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The ups and downs of being a Non-native English teacher

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Despite the realization that the majority uses of English occur in contexts where English serves as a lingua franca, the “native speaker” authority is still prevalent in the field of English language teaching, especially in EFL contexts. The present case study was conducted with three Turkish teachers of English and investigated their opinions on the native speaker/non-native speaker dichotomy over an eighteen month period. Data collected by means of interviews revealed that there is still a lot of work to be done to empower novice English teachers, encourage them to rethink their roles in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and help them overcome the deficit model of their own professional competence.

Key words: Native speaker/non-native speaker teacher dichotomy, EFL context

INTRODUCTION

Significant developments in the sociopolitics of English language teaching, particularly the realization that the majority of people use English in contexts where English serves as a lingua franca have led to extensive research in education. Although the notion of native speakers’ “ownership of English” has been called into question (Widdowson, 1994), native (NS)/ non-native speaker teacher (NNS) dichotomy in language teaching is still going on and targets seem to remain tied to NS norms, especially in the EFL contexts.

Cook (1999) indicates that it is necessary to move beyond the native speaker as the model in language teaching because in the context of EIL native speakers are only a part of the much larger group of speakers of the language. Crystal (2003, pp.67-69) put the number of English speakers in the world at 1500 million, of whom only 400 million are L1 speakers. Students are in fact most likely to use English with other NNSs as NNSs now far outnumber NSs. However, many NNS teachers, especially in the EFL settings, seem not be aware of the new perspectives and are anchored in the old native-speaker dominated framework in which British or American norms have to be followed.

In one of the pioneering studies on this issue, Medgyes (1994) collected data from 325 teachers from 11 countries by means of three surveys points out that NNS

teachers have linguistic deficits in the area of vocabulary, oral fluency and pronunciation, stating that although hard work and dedication may help narrow the gap between the native and nonnative professionals, achieving native-like proficiency for the NNS teacher is “wishful thinking” (p. 33). To counterbalance his negative view of the NNS teachers, the researcher highlighted some qualities that NNS have that are considered to be better than the NS teachers. In the section accentuating “the brighter side” (pp. 51-69), the researcher claims that NNS teachers are better than NS teachers in predicting students’ difficulties and estimating their potential. Another advocate of the nonnative ELT professional, Phillipson (1996) stated that NNS teachers are potentially ideal ESL teachers as they have undergone the process of acquiring English as an additional language and have first hand experience in learning, and using a second language which has sensitized them to the linguistic and cultural needs of their students. McNeill (2006) conducted a study on awareness of lexical difficulty in pedagogical texts in order to investigate the similarities and differences in the way NS and NNS teachers predict learners’ vocabulary difficulties in reading texts. Sixty-five teachers and 200 secondary school students from 10 different schools in Hong Kong participated in the study. The students were asked to read a 600 word science passage, which included 40 target words. The teachers were asked to read the same passage and select 12 words that they believed to be unfamiliar to the students and necessary for the general understanding of the text. Findings of the study showed that “teachers who speak their students’ L1

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have a distinct advantage in knowing where their students' language difficulties lie" (p.116).

The NS/NNS teacher dichotomy was also studied from the perspective of language learners and studies, mostly carried out in the ESL settings, and yielded controversial results. For example, Thomas (1999) described her own experience as a NNS teacher who constantly noticed some disappointments in her students' attitudes when they realized they were going to have English classes with a NNS teacher. Kelch and Santana Williamson (2002) aimed to determine if ESL students could identify a native from a non-native accent and if they held a more positive attitude towards teachers with "native" accents. The researchers used audiotape recordings of three native speakers of different varieties of English and three non-native speakers reading the same script. Results showed that students were able to correctly identify native and non-native speakers of English in only 45% of the occasions and that their perception of the teachers' nativeness strongly influenced the attitudes they had towards them. Moreover, researchers also found that teachers perceived by students to be native speakers were judged to have higher levels of education and training. On the other hand, Liang (2002) in a study with 20 ESL students found that although students rated pronunciation in the ESL teacher speech as very important, this did not affect their attitudes toward their teachers.

A major indication of the increasing interest in the global expansion of English is the frequent use of the world English in the literature together with English as an International Language (EIL) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) (House 1999; Seidlhofer 2001). The transformation of English from being the language of a few countries to becoming the international language it is today has brought with it many changes in the language teaching profession. Research shows that considering NS teachers ideal teachers and trying to prove themselves all the time affect the self-confidence of NNS teachers negatively as well. For example, in a study with 78 NS and 18 NNS teachers working at different universities in the United States, Moussu (2006) found that NS teachers were more confident than NNS teachers about the strengths of their teaching and language skills. NNS teachers, on the other hand, were found to have low self esteem because of their limited knowledge of American culture and foreign accents. By comparing themselves to that of NS teachers, Rajagopalan (2006), similarly, found that the majority of Brazilian teachers of English participating in the study evaluated their preparedness low because they saw linguistic competence as the major part in measuring their overall preparedness. Although NNS teachers constitute 80% of the total ELT workforce worldwide, they are "typically treated as second class citizens in the world of language teaching" (p.283). Rajagopalan believes this is due to the

fact that native speakers are usually regarded as the only reliable source of "authentic " language and that the target language is considered to be "whatever the native speakers speak" (p. 286). In the meantime NS teachers are often hired with little or no teacher education because of an "automatic extrapolation from competent speaker to competent teacher-based on linguist grounds alone" (Seidlhofer, 1999, p.236). Studies carried out in the US (Mahboob et al., 2004), UK (Clark and Paran, 2007), and Turkey (Çelik, 2006) have all shown that being a native speaker is important for employers of English teachers, especially in private language schools and universities, and that employers make hiring decisions based on it.

A review of literature has shown that studies on NS/NNS dichotomy are mostly conducted with experienced teachers and/or from the perspectives of language learners. To our best knowledge, there are only a few studies carried out with prospective or novice teachers. In a recent study with 116 Turkish prospective teachers of English, (79 females and 37 males), Atay (2007) found that prospective teachers had concerns about their future careers, especially when it came to being compared to NS teachers. Analysis of focus-group interviews revealed that the majority of them believed that NS teachers would be more successful in teaching English than NNS teachers, because of linguistic and cultural advantages of the NS teachers. Thus, it was not possible for them to compete with a NS teacher. They all wanted to have native-like competence in English, defining "native-like" competence as "oral proficiency". Speaking English fluently without any "hesitations" and "pauses" and with little "accent" was of utmost importance. There were only a few prospective teachers who stated that learning English with NNS English teachers would be more advantageous as they can find the topics with which the students are familiar

The present study is a follow-up of the above mentioned study and aims to explore whether there are any changes in the opinions of prospective teachers when they start teaching in different teaching environments.

A brief description of the Turkish setting in relation to the role of English may help to clarify the context of the study.

The Turkish situation

The political, economic and cultural needs, and the technological and economic changes in the world have influenced foreign language education in Turkey as in many other countries in the world. Starting in the 1960s, when international ties were being established, Turkey started to feel an increasing need to keep up with the rapidly globalizing world in terms of foreign language proficiency. After the 1980s the acquisition of English was

also “aided by the language-in-education planning” (Do ançay-Aktuna, 1998, p. 28). It was during this period that English started to become the *sine qua non* for a successful career in virtually any field and when the English-medium universities were expected to produce a growing managerial and technocratic class.

Turkey, following Kachru’s (1992) three-circle model of World Englishes, is an example of an EFL context in the Expanding Circle, where English is neither an official language nor a second language. It is not a remnant of colonization or the legacy of missionaries either. Yet, the globalization of English and the growth in international contacts positioned Turkey to give English a special status. The fact that Turkey is facing entry into the European Union (EU) has made the status of English even stronger. For most Turkish people high competence in English is considered a cornerstone to integration in the EU. It is the language every Turkish citizen should learn if s/he wants to communicate beyond his borders. It is considered as a means for both individual and national advancement, e.g., claiming higher status and gaining economic advantage.

The predominance of English can be witnessed in almost all aspects of Turkish life; in educational domains, in technological communications, in leisure and travel industries, as well as in the youth culture. Today English education is offered from kindergarten level until university, either as a compulsory foreign language or as the means of instruction, e.g., there are many secondary schools and universities with a one-year preparatory class followed by English-medium instruction. In addition to the private English courses, the government encourages citizens of all ages to become proficient in English by expanding educational opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The present case study was conducted with 3 female Turkish novice teachers of English, who graduated from the English Language Education Department of a state university, Istanbul, in 2007. These teachers were selected from among 148 graduates of the department, 112 of whom took the national exam to become public school teachers and were assigned to different regions of Turkey. These teachers did not experience any NS/NNS dichotomy during the process of application or teaching. When asked why they were not applying to a private school, they all said “I would not have a chance at a private school”, “private schools hire NS teachers” and “in a private school I will not have any guarantee for my future, they will fire me if they find a native teacher”. Thus, they did not even try their chances at private institutions.

The three participants of this study were the graduates whom the researchers had ongoing contact and they were the ones, who decided to apply to private institutions. They studied at the English language teaching department for four years and had one year of practicum in public schools in their senior year. They were at

advanced level of English. At the time of the study the average age of the participants was 19.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected through in-depth, unstructured interviews with the novice teachers over an eighteen month period. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, having a broad focus on the novice teachers’ experiences starting from their job application process to their teaching within their social context. There were a number of topics discussed in the interviews, yet it would not be possible to examine the entire range of topics in an article of this length. The interviews started in July, right after the participants graduated and received the necessary documents from the university. The main focus was their job application process which lasted for months. Each participant gave detailed information about the application starting from the very beginning, like leaving the cv at the institution. When a participant found a job, the interviews mainly focused on the working environment and particularly their relationships with the NS teachers and their attitudes towards NS teachers.

For the purposes of the study the conduct of the interview was of paramount importance and as suggested by researchers interviewing of this type was more “like a conversation between partners than between a researcher and a subject” (Schutt, 1999, p.304).

RESULTS

The three teachers were anonymized as Sevgi, Lale and Aslı for the purposes of the study. All three teachers were asked about their chances of finding a job at private institutions. They were not highly optimistic because they talked to the administrators of many private schools and learned that they would have more chances if they had some years of experience and that NS teachers would always be “much more welcome”.

Sevgi, after being rejected by the private schools she applied, decides to work at the prep school of her own university and makes her application, after taking the national exams of the Turkish Higher Education Council. However, there are only three vacant positions and her score is not high enough to compete with the others. She accepts to work as a part-timer for a very little salary. As it is not possible for her to survive with this money, she gets financial help from her family and starts to work in private courses as well. In one interview she mentions that the picture would be totally different if she were a native speaker, yet, as can be seen in the following quote, she seems to have accepted the situation as it is,

A NS teacher is more than welcome here; s/he doesn’t have to be an ELT graduate nor does s/he need to take additional exams. Being a native is enough.

The admission process in the private course is particularly shocking; “anyone who is not a Turk but speaks English is considered a native speaker”. The newspapers are full with ads of private courses which

offer intensive English programs “with native English teachers” . In the third month of her teaching, she starts sharing the class with a NS teacher in the prep school and builds a good relationship with him.

There are times when I feel uneasy with the pronunciation of some words. I don't want to ask these to other teachers but I feel OK when J. tells me the correct pronunciation of words and he is so willing to help.

Being partner with a NS teacher at first boosts Sevgi's thoughts about the superiority of NS teachers. However, she realizes that the NS teacher's way of teaching does not match with the expectations of the class. The NS teacher, trying to improve the autonomy of learners, leaves students on their own. Students who are not used to this system expect to be guided and show reaction to the teacher. Sevgi covers the topics the NS teacher has to do, questioning her ideas that a NS teacher always makes a better teacher.

I put the NS/NNS thing aside and solved this problem through cooperation. We discussed the problems of class and together we are trying to solve them.

Lale decides to try her chance at private institutions. After looking for a job for months, she finds one in a private language institution which offers both English and German courses. Lale is tri-lingual, simultaneous in German, Turkish and English. Among the three she is the one who had most contact with NS teachers. The following excerpts from the interviews show how things affect her self esteem and how she tries to change things:

Besides me there are three other teachers working here. One Turk, one Polish and two Americans. The Polish are considered native too, I can't believe that.... the Polish has English with an accent. I'm sure they are paid much more. I can't believe this: I'm a nonnative speaker in my own country.

Once one of the native speakers becomes ill and Lale has to substitute her class for about two weeks; parents keep coming and complaining about this to the administration: “Why does my son have a NNS teacher?” “Can't you find a NS teacher as a substitute?”. All these demands make Lale feel hostile towards the NS teachers:

Do these people have any teaching qualifications? Did they attend the ELT dept or are they just hired because they are natives? I can easily see that Liz is not happy here. She does not know anything about our culture. She says it is only a month she has been here.

The analyses of the interviews show that Lale is trying to find weaknesses of NS teachers subconsciously. She is sharing a class with Liz and says that there are so many things students do not understand.

I wonder if Liz teaches the subject until the students understand everything or whether she is just going over the things to complete the unit. Yet, students still feel that being taught English by a native teacher is a privilege.

I'm a mom too. Is it worth to pay all this money so that my son listens to a native. Do parents think that their kids will have native like accent at the end of the year?

Aslı, the third participant, finds a job at a private school. She is asked to attend an in-service training program for 6 weeks with all the other teachers of the school. She enjoys it a lot and thinks that this training was a useful orientation for her. During the groupwork activities she realizes

I felt that I know so much about teaching English, yet I feel nervous when talking to NS teachers. I feel as if people are questioning my “English”.

The school is a highly prestigious private school and Aslı feels that she has to prove herself all the time to show that she “deserved” this place because she is one of the few NNS teachers accepted. Because she is an inexperienced NS teacher, she is not given the full responsibility of a class. For two years she has to “assist” a NS teacher, which makes her feel really upset at first. Though she gradually starts liking the partnership she has with the NS teacher, she questions her position in the school compared to those of NS novice teachers. When talking to other Turkish teachers, she also learns that a major reason parents send their kids to this school is the high number of NS teachers and that both the students and families would react if English were be taught by a Turkish teacher of English.

The analyses in general revealed a similar picture regarding Turkish teachers' opinions on NS/NNS dichotomy when they start teaching. At first they feel hostile towards the system of admission, but they accept the superiority of NS teachers. They also realize that as English language teachers they can be as successful as NS teachers and this awareness seems to increase their self-esteem. They feel annoyed by the situation they are in, while accepting it as it is and even feel “lucky” as they are given a chance to work with NS teachers in the same institution.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to find out the opinions of Turkish teachers of English regarding NS/NNS dichotomy. Results of the study have shown that “I'm-not-a-native-speaker” syndrome is prevalent among NNS teachers and this has negative effects on their morale as they feel inferior and inadequate when they compare themselves to their L1 colleagues (Suarez, 2000).

Moreover, the conflict between the educational principle of equality between NNS and NS teachers and commercial benefits seems to be going on as well. Institutions offering English language programs often promote themselves as employing NS teachers and advertisements for teaching positions often require that applicants are native speakers implying that NS teachers are preferable in some way. The reason for the commercial preference for NS teachers appears to be that despite the academic arguments and evidence there is still a broad social acceptance of the native speaker model (Pacek, 2005; Thornburry, 2006).

In Turkey, today there are around 15 million students in the primary and secondary schools both in public and private, and about 10 % of the students are studying in private schools. It is particularly in these schools and private English courses where the competition between NS/NNS teachers is still going on. NS teachers with little or no teaching qualifications are hired before experienced NNS teachers. Such institutions advertise that all of their teachers are native speakers in order to attract attention from students and parents, and increase their enrollment rates. Native speaker teachers are generally paid much more than their non-native speaker counterparts and get extra benefits, like lodging. Teaching abilities and qualifications are often not sufficient for employment in these institutions.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that English has become an international language and the very concept of native speaker is becoming of doubtful utility (McKay, 2002), there seems to be a lot of work to be done to empower the NNS teachers to rethink their own roles in EFL. There is an urgent need to help them overcome the “deficit model” (Rajagopalan, 2005, p.287) of their professional competence which many accept without questioning at all and such empowerment of teachers should start in the teacher education programs.

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