Examining the Anxiety, Stress and Motivation of Novice NESTs

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Abstract

Anxiety, stress and motivation are often discussed from the English language learner's perspective, but these terms can also apply to the language teacher. More specifically, novice Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) working in foreign countries may experience these phenomena both in and outside of the classroom due to the vast cultural variations between their home country and their country of employment. My research examined four NESTs working at a private preschool in South Korea. It documented, through journal entries and interviews, some of the issues these teachers faced while employed by a Korean 'cram school'. The NESTs in this study had no formal teacher training but met the requirements to be issued an E-2 teaching visa, thus categorizing them as novice teachers. Findings suggest that initially, both the anxiety of moving to a new country and the motivation to teach 'good' lessons were high. However, after only a few weeks, anxiety was replaced by increased stress levels and motivation toward teaching decreased. This was primarily due to a lack of cultural understanding and frustration surrounding workplace conditions. This paper attempts to identify challenges that novice NESTs encounter during their time working abroad and endeavours to suggest some possible solutions.

Introduction

Commencing employment can be a stressful time for any teacher. It has been noted that "teaching is one of the top five most stressful careers in the world" (Kyriacou, 1980) so it is not be surprising that teachers may feel anxiety or stress in a new role. Researchers have suggested that in the case of *novice* teachers, levels of anxiety and stress are higher than in those of more experienced teachers (Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy, 2007). It has also been noted that stress and anxiety can occur because of influences outside of the classroom (Blase, 1986), and in the case of Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) working in South Korea (hereafter Korea), these external influences primarily relate to cross-cultural differences. Therefore, in terms of *novice* NESTs, not only are they likely to be affected by 'typical' teacher issues related to stress and anxiety, they must also navigate the cultural expectations of their new role. Numerous studies have been conducted on English language learner stress and anxiety (e.g. Brundage, 2007; Kajs, 2002) and on non-NEST teacher anxiety (Mousavi, 2007), but little has been done with a focus solely on the NEST, thus allowing this study to contribute to this overall field of knowledge.

Study Rationale

This study considers how a lack of experience paired with the influences of a foreign culture affect the role of novice NESTs in Korea. There were two premises underpinning this study – that culture would be a factor that significantly influenced NESTs and that stress levels related to teaching would increase as a result. It has been previously acknowledged that novice teachers often use prior knowledge from what they experienced as learners in their teaching practice to combat their initially weak understandings of the subject specific content (Ell, Hill and Grudnoff, 2012). The issue with respect to NESTs is that they are asked to teach the English language as a second or foreign language, something that as native speakers they have never experienced from the perspective of a learner.

Background

Defining the novice NEST

It is first necessary to set up the context of this study, as the terms used in the field of teacher development vary within the literature. First, the term *novice* in this study relates to those with absolutely no previous teaching experience. This differs from other studies which sometimes use the term 'novice' or 'pre-service' to define those who have limited training or experience in teaching or have just recently obtained a teaching qualification (Numrich, 1996). Second, the term 'NEST' is defined as someone who carries the job title 'teacher' in Korea while also being a Native English Speaker (NES). The NES is defined as someone from an 'Inner Circle' country (Kachru, 1992) (more specifically from Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, the USA or the UK). Again, while numerous studies outline the problems of associating native English speaker status solely with these countries (Seidlhofer, 1999), the Korean government has identified that these are 'NES' countries where nationals are eligible for the E-2 teaching visa.

Anxiety and Stress

Teacher stress is defined as "the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of their work as a teacher" (Kyriacou, 2001: p.28) and also takes into account that the level of teacher stress could increase if the demands placed on teachers do not fall within teachers' expected parameters. Second is the process of cultural adaptation (or lack thereof), which is often referred to as 'culture shock'. Anderson (1971) suggests that this 'shock' occurs when an individual experiences social elements that are not part of their normal social experience. Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping and Todman (2008) take a more proactive view of this term, suggesting that although it is associated with contact-induced stress, that actually this can be managed by individuals, although the level of management will vary.

There has been extensive research on teacher anxiety in the classroom leading to an almost overwhelming list of possible concerns. Some of the main areas where teachers might expect to experience anxiety include a lack of confidence (Berry, 2004), personal insecurities (Wilson, 1986), evaluation from supervisors (Randall and Thornton, 2001), teaching a particular language area, level, or class size (Chang, 2009), fear of failure (Ipek, 2007), among others. However, in the case of novice NESTs, *initial* feelings of anxiety may relate more to cultural differences than to classroom situations. Sammephet and Wanphet (2013) suggest that anxiety in novice teachers can be linked to expectations. This, paired with the idea that anxiety can be linked to fear of the unknown (French, 1997) suggests that it is likely that novice NESTs may experience high levels of anxiety before starting a new position abroad.

In terms of stress, anxiety can be included as a component but stress also tends to include unpleasant emotions including frustration, anger, or depression (Kyriacou and Sutcliffe, 1978). When it comes to the underlying theory related to stress in the workplace, reference is made to the 'Person-Environment Fit' (Rice, McFarlin, Hunt and Near, 1985). This overarching model suggests that there is a relationship between the environment and the people who live within it. If 'environment' is narrowed down to the workplace, Chatman (1991) suggests that an unbalance or 'poor fit' between employer and employee values can lead to instances of high stress and dissatisfaction.

Research questions

In order to focus specifically on teacher anxiety, stress and motivation, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the main causes of anxiety (prior to employment) and stress (during employment) among novice NESTs? How do these affect motivation?

2. What steps, if any, are taken to reduce the levels of stress and anxiety felt by these NESTs?

Methodology

Participants and context

Participants of the study were four North American NESTs (2 males and 2 females) all working at the same private preschool in a South Korean city. Participants were chosen using purposive sampling as it was necessary for *novice* NESTs to be selected. Therefore, while all the participants held Bachelor's degrees, the subject of the degree was unrelated to English Language Teaching (ELT) (their degrees were in math, international management, history and philosophy) and the participants had no prior teaching experience.

In terms of the preschool, it was located in a medium-sized city in Korea and was part of a larger franchise of 32 private language schools. Preschool classes were held in the mornings from 9:30-14:20 while language classes for older students (8-12 years) were held in the evenings until 18:30. Participants were employed at this school on one year contracts and were required to teach 37 contact hours per week in return for a salary of $1850-2200 (USD) plus free airfare, a free apartment (studio or one bedroom), medical insurance, a pension, and a severance payment equivalent to one month of salary upon contract completion. Data collection took place between September 2010 and April 2011.

Interviews

Participants were individually interviewed three times over a twelve week period. The first interview was held in week 0 (using Skype) before the participant had departed for Korea while the second and third interviews were held in weeks six and twelve respectively. Interviews were semi-structured lasting between 30-45 minutes and questions focused mainly on two areas, those relating specifically to ELT and those relating to living in Korea.

Journal entries

Detailed journals were kept by participants over the twelve week period and included daily lesson plans (which were initially a requirement by the preschool) as well as their own personal reflections. Each participant was required to provide entries at least three times weekly, although it was common for the participants to write in their journal up to five times weekly. There were no boundaries set on the types of comments NESTs could provide but a list of example topics was provided with the instructions including discussion of teaching strategies, design and implementation of lesson plans, feedback, classroom management, workload, parental attitudes, culture shock, housing, transportation, and nightlife.

Data analysis

Initially, the journal entries were transcribed into the software program atlas.ti where they were divided into smaller units depending on the subject matter. These units were then coded into subcategories according to subject matter. The creation of the subcategories stemmed from research done on a pilot study identifying these areas as

most commonly discussed. A breakdown of this division is shown in the following figure:

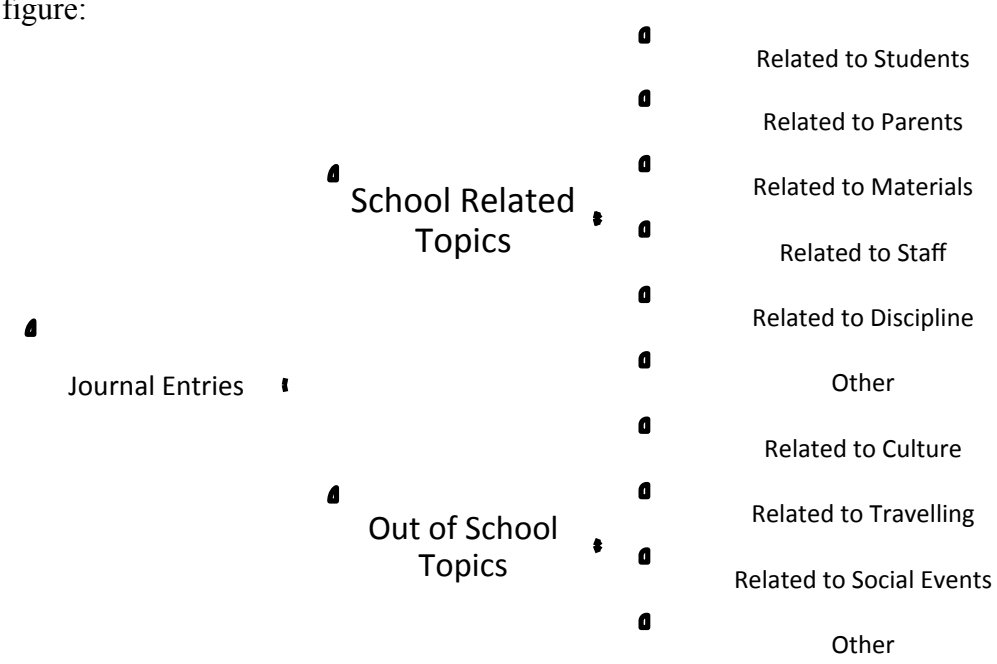

Figure 1: Coding for journal entries

Once the journal units had been categorized, interview data were inputted into the atlas.ti program using the same coding system and linked to participants' journal entries. This created, in essence, ten folders, from which data related to anxiety, stress, and motivation could then be extracted and analysed.

Findings

Since cultural issues were initially identified by other studies as significant contributors to teacher stress and anxiety (e.g. Payne and Furnam, 1987), findings on related to cultural issues were examined in my study. Differences in culture were evident both inside and outside of the classroom, and while both were deemed important to the overall experience of the NESTs, it is the in-house issues that were noted in this study.

The first set of interviews took place the week before the teachers arrived in Korea and were designed to examine expectations toward living and teaching. All four teachers expressed excitement toward their new roles and admitted that they thought difficulties surrounding cultural issues would mainly be associated with food and language. However, this idealistic view was quickly replaced upon arrival in Korea, with the realization that the cultural differences were much more extensive.

All four teachers brought to attention that their signed contracts specified '37 contact hours per week,' however, upon closer inspection, these 37 hours were the *teaching* hours and did not allow for preparation time. Further, preparation was designed to be conducted within the walls of the preschool as teachers were expected to be at school at eight in the morning, have lunch for 45 minutes and finish the day by six, meaning nine hours and 15 minutes were to be spent working each day. Further, if the teachers did not have a class at the end of the day, they still were expected to remain at the preschool and wait for their colleagues to finish before they could go home. Moreover,

if the Director or Owner of the preschool had to work late, the teachers had to sit and wait for them to finish before they could go home. As one teacher noted:

> "We are not necessarily expected to be doing work during these hours, we are just expected to sit and wait until the boss leaves. When he goes home, so can we. It's not productive."

This attitude is not necessarily unexpected as Korea is considered to be a collectivist society underpinned by the teachings of Confucianism (Cheah and Park, 2006); however the difference between this style and a typically more Western style of employment meant that rather than feeling a sense of unity within the school, teachers felt as if time was simply being wasted. In the journal entries, the relationship of this to stress was highlighted:

> "I have noticed that lots of stuff that we do around [the school] is only for the sake of appearances. There is no need for me to sit at my desk and look busy when I honestly have nothing to prepare for the next day. If other teachers have a class and I don't, I have to just sit and wait for them to finish."

Some might argue that this idea of collectivism is no longer relevant in Korea (Cheah and Park, 2006), especially since, as previously noted, parents are spending a substantial part of their household income on tutoring so that their child will have better opportunities and be able to compete for a coveted place at a well-recognized and highly ranked university. However, while it is clear that competition may be perfectly acceptable in one situation, in others, such as with the case of the teachers, the desire for equality and unity also exists.

Another cultural issue which particularly aggravated the teachers was the desire for the Korean staff to avoid conflict at all costs. Teachers suggested that when speaking with the Director about classroom issues (e.g. the textbooks being too difficult or the desire to change the way a lesson had been designed), the Director would listen carefully, nod, and agree. However, then nothing would be changed. Again, this likely relates to the differences in approaches.

For the teachers in this study, the language barrier, which was initially thought of as possibly being a hindrance to adapting to a life in Korea quickly became a monumental issue. This was true both in and outside of the classroom. In the classroom, NESTs were expected to show excitement for upcoming holidays – many of which were specific to Korea. Teachers were often left uninformed as to the significance of these events, as this could not be adequately translated by the staff. Further, the teachers were encouraged to teach 'Western holidays', but with handouts designed by the Korean staff members. An example of a Halloween handout was described by a NEST, she noted:

> "The handout said Halloween is when girls dress up as princesses and boys dress up as superheroes. They can play games and have fun."

When she asked about ghosts, pumpkins and trick-or-treating, she was told that these were not appropriate and that she should teach from the handout.

This example was one of many noted by the four NESTs in this study. They felt as though students were being misinformed and thought that what they, as NESTs, could offer was better than what had been produced by the Director and Korean staff.

The Halloween handout was only one example, yet teachers identified stress with the Korean staff at multiple points and it was a continuing theme throughout the 12 week period. Other examples included:

> "[The Korean Head Teacher] decided and finalized [a class] skipping 2 full books in the speaking curriculum. She ordered the books and told the parents without the foreign teachers' approval. The book they are switching to is way too hard for them. Their level will go down if they do this. I'm so upset. I told [her] 2 times not to do it, but she (and [the Director]) did anyway. When another teacher and I confronted [her], she said that [another teacher] and I didn't say anything. That was a flat out lie."
>
> I've noticed that the Korean staff really just like to throw things out there with little to no warning or preparation, leaving us foreign staff dizzy and looking at each other like, 'what the hell just happened?' And trying to keep up without getting frustrated, this can be challenging."

As this relates to the role, NESTs were initially expecting to provide input related to how their classes would be taught and which books would be most appropriate. In actuality their role was much different. Part of this situation was reported as being linked to a language barrier while another part was linked to the perception by participants that the Korean staff clearly had more incentive to appease the parents than to take NESTs' suggestions into account. Differences in job expectation, language and business enterprise in the above situation are examples of cultural differences which explicitly linked to unpleasant, negative emotions described previously as teacher stress.

The NEST as the 'edutainer'

The word 'edutainer' is a common one circulating through the private language school industry in Korea, used mainly by foreigners who truly understand its meaning. An 'edutainer' is a NEST who has a primary role of looking presentable, plastering on a smile at all times and making sure students have a nice time so to ensure that the parents are kept satisfied. For an 'edutainer,' actually teaching the students a key grammatical or cultural point is secondary, although it is necessary that students fill out at least one page in their workbook each lesson so it appears as if they have been diligently studying.

The NESTs at the preschool in this study noted that they felt like 'edutainers' often. One teacher, giving a more specific example, recounted how she had to dress up in a wedding dress, while her class of five year olds sang a rendition of *Bicycle Race* by Queen to a group of parents who gazed on adoringly from the audience. She noted that while none of the parents questioned whether or not the children understood the lyrics, they did confirm that they approved of her choice of attire. She specifically noted in the interview that this performance caused her anxiety, as she was concerned both for herself (noting the 'bad karma' of wearing a wedding dress not on her

wedding day) and for her students (noting that the lyrics of the song were not appropriate for young children).

This is not to say that all NESTs working in Korean private language schools are considered to be 'edutainers,' it is however, a role that sometimes exists. Moreover, being considered an 'edutainer' is not necessarily a downfall. It is plausible that some NESTs are content with this type of role. For some however, the lack of academic involvement can be frustrating and can reduce motivation.

Discussion

Many of the NESTs that travel to Korea to teach at private language schools are on one-year contracts. Requirements for teachers include citizenship from one of the seven Inner circle countries (Canada, the USA, the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa), a Bachelor's degree from an English speaking university (in any subject) and a criminal background check. Without teaching experience or formal training, it is not surprising that those in the private language school industry view NESTs as 'low-cost' assets, but ones which will entice parents to enrol their children in private tutoring. The role of a native speaker will inevitably vary among schools, but it is not uncommon to note that they are pawns in a larger game.

It should, however, be noted that whether teachers see themselves as 'edutainers' or more important members of the language teaching community, issues of culture and stress seem to consistently arise. Being an untrained teacher may be one issue, but being unfamiliar with the culture has a direct influence on the well-being of the NESTs. Certainly, teachers who are comfortable in their environment and who feel valued in their role are less likely to succumb to the same frustrations as those who see their role as primarily symbolic. Then again, for some, a job where there is minimal responsibility and an opportunity to travel countrywide may sound enticing.

As suggested by Park and Abelmann (2002), although Korean parents seem to realize that their approach toward private tutoring is, at best, misguided, it is, at the moment, seen as one of the only ways to ensure academic success and to secure appropriate future employment for their children. Therefore, while parents are striving to keep up with other parents and private language school owners are attempting to earn significant profits in order to secure their own status level, NESTs are left trying to navigate the maze of cultural and social expectations while being unable to speak the language or truly understand the circumstances that surround them. Based on this, the increase in stress levels indicated by the teachers in this study and the apathy and lack of motivation to create stimulating and enjoyable classes seems appropriate for a system which is not necessarily concerned with the level of English learnt by the children.

Limitations

The most significant limitation of this study is that it is not representative of the entire general population of NESTs working in Korean cram schools. Future studies must examine a wider range of institutions in order to determine whether cultural differences and lack of responsibility are directly linked to an increase in stress and decrease in motivation.

Related to this, it is not yet known whether similar issues would be observed amongst *experienced* NESTs working in Korea for the first time. The notion that novice teachers are inherently different from experienced teachers has been documented in various areas including 'practical knowledge' (Johnston, 1992) and emotions in the workplace (Cowie and Sakui 2012). However, to link it to this study, a longitudinal study examining experiences of a wide range of NESTs would need to be undertaken.

Conclusion

This study examined the perceived areas where four novice NESTs felt high levels of stress and anxiety. It found that culture played a prominent role both in and outside of the classroom. Interviews and journal entries gave possible insight into the aspects surrounding teacher stress in one private preschool. As a result, aspects surrounding material selection, student performance, classroom management and parental attitudes were particularly influential in stress levels. Because of these issues, participants felt that their motivation toward teaching decreased over the course of the twelve week period. This was indicated through key phrases in the interviews and journals indicated above.

The high levels of anxiety and stress linked to low levels of motivation is worrying in the Korean context because of the role of English and its link to 'upward mobility' for Korean students (Kwon, 2003; 2004). What is more concerning is that the inability of NESTs to integrate into or to understand the Korean culture only exacerbates the problem (Park, 2009). Ultimately, more research on teacher development in Korea needs to occur.

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