novice lecturers. The study seeks to answer the following research questions. What are the problems and challenges faced by the novice

lecturers of English for academic writing? What kinds of professional support are required to address the problems of teaching advanced language courses as perceived by the novice teachers?

Literature review: Huberman defines a novice teacher as one with <3 years of teaching experience and one whose teaching tends to focus on “survival”. He further explains that a novice teacher has 3 phases in their teaching career, novice, middle novice and late novice. Beginning teachers experience at their initial years of teaching a struggle for survival (Day *et al.*, 2007; Veenman, 1984). Cheng and Cheung (2004) describe the starting point of these novice teachers as a significant reference value for charting out directions for development in their teaching career. Green (2006) argues that teacher educators need to focus on helping novices to ask themselves the right questions as they think about teaching. She argues that although many models are designed in preparing teachers, there is still the key element of engaging the teachers in professional discourse.

Having a qualified teacher in the class is of utmost importance for any successful lesson. For a novice teacher, this may not just pose a problem to the students but also a treat for the teacher to leave the teaching profession. Unfortunately in the teaching profession, the full pedagogical and legal responsibility is given as soon as the teacher enters the school with a formal qualification. At the tertiary level, newly appointed lecturers are thrown into teaching advanced language courses and are expected to deliver the same quality of teaching as those who have served the university for many years. As Kealy (2010) crystallizes “the greatest challenge is that they need to be proficient in all knowledge and skills from the first moment they enter the classroom”. Consequently, the novice lecturers are often left to struggle on their own without any experience and support. In many countries, despite the average four year training that most of them received, many beginning lecturers enter their classroom feeling inadequate and handicapped. Tynjala and Heikkinen (2011) outlined in their study 6 challenges that most graduates meet in early stages of their career: threat of unemployment, inadequate knowledge and skills, decreased self-efficacy and increased stress, early attrition, newcomer’s role and position in a work community and importance of workplace learning. Teacher attrition especially during early years of teacher’s career is a serious problem in many western societies (Scheopner, 2010). Beginning teachers are exiting the profession in part due to difficult work assignments, unclear expectations, isolation, lack of resources and the idea that they are expected to complete

the same tasks of a veteran teacher as found in Anhorn's study. Singapore recorded a 25% of teachers leaving the profession partly due to poor support in the early years of teaching. In a language classroom, the competency of the teacher may be an additional factor to the success of the lesson. Darling-Hammond cautioned that without proper mentoring and appropriate support more and more teachers will find the challenges too overwhelming.

The recent shift from English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to English for Academic Writing (EAW) at the language centre for the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) has created an added anxiety for many teachers especially those who are novice in their teaching. The learning outcomes state that upon completion of the course, students should be able to use appropriate language to review the literature to apply appropriate language to write a research proposal to demonstrate appropriate language register to write an academic piece of writing and to present their academic arguments orally. It is very clear that the academic writing component is heavily related to research and it becomes an immediate concern for many lecturers who have with them very little research experience. Carter and Nunan (2001) asserted that the teaching of English in an international setting can be also complicated by the fact that teachers are usually non-native speakers of English who lack opportunities to use the language or lack the confidence in using it. While the new EAW course is still at its infant stage, the novice lecturers continue to struggle in their teaching. For many foreign language learners, the only exposure that the learners get is the from their language instructors (Daud *et al.*, 2011). Unfortunately, not all language teachers manage to reach the minimum level of proficiency required to teach (Butler, 2004). Gourden poses a strong question on how competent the lecturers are in teaching EAP in Norway when specialists of English in the country have very little contact between each other.

Hyland emphasized the need for novice practitioners of ESP to collaborate with subject specialists. This can be done by way of team teaching, linking courses, consulting, selecting of textbooks, coordinating instruction or even planning joint tasks (Haas *et al.*, 1991). The fact that the EAW practitioner is generally a novice in these areas means that collaboration with both students and subject specialists is essential. For many university students, writing an argument is a daunting task that they must fulfill before completing any assignment that involves an issue or a debatable question. Thus, it is the responsibility of the teachers and curriculum designers to ensure that the EAW syllabus incorporates sufficient training and coaching for the students.

Table 1: Summary of the novice teachers

Qualifications	N	Gender	Level of experience (years)
Bachelor of Education (TESL)	1	Male	<5
Bachelor of Human Sciences (English)	1	Female	<5

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A case study is employed to explore the perceptions, the challenges and problems faced by the novice teachers for this research since a case study enables the researcher to investigate a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, this design is adopted to enable the researcher to go in-depth into the problems of the novice teachers who are teaching EAW. A summary of the novice teachers are in Table 1.

The interview was carried out in week 7 of the semester as timing was crucial in this case study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define this as "the investment of sufficient time to achieve certain purposes: learning the 'culture', testing for misinformation introduced by distortions either of the self or the respondents and building trust". During the face-to-face interview, views and opinions from the novice teachers were elicited. The data for this study is analyzed using a procedure of data reduction and confirmation of findings. The data from the interview were coded by inductive analysis procedures (Johnson, 1992). The themes were carefully generated from the main ideas as conveyed by the informants. The purpose of this study was to focus on the challenges faced by the novice lecturers and thus, qualitative research is "not to generalize findings but to form a unique interpretations of events" (Creswell, 1994).

The transcribed interviews were coded in a coding template for a more systematic analysis. To check the reliability of the researcher's interpretation of the data, the researcher invited two lecturers to be the inter-raters a PHD lecturer from Kulliyah of Education who is also a native speaker with 13 years of teaching experience. The result of the inter-rater reliability exercise showed that the total percentage of agreement was 96.36%. Finally, the findings of the study were discussed based on the themes and subthemes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first set of data focused on answering research Question 1: what are the problems and challenges faced by the novice lecturers of English for academic writing?

Understanding of English for Academic Writing: The informant's understanding of the subject matter was

mostly relying on their own past experience whereby they made a comparison and contrast with what they have experienced earlier as a student. Informant 1 mentioned how she as an ex-student of IIUM understood the current English for academic writing in comparison to her experience of learning English for Academic Purposes in the past. Informant 2, however, was making a comparison between a proposal a real thesis and the final project paper to be produced in EAW class. Informant 1 also shares her interpretation of EAW based on her own understanding and objective of learning. This is evident from the interview conducted:

So, it's not merely a proposal because of course proposal you don't have to do a research yet, right? So, for me it's like in between a proposal and also a real thesis" (R 2/DU 24). "Cause I if I were to go back to how I were before, it's more of our own understanding" (R 1/DU 42)

Reaction when assigned to EAW: The respondents expressed negative feelings when asked about the news that they were given the task to teach an advanced course like EAW. These feelings can be further categorized into two. The first is a rather negative or pessimistic one.

"Because at first I was arr afraid because arr it was because it was something for me even though I had the experience of doing my thesis during my degree years but I think that that helps a little bit in my understanding what EAW is" (R 2/DU 30)

Besides pessimism, the informant also expressed a sense of anxiety. The response was:

"At least, you know to calm the nerves of having to teach something that in my opinion is heavy, tedious and at the same time I think overwhelming. Perhaps, it would be for someone who's just starting to teach the course" (R 1/32)

Factors and challenges to teaching EAW: In trying to justify the shortcomings in their performance as EAW teachers, the two young lecturers admitted that slack of experience and knowledge are two main reasons. Inexperienced in doing research was identified as the biggest factor while the fear of not being able to give tips and help the students was also highlighted.

"So, yes, having an experience do play a big role. I mean again it comes back to if you have taught this before you would know, you know how to manoeuvre on arr the quickest way or certain tips that students can take" (R1/DU 60)

For both the novice teachers, the content matter was the biggest challenge. Coaching the students to write literature review and introducing the APA format using the correct citations were on top of their list. These were their responses:

"Until today, I still say my biggest challenge would be mm doing the literature review" (R 1/DU 38). "For me, maybe it's the mechanics of APA and everything" (R 2/DU 36)

The informants also shared their struggle in dealing with the subject matter from the aspect of assessment. There were pressures of marking and also the level of difficulty in the exam questions: when it comes to teaching skills, the novice teacher admitted that inadequate experience in research writing does hamper teaching to a certain extent:

"So in that case, having experience teaching the course at the same time having experience doing research the similar type of paper can help me to

The final aspect of challenge in teaching EAW for the novice teachers stems from time factor. Both novice teachers displayed a sense of stress with regards to time factor, the time is either too short or inappropriate or even the whole course is regarded as time consuming.

"I would say the the course itself EAW is time consuming. It's time consuming, it's it's tedious to the point that you have a lot of things to do with with a short period of time"(R 1/DU 50-52)

In essence, the novice teacher's reflection of their teaching experience is crucial in realizing and accepting the problems they face in their teaching career. The second set of data focused on addressing research Question 2: what kinds of support are required to address the problems of teaching advanced language courses as perceived by the novice teachers?

Training: Interestingly, both respondents admitted that they have not attended any training on EAW about they strongly admit that training is regarded as important to improve their teaching. Respondent 2 also added that he is willing to be trained:

“In terms of EAW, I would say that there is no training” (R1/DU 92). “Cause I don’t mind spending my time for a workshop like that” (R 2/DU 84)

The second aspect of training that was mentioned by the informants is the type of training and the timing that were regarded as important. This is evident from respondent 2:

I can’t really answer that because I’m not sure what I should get because I haven’t finish teaching

Preparation for EAW lessons: When asked about lesson preparation, both the novice teacher emphasized that it is imperative to prepare for their lessons. This includes using suitable teaching materials that are prepared prior to their lessons. Informant 1 says:

“Yes, I would especially if I’m going to teach something that are relatively new. I would prepare first of all but in this case are assessing them as well. For instance, I would say I would like to teach on paraphrasing. However, I would recap first what I’ve what I taught previously in that case if I sense it is 80 or 90% of them still do not understand what it was before I would go with that” (R 1/DU 68). “Of course, you will have to read the notes before the students read it” (R2/ DU 76)

Self-improvement: This interview question highlighted an important indicative cry for help from the novice teachers. Both repeatedly uttered that colleagues play an important role in helping them. Having sharing sessions was specifically suggested by informant 2 for the colleagues to extend help for young novice teachers such as themselves.

“What I’m actually doing at the moment is more of going to my colleagues my senior colleagues asking out” (R1/DU 102)

Need help areas: The novice teachers requested for hands-training in research writing and language:

“I think basically all. I mean more on the hands on mmm technique of how to do the research study not so much of the skills because all that can be read”(R1/DU 110-112). “It’s just not about language now. It’s more than that. Sometimes we are not very sure when we want to check the student’s work, whether we want to check the technical aspect or, we want to check the language” (R 2/DU 156)

The informants did not feel that there is an urgency to meet up with the higher authority whenever they face problems in teaching EAW. If this was the option, they needed to follow the hierarchy accordingly. This is clearly illustrated by their responses:

I think at this point if I were to go arr and talk about the problems that I have I think

“It will more of me complaining of the things I can’t do or the things that I am reluctant to do” (R 1/DU 140). “I would try arr asking the CC first and everyone because I wouldn’t I wouldn’t want to go above the the level I am supposed to go to” (R2/DU 182)

Summary of findings for research question 2: The informants both strongly agreed that they need help from colleagues, coordinator and even the management. The critical issue that could be elicited from the findings is the respondent’s revelation regarding the specific areas that they need help. Training is certainly valued by the novice teachers with special emphasis on areas like writing and research. The timing of the training is also important so as not to interfere with their teaching during the semester. The novice teachers also hope that their colleagues and coordinator are willing to extend their assistance in carrying out their teaching duties.

CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be made with regards to the challenges and the strategies that the novice teachers experienced in becoming first time EAW lecturers. Firstly, qualification and competency in English language are imperative for instructors for an advanced language course. Lecturers at tertiary level must possess the kind of qualification to be an instructor for an advanced course. Any language teacher would realize that for students to be able to write, they would need to master all other skills namely, speaking, listening and reading as well.

However, having the qualification to teach does not guarantee a successful lesson. Both informants opined that experience still plays an important role to overcome anxiety and pessimism in teaching. Their own understanding of the EAW course is also questionable as they are merely comparing from their own past experience of being an EAW student with very little research experience. In the absence of prior experience, the novice teachers were feeling incompetent in helping their students. Other challenges that the novice teachers face are their struggle of overcoming anxiety and pessimism. Certain style of teachings like having to study all aspects of the teaching modules and visualizing themselves teaching in the next class are some of styles these novice teachers adapt in their classrooms. To accomplish a successful lesson, teachers must properly plan and prepare. Time management is also vital because the whole course was overwhelming with different tasks for the teachers.

Embracing the problems and challenges is the first step to admitting that there is room for improvement. The novice teacher's struggle cannot be left alone but must be addressed with proper strategies and solutions. Getting help from friends and management is important for them as they uttered the various ways their colleagues can help them. From sharing of materials to sharing of ideas, every bit of assistance is very precious for these young teachers. Training is certainly valued by the novice teachers with special emphasis given on writing and research. The novice teachers also requested that training should be done prior to the commencement of the semester so that it does not interfere with teaching. What is more valued is the open communication with friends and coordinator including higher authority. It is recommended that novice teachers are given the proper training from their point view and not necessarily from the management's point of view. Trainings will not be worth attending if it does not serve the purpose of coaching and giving guidance.

In a nutshell, novice teachers have to rise to the challenge of becoming instructors of EAW. Realizing the challenges that they need to confront every day is just as important as searching for the right solution. It is hoped that with the cooperation from colleagues and the management, the novice teachers can fulfill the teaching objectives of EAW successfully.

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