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TEACHER INDUCTION IN CONTEXT: THE CASE OF LANGUAGE EDUCATORS IN OMAN

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ABSTRACT

Support, guidance, and orientation programs for newly hired English language educators - collectively known as teacher induction – have attracted a lot of attention in the field of tertiary education in the Gulf countries, especially due to increased efforts to meet educational goals and counter the growing challenges of an unfavorable shortage of teachers, high rate of teacher attrition and turnover. This study examines a teacher induction program currently existing at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, including its organization, structure, and strategies, e.g., administrative support, peer support, extra resources, orientation and mentorship. The way teacher induction is implemented influences familiarization of newly-hired teachers with the work environment and fosters their adjustment to its culture. Data was collected from a study which involved empirical methods: observations and descriptions; a qualitative and quantitative survey with 51respondents and focus groups. The study provided strong support for the impact of comprehensive teacher induction program in the context of Oman on targeting newly-hired teachers' academic, professional, and personal interests and needs during the transition into their teaching jobs. Implications and policy interventions are discussed.

Keywords: new teacher induction, language centre, Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

INTRODUCTION

New teacher induction is a comprehensive process of sustained training and support for new teachers (Wong, 2005, p.41). It has recently gained considerable worldwide attention (Ibrahim, 2012) as can be observed by the multitude of publications that discuss the effectiveness and positive outcomes of induction programming on teaching quality and development (Ingersoll & Strong, 2012; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Langdon, Alexander, Dinsmore & Ryde, 2012; Strong, 2009). Recent research reveals that induction can have effects on various outcomes: increase in the quality of teacher recruitment strategies, improvement of communication, and familiarization of teachers with schooling and the educational system (Demirijian, 2015, p.7); decrease of teacher shortages; increase of student achievement (Dawson, 2010); increase of teacher satisfaction, commitment, retention, and performance at various aspects of instruction including keeping students on task, developing workable lesson plans, using effective student questioning practices, adjusting classroom activities to meet students' interests, maintaining a positive classroom atmosphere, and demonstrating successful classroom management (Ingersoll & Strong, 2012). Comprehensive teacher induction programs can significantly reduce attrition rates and lead to positive improvements in the professional development of new instructors (Portner, 2005).

As reported in Britton, Paine, Raizen and Pimm (2003), who examined induction programs of Switzerland, Japan, France, Shanghai (China), and New Zealand over a four year period, the

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approach to induction can be diverse and disparate. However, there are three main ideas behind effective induction: it should be comprehensive and provide opportunities for both professional learning and collaboration (cited in Wong, 2004, p.46). When reflecting on these ideas, Wong (2004) argues that in order to be effective, induction programs should be highly structured, rigorous, comprehensive, and seriously monitored, and program leaders should have well-defined roles; they focus on organized and sustained professional development and learning, and delivering growth and professionalism to teachers using a variety of methods. Accordingly, they also foster and accept the principles of collaboration or collaborative group work as a part of teaching culture (p.46). Building on Britton, Paine, Raizen and Pimm (2003), Wong (2004) believes that it is the function of the induction phase to engender this sense of group identity and treat new teachers as colleagues and cohorts (p.46). His view on the importance of collaboration in induction process is shared by Schlager et al. (2003) who report on variability and immediate character of new teachers' needs and argue that the appropriate combination of expertise, experience, and cultural background is unlikely to reside in one mentor who is not always available when needed. In the same line, Ingersoll and Smith (2004) found that induction support, activities, or practices rarely exist in isolation; however, receiving multiple induction components has a strong and statistically significant effect on teacher turnover (p.35).

In light of continuing educational reforms and the increased focus on students' achievements and teaching quality, many authors argue the need for a formal, coherent, and sustained induction and support system that is drawing from empirical research in culturally diverse educational contexts. (Flores & Ferreira, 2009). There is also a growing commitment to scrutinize existing induction programs for their effectiveness (McMichael, 2009), roles, activities, opportunities, and outcomes, and, as a consequence, introduce necessary structural and organizational changes (Demirijian, 2015).

Insights and thoughts about teacher induction, orientation, and mentorship programs already belong to the tertiary education mainstream in the Gulf countries as a result of research, empirical findings, policy recommendations, and interventions that aim to counter the growing challenges of an unfavorable shortage of teachers, high rates of teacher attrition, and staff turnover (e.g. Al-Kaabi, 2005; Amzat & Al-Neimi, 2014; Demirjian, 2015; Issan, Al-Nabhani, Kazem & Al-Ani, 2011). Acknowledging the significant increase of the budgetary allocations towards improving education access in such Gulf countries as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman and Kuwait, the researchers call for further investment "towards quality teacher recruitment; continuous training and research; and teacher practice to ensure quality education" (Demirjian, 2015, p.3), whereas higher education institutions' management and administration require teacher induction and comprehensive mentorship and professional development programs. Many higher education institutions in the Gulf countries have opted for new thinking about induction and, as a consequence, for certain structural and organizational changes, and Oman is no exception. Unprecedented social and economic development in the country coupled with the government's "Omanization" policy have had a "dramatic change on the country's needs in terms of education" (Al-Shaibani, 2012, p.5).To meet the challenges of a knowledge based economy, the country requires a qualitatively improved educational system that is relevant for producing future employees who can engage in analytical thinking and problem solving and who are creative, adaptable, and competitive, and is thus undergoing multiple reforms. These reforms emphasize "changing teaching, learning and assessment methodologies, updating the curriculum, adding new resources, improving facilities, reducing class sizes and upgrading the qualifications and skills of teachers" (Al-Shaibani, 2012, p.5).

Similar to institutions in other countries of the Gulf region, Oman's higher education institutions have attempted to "maintain a policy framework that balances teacher supply and demand based on educational market changes" (Darling-Hammond, Berry, Haselkorn, and Fideler, 1999 cited in (Demirijian, 2015, p.9) and to give newly-hired teachers direct attention and support via induction programming. However, the induction programs vary in the approaches and strategies with which they cater to the individual culture and specific academic and professional needs of their institutions and their new teachers. Though the teacher induction process is commonly aimed at providing assistance to manage the stressors of a new job (Gold 1996), diverse formal and informal induction and post-induction strategies are implemented in public and private higher education institutions in Oman, e.g. orientation weeks, mentor/mentee systems, buddy systems, staff books (paper back and electronic), observations, demo-classes by experienced teachers, etc. However, the growing trend is to develop a "coherent infrastructure of recruitment, preparation, and support programs that connect all aspects of the teacher's career continuum into a teacher development system that is linked to national and local educational goals" (Darling-Hammond, Berry, Haselkorn, and Fideler, 1999 cited in (Demirijian, 2015, p.9). This trend can be exemplified by the teacher induction program currently existing at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman aimed at providing extra resources, peer and administrative support, collaboration, and "raising the quality of teacher recruitment strategies, better communication and familiarizing teachers with schooling and the educational system" (Demirijian, 2015, p.7). It also focuses on targeting newly-hired teachers' academic, professional, and personal interests and needs during the transition into their teaching jobs (Ingersoll, 2004).

The Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University is a large institution in Oman that for almost 30 years has provided English language services to support Omani students and to prepare them for their further academic studies and future roles in the workplace. A diverse faculty of more than 200 Omani and expatriate teachers from 30 different countries who contribute their unique teaching experience, educational philosophy, academic habits, culture as well as linguistic, sociocultural and educational background is currently employed at the Language Centre. All of them have joined the Language Centre to help students to better adjust to the English language academic environment and improve their linguistic and general academic skills.

In employing expatriate faculty, the Language Centre hires experienced teachers with a TESL/TEFL specialization and a minimum of two years' TESL/TEFL teaching experience on three yearlong renewable contracts. Teacher turnover rates typically average 5 – 10% per year. Recruiting/hiring takes place locally and worldwide. The hiring process can be lengthy because it includes the attesting of the qualifications of the newly-employed expatriate faculty, security and background checks, and completing visa applications prior to entering the country. When in Oman, newly arrived faculty can face challenges with procedural issues because they must secure medical clearances, residency cards, drivers' licenses, bank accounts, transportation, and enrollment for school children, and set up house in the brief period of time between arriving in country and the start of their first semester that itself can bring a web of classroom difficulties: built-in expectations about teaching and learning outcomes, different classroom interactions and behaviors, discrepancies in classroom culture, and communication issues (Sonleitner & Khelifa, 2005). In addition, new teachers face the stress involved in adapting to a new culture, a challenging climate, new work environment and unfamiliar teaching assignments, which can prove challenging to both inexperienced and seasoned expatriate teachers alike (Richardson & Zikic, 2007). As a consequence of the complexity of hiring and adaptation-related challenges and stress, frequently not all of the teachers who accept their initial job offers from the Language Centre have remained on the teaching roster by the start of the academic year. Though the attrition rate has not been high, the exodus of some of the prospective teachers during the hiring process has often caused difficulties in planning for staffing. Additionally, the inherent difficulty of the hiring process often leaves those who manage to endure it stressed and demotivated.

In order to meet standards in staff induction and mentoring policies set by Sultan Qaboos University, the Language Centre formed an induction and mentoring program in 2012 with the expressed task of supporting, training, and acculturating newly-hired faculty from the point of hire up through the first semester of their first teaching assignments. In Wong's (2004) view, the best and most successful teacher induction programs provide inter-collegial connections because they are structured within learning communities where new and veteran teachers interact. The study by Britton, Paine, Raizen and Pimm (2003) demonstrates that induction programs, which ensure effective teacher performance, are conducted by "experienced educators who form an administrative group that oversees, coordinates, sets policy, provides goals, and rigorously monitors the induction program" (cited in Wong, 2005, p.48). However, such programs are dependent on additional resources, for example, money, and release time for experienced teachers and staff developers (Johnson, 2007).

Currently the induction and mentoring program at the Language Centre is a structured program led by its Professional Development and Research Unit. The mission of the Unit is to assure and continuously enhance quality of teaching and learning and to organize events and activities for teachers in the areas of professional development and research that improve instruction, curriculum, assessment and evaluation at the center within the university's framework of strategic planning. One member of the Professional Development and Research Unit heads the induction and mentoring program. This individual is responsible for structuring and coordinating the comprehensive induction program with varied activities for newly-hired teachers and has six release hours from teaching per week. The program is supported by five additional members, expert colleagues who play a crucial role in directing and supporting new teachers' induction process. Together they implement programming, act to update and formalize current induction programming, develop any missing elements, and organize the program the program and its procedures.

Typically, teacher induction programs in various arenas in higher education are centered on the integration of novice teachers into their new work culture and environment and on their active involvement in the campus community (Fry, 2007; Stanilus, Burrill & Ames, 2007; Schönwetter & Nazarko, 2008). However, like many higher education institutions in the Gulf countries, broad differences for expatriates in the culture and customs inherent at the Sultan Qaboos University Language Centre require that its induction programming adopt a more custom-tailored approach (Schönwetter & Nazarko, 2008).

The aim at the Language Centre is to provide a comprehensive induction program for new teachers which structure includes a "combination of professional development, support, and formal assessments" (Qualified teachers, 2005, n.p.). In addition, in the local context, induction involves catering to the unique culture of the Language Centre and its specific needs. This includes a more in-depth perspective that is required for inducting and facilitating expatriate faculty (Richardson & Zikic, 2007), for example, providing for the orientation and support of instructors who are already experienced teachers but are unfamiliar with the local cultural norms and environment. As Fenton-Smith & Torpey (2013) point out, induction in this context means assisting newly-hired instructors not only in academic and administrative matters but also in matters both interpersonal and civilian.

STUDY

The current study investigates the Language Centre's existing induction program in order to gain insight into its existing structure and evaluate its effectiveness in meeting the needs of the institution as well as induction programming goals in general. The researchers utilized a flexible methodology that integrated several approaches to obtain qualitative and quantitative research data. Empirical methods - observations and descriptions - were supported by quantitative and qualitative data collection methods: an online survey and focus groups. The purpose of collecting multiple sets of data using the survey and focus groups was to ascertain whether newly-hired teachers can highlight issues or provide additional insights into the utility of the teacher induction process. The additional information also validated and enriched the original data collected using empirical methods.

The online and anonymous New Teacher Induction Satisfaction Survey was created using Google Forms. The survey asked participants to express their level of satisfaction in all aspects of the induction and orientation process through the first few months of teaching. It was administered following the arrival and orientation periods when inductees had already taken up their first semester teaching assignments. The survey included both Likert scale items as well as open-ended questions to allow participants the chance to provide detailed responses. There were fifty-one full-time newly-hired teachers from three annual cohorts who were invited to participate in the survey. The survey has had an overall response rate of 82%.

Focus group sessions were conducted to further ascertain the effectiveness of the teacher induction program in achieving its aims (Sagoe, 2012). The focus groups took place early in the Spring semester of the new teachers' first year. The recorded sessions gave the new teachers a chance to further explicate the effectiveness of the induction programming in helping them to perform their professional duties and to become integrated members of the Language Centre faculty. Each focus groups involved small groups of four to five volunteer teachers from those who participated in the survey. The groups were relatively heterogeneous in terms of the participants' teaching experience, experience of teaching in Oman, and cultural background, thus bringing some diversity of opinions and views into the discussion. The discussions were based on the following question prompts: a) Thinking back over your induction experiences from the first point of contact with the Language Centre induction program through the orientation period and the assumption of teaching duties, what aspects did you find most helpful and effective? b) Are there any aspects of the induction process or content that could reasonably be improved to make the experience better for new faculty in the future? c) Are there any other ways that the induction program or the Language Centre can assist new faculty in becoming fully integrated into the community, the university, the Language Centre, and one's teaching program? d) Did the induction process at the Language Centre enable you to carry out your teaching duties effectively in your first semester at Sultan Qaboos University? Why or why not? e) What was your personal experience of your class being observed? How helpful were professional development sessions and workshops during your induction period?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A substantial body of research strongly supports systematic and sustained induction process in order to yield the best results of the professional development of newly-hired teachers (Hiebert et al., 2002; Schönwetter & Nazarko, 2008; Wong, 2004; Wong, 2005). According to Wong (2004), in addition to being sustained, the induction programs, which keep teachers teaching and improving, should be comprehensive and coherent, i.e. they should have a structured curriculum with many varied activities and people that are logically connected and fit together. They should also implement strategies "incorporated into a comprehensive, formalized process to train, support, and retain new teachers" (Wong, 2005, p.48). As exemplified by Wong (2005), these strategies include but are not limited to administrative support, multiple support by different support providers, demonstration classrooms, networking, release time for classroom peer visitations, bus tours, welcome centers, mentoring component, group work, mini-workshops, off-campus opportunities for socialization and connecting, etc.

Only some of these strategies take place in the context of the Language Centre, e.g. administrative support. Context-specific strategies, which are implemented at various stages of the induction process, namely pre-arrival support, induction and orientation, and first semester mentoring include providing relevant information, a buddy system, multi-day orientation programming, administrative involvement in and support of the induction process at all levels, etc. To exemplify, support for new instructors at the pre-arrival stage involves disseminating useful information concerning moving to Oman and keeping communication channels open to provide support in acquiring visas and other important documents and making travel arrangements. Relevant information is made available through the resources and documents that are published on the teacher induction program's web page (http://www.squ.edu.om/tabid/13321/language/en-US/Default.aspx), e.g. a) Who to Ask about What – this document aims to give new teachers information about who to approach regarding common problems e.g. obtaining a parking permit; b) Frequently Asked Questions; c) a 45-page Guide for New Teachers detailing practical, professional, and cultural matters concerning moving to and living in Oman; d) Maps and Floor Plans – a high-quality, detailed plan of each floor of the Language Centre, university and neighborhood area; e) Advice on teaching Omani students – this document contains articles written by the Language Centre faculty on different aspects of Omani culture to try to give newcomers to the region an insight into the sociocultural aspects of teaching here. More practical classroom tips are also there.

As for administrative involvement in and support of the induction process at all levels, the induction program also facilitates a buddy system which connects a volunteer faculty member from the Language Centre with each new instructor via email to provide timely and informative information regarding their individual queries regarding relocating to Oman and working at SQU. The Language Centre buddies can also alert induction program members to unresolved problems or concerns that new teachers may be facing. In addition, the Language Centre buddies may also assist new teachers after they have arrived in practical matters such as general orientation to the city, shopping, and obtaining rental cars.

Additional support following arrival is provided by the induction and mentoring program members, who assist new teachers completing all the administrative and procedural tasks required to prepare them for their first semester. These include completing necessary paperwork, obtaining documents such as driver's licenses and residency cards, completing medical checks, securing offices and email accounts, and giving tours to orient new arrivals to the campus and community. By offering support in these matters, the induction and mentoring program assures that newly arrived teachers are integrated into the community as smoothly as possible, thereby allowing them to take on their professional duties in a timely and effective manner.

The post-arrival induction period is capped by an orientation program which takes place over several days. This program features a "meet and greet" event; sessions by the Language Centre administration, program coordinators, and heads of the units responsible for faculty academic support, research, and professional development; discussions and collegial interchange of thoughts, ideas, and practices. New teachers are introduced to the Language Centre's program and curriculum, and they are briefed on policies and general procedures.

The orientation also includes training on current computer software and cultural issues relevant to the local context. Finally, teachers are assigned to their initial programs and have an opportunity to meet with their coordinators and co-teachers.

Following the orientation period and the beginning of teaching duties, new teachers are further supported by their program coordinators and experienced co-teachers in order to continue their integration into the Language Centre. Program coordinators are also encouraged to assign teaching mentors from their programs to new faculty. Additionally, newly-hired faculty undergo a full class observation during their probationary period and have the option of further observations upon request.

Survey feedback from newly inducted faculty has indicated a high degree of favorable responses consistent over the past three years. Respondents reported an 81% affirmative response to the question “Did you receive enough information from your program to carry out your teaching duties effectively in the first few weeks?” Additionally, respondents reported an 81% positive response (Likert scale 1 or 2) to the statement “feel confident that I am carrying out my duties effectively,” a 93% positive response to the statement “I feel positive about working at the Language Centre,” and an 89% positive response to the statement “I am enjoying my teaching.”

Detailed feedback and satisfaction measures from new faculty on all aspects of the Language Centre’s induction program and its stakeholders is important for evaluating the entire process of teacher induction and for continual quality enhancement of the program’s policies, procedures, and documents. Analysis of available data allows for insightful reflection on the effectiveness of the teacher induction program and for identifying strategies that can assist the existing program in leading teaching into lifelong learning and professional development. In general, qualitative feedback from the new teachers repeatedly suggests that induction strategies currently existing at the Language Centre, namely administrative and peer support (e.g. communication during the transition period and correspondence with the induction and mentoring team; the buddy system; website; handbook), observations, and the dedication of induction team members have had a strong influence on high degree of positive feedback. However, the data also supports research that making the teacher induction process more structured and streamlined (Ingersoll & Smith, 2004) as well as demonstrating more sensitivity to the professional needs of the new teachers and providing more extensive support in instructional matters during the post-orientation period would be priority areas for improvement.

Providing assistance and personalized attention from administration and colleagues to manage the stressors of a new job (Gold, 1996) is essential in supporting new teachers. This results in lower anxiety in the period before coming to Oman and during the intensive induction and orientation period as program feedback demonstrates. However, some teachers who are new to the Language Centre and to the context of teaching in different foundation and credit language programs report that they need additional resources that would enable them to get trained for their specific teaching allocations and assignments. Currently, newly inducted faculty have frequently not been provided with a mentor, or else the assigned mentors were considered ineffective. Although mentoring practice is generally perceived as a basic element of induction programs (Portner, 2005; Portner, 2008), it has been difficult to put into practice at the Language Centre because of the lack of the pedagogical content and the structural characteristics of the required mentoring as well as problems experienced by program coordinators recruiting experienced and effective instructors to volunteer to take on the additional responsibility. The members of the Language Centre teacher induction program also do not have the time to act as mentors or coaches, especially as they are unlikely to be assigned to the same teaching program as the new faculty members. Additionally, as Portner (2008) mentions, for mentoring to be successful, mentor roles must be clearly defined, mentors must be trained, and the mentoring process must be supported by the administration. This element of the teacher induction process therefore can present opportunities for the induction and mentoring program to improve the quality of its programming in this stage.

Organization and structure of the teacher induction process as well as the strategies implemented have an impact on teacher newly-hired teachers' adjustment and acculturation in the context of language teaching in Oman. To overhaul and improve the induction process for new faculty, one fundamental step is to maintain positive and productive relations, and effective communication during the whole process of teacher induction at the Language Centre which involves three stages: pre-arrival support, induction and orientation, and first semester mentoring. This supports previous research on induction that clearly demonstrates that induction is a "group activity, which immediately fosters and continues an integrated professional culture" (Wong, 2005, p.54). Continued personal contacts, multiple, clear notifications about the hiring process, general time lines, and expectations for the speed and frequency of correspondence as well as using joint email accounts throughout the process are helpful here in order to avoid any communication issues. This is in addition to maintaining a designated contact person or persons from induction and mentoring program in country during the summer months to correspond with new hires and liaise with administrative offices. If the contact is teaching during the summer, it is important to make sure that release hours are provided.

Another important step is to increase the opportunities available for newly-hired teachers to familiarize themselves with the computer software and systems utilized by the Language Centre. Additional training sessions at the beginning of the year could be developed in conjunction with the professional development and research unit. Also, further investigation is needed concerning what new teachers require to be better prepared for their teaching assignments.

Notably, the buddy system is very effective in induction process. For this reason, it is important to continue to recruit buddies who have been known to be reliable in the past and to seek out new volunteers who would make good buddies and plan to be present during the induction period (if possible). However, the duties of buddies should be better clarified after arrival to both new hires and buddies. In addition, some kind of recognition or reward for serving as a buddy should be provided as further incentive for participation in the buddy program.

An approach to overcome challenges in the induction process would be also to design strategies to navigate between the standards and expectations of expatriate employees and those inherent in the local context. While many new faculty members have some experience in the Gulf countries, and even Oman, and most, if not all, have a well-developed intercultural awareness, misunderstandings and frustration are common when one encounters a new cultural environment. There is much at stake for new teachers who have just committed to the process of uprooting their lives and resettling in a largely unknown and unfamiliar location, and they naturally come with their own cultural and personal expectations concerning the level of service and the quality of treatment that they should receive as professionals. Thus, preparing newly-hired teachers for what to realistically expect in terms of local societal and cultural norms while at the same time advocating for acceptable, professional standards from those who play a role in the lives of new teachers during the induction period and beyond is not always a simple matter. With this in mind, the induction and mentoring program should actively address both sides by conveying appropriate and helpful information that will alleviate any disappointment or stress that arises from gaps in expectations or understanding. Cultural adjustment is natural and necessary, but a soft landing in a new place can help to reduce some of the stressors that ultimately affect the quality of work of the newly-hired teachers and their job satisfaction.

CONCLUSIONS

This study addressed the question of the impact of a comprehensive teacher induction program on teacher familiarization of the newly-hired teachers with the work environment and their adjustment to its culture in the context of a Gulf university by focusing on the induction process currently existing at the Language Centre of Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. It particularly targeted its organization, structure, and strategies, e.g., administrative support, peer support, extra resources, orientation, and mentorship, which reflects the growing trend in the Gulf countries and worldwide towards developing comprehensive teacher induction programming aimed at nurturing and retaining high quality language educators. The study provided strong support for the impact of comprehensive teacher induction program on targeting newly-hired teachers' academic, professional and personal interests and needs during the transition into their teaching jobs; furthermore, it suggests a positive impact of such programming in attracting additional highly qualified job candidates, continual improvement in professional development, increased job satisfaction, and further step towards quality enhancement in regards to instruction and learning (Howe, 2006).

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