

A CONCISE EXAMINATION OF THE ARTIFICIAL BATTLE BETWEEN NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKER TEACHERS OF ENGLISH IN TURKEY

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Abstract:

This paper serves as a theoretical commentary on the debate regarding native and non-native speaker teachers of English as it draws from the discussions in the literature, as well as from personal experience. The author, a nonnative English teacher himself, points out the possible pros and cons of being a native and non-native speaker teacher of English, and emphasizes the need for these two groups of teachers to embrace each other and to work in a partnership. The custom-made cold war with extreme competition between these groups is criticized for the benefit of language teaching workplaces where success is inevitable.

Keywords: Native speaker, non-native speaker, English teacher, language teaching, EFL

TÜRKİYEDEKİ İNGİLİZCE KONUŞAN YERLİ VE YABANCI İNGİLİZCE ÖĞRETMENLERİ ARASINDAKİ SUNİ MÜCADELEYE YÖNELİK KISA BİR ARAŞTIRMA

Özet

Bu çalışma İngilizceyi ana dili olarak konuşan İngilizce öğretmenleri ile yabancı dil olarak konuşanlar arasında yaratılan kavramsal soğuk savaşın gereksizliğini, ve iyi bir dil eğitimcisi olmak için İngilizcenin ana dili olarak konuşulmasının zorunlu olmadığını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Ana dili İngilizce olanlar ile olmayanların dil öğretiminde doğal olarak bazı avantaj ve dezavantajlarının olduğu, fakat bu farklılıkların herhangi bir grubu doğuştan daha iyi ya da kötü öğretmen yapmayacağı vurgulanmaktadır. Ülkedeki dil eğitimin geleceği adına bu farklılıkların iki grup arasında işbirliği ortamı oluşturulması için kullanılmasının önemi ve ana dili İngilizce olmayan İngilizce öğretmenlerinin eşitsizliklere maruz bırakılmamasının gerekliliği tartışılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ana dil, yabancı dil, İngilizce öğretmeni, dil öğretimi, İngilizce eğitimi

Introduction

The place of non-native speakers as English teachers and the relationship between native speaker and non-native speaker teachers have always been a subject of much debate. Researchers have long looked for answers to the questions that flow from the growth and diversification of English as a medium for global communication. Yet, 'Is language best taught by native speakers of a language?' has remained one of the most important queries that have never been settled on.

As in most other countries, where English language teaching has been expanding in popularity and significance on a daily basis, in Turkey, too, the majority of people (including administrators and educators) seem to view English language teaching as the sole domain of native speakers and assume that the ideal EFL/ESL teacher is necessarily a native speaker. This myth leads to the fact that non-native teachers of English in the country are praised and admired less day by day, and as a result, they

even face discrimination in hiring or promotion practices. Non-native teachers of English, finding themselves being compared to their native speaker colleagues in an unfair way, build the "I-am-not-a-native-speaker syndrome" (Suarez, 2000), which has catastrophic effects on these individuals' self-esteem, and thus, ultimately on their performance.

This study discusses the controversy between the misleading notion that native speakers make better teachers of English and the research advocating that this is not necessarily the truth. However, it does not intend to be in favor of any one side to defend it and attack the other, nor does it attempt to deny the existence of the differences between native speaker and non-native speaker teachers. The main objective rather is to celebrate the differences to create a balance of native and non-native teachers, who complement each other in their strengths and weaknesses.

Why this controversy has been chosen to discuss in this study has much to do with my own concern about the position of non-native speaker teachers of English in Turkey. As a non-native speaker teacher of English, and a prospective language teacher educator of non-native speaker language teacher candidates in the country, I wanted to draw attention to one of the major stressors of in-service language teachers before they enter the profession: the erroneous belief that they cannot make good teachers of English, simply because they are not native speakers. I thought an illustration of the distinctive nature of non-native speaker teachers with their own strengths and weaknesses would show them the other side of the coin they often avoid looking at. Above and beyond, coming to an understanding of the fact that non-native speakers can make successful teachers of English would help them to gain the confidence and motivation that we always urge in teachers and that we value in teaching.

In a broader perspective, this study has implications outside its context for the larger Language Education community. Such studies emphasizing the collaboration, not rivalry, would reduce the tension between native and non-native speaker teachers in the profession. As language education professionals (textbook creators, curriculum specialists, language teachers and administrators) become conscious of, and take into consideration the differences between these two groups of teachers, they will be much more likely to produce improved results that would contribute to the merit of the language education field.

A Journey From 'Who is Worth More?'¹ to 'We are Worth More Together'

There have been numerous attempts in recent years to uncover the issues related to the native speaker/non-native speaker teacher debate. Swales (1993), for instance, claims that "it no longer makes any sense to differentiate between the native speaker and the non-native speaker" (p. 284). However, English Language Teaching (ELT) practices in Turkey, as in many other countries, prove that it still does.

Private language schools advertising that all of their teachers are native speakers, in order to attract attention from students and parents and increase their enrollment rates, schools paying native speaker teachers much more than what their non-native speaker counterparts get paid, administrators (and sometimes parents, and students alike) scapegoating non-native

¹ This is in reference to Medgyes' article titled "Native or non-native: who's worth more" published in *ELT Journal* in 1992.

speaker teachers, not the native ones, for any potential negative situation that might arise in the language teaching/learning process (i.e., student failure, nonattendance all confirm the fact that there are some differences between native and non-native teachers of English in action, or at least, that they are perceived to be different in some ways by the majority.

Here, it is crucial to answer what aspects of non-native speaker teachers in Turkey are being compared to native speakers, and why those non-native speaker teachers, who make more than ninety-five percent of English language teachers in the country, are perceived inferior. Depending on the EFL/ESL context, non-native teachers of English may be judged based on different criteria. As Rubin (1992) mentions, the credibility of non-native English-speaking teachers is often challenged on the grounds that they have an 'accent' or that they do not look 'American' or 'English', meaning White Anglo-Saxon. Although Turkish teachers of English do not come across any problems due to their physical appearance since it is impossible to guess they are not native speakers of English simply by looking at the way they look, the fact that they have a non-native accent makes people think that they are linguistically less competent, and this might cause such teachers to be confronted by outrageous experiences such as, but not limited to, unfair hiring practices, that will ultimately lower their confidence and self-respect. Needless to say, this is then very likely to result in the disillusionment and discouragement of such teachers, who come to believe that they cannot be as good teachers as their native counterparts.

At this point, it is essential to discuss the main differences between native and non-native speaker teachers of English in Turkey, derived partly from the discussions in Atkinson (1993) and Medgyes (1994). It should be kept in mind, however, that these are not 'advantages' or 'disadvantages' that make them better or worse, but 'natural outcomes of being different' that should be appreciated:

1. Linguistic Knowledge (Competence and Performance)

In the field of language use, most Turkish teachers of English may not compete with native speaker teachers, even if their language competence is very high or near-native. The fact that the knowledge of English of non-native speaker teachers in Turkey very often comes from books, rather than direct contact with authentic sources, and that most teachers have few (if any) opportunities to speak English make them feel insecure. My observations of English classes run by Turkish teachers (during my undergraduate education in Turkey) and my own teaching practice in Turkey provide evidence for this *lack of confidence*. The overdependence of Turkish teachers of English on textbooks might be the best illustration of this fact. Another possible rationale to explain why these teachers tend to use textbooks a lot more than their native speaker counterparts is that they are much more concerned with *grammar*, as Hutchinson and Torres (1994) declare, "textbooks... are the most convenient means of providing structure" (p. 317).

In short, native speakers are evidently superior from the point of view of language speaking ability. Nevertheless, it is time people start realizing that there might be some non-native speaker teachers who have a much better command of the English language than some native speaker teachers. A key point to discuss here is that most of the practicing native speaker teachers of English in Turkey, as is the case with most countries, do not have formal training in English, nor do they have a degree in ELT/TESOL or in a related field. Thus, it is not reasonable that especially private language schools in Turkey would welcome average people to teach English 'just because they are native speakers

of English' and would allow for the construction of an environment where its own people with degrees and skills in English language teaching are doomed and discriminated against, although not permitted by the law and is not performed overtly.

Further, speaking a language does not necessarily bring an innate awareness of the language and/or the ability and skills to teach it. As Harmer (1991) states, "average native speakers...do not consciously know any grammar and cannot produce any rules of grammar without study and thought, but they do have a language competence which is subconscious and allows them to generate grammatically correct sentences" (p. 13). Cook (1999) reframes this with an irony and refers to native speakers as good bike riders, who cannot explain how they ride a bicycle. Paradoxically, it is surprising to see, as a result of my encounters with my Turkish friends teaching English in Turkey, that most of them would find the presence of a native speaker teacher at the same work site helpful, whether trained or not in the field.

In addition, as most professionals in the field would accept without any doubt, pedagogic skills and teachers' attitudes are equally important as language proficiency to account for a teacher and his or her teaching. In this regard, even in the case of trained native speaker teachers, it is not guaranteed that the desired teaching would occur. If this broad understanding of what makes a good English teacher is taken, it can be asserted that non-native teachers in Turkey, just like other non-native speaker teachers, can be effective in teaching. Since the assumption that native speaker teachers are better teachers has never been tested pedagogically, it will not go beyond being a prejudice, and should be neglected.

2. Experience in Learning English

Since Turkish teachers of English have the experience of learning English themselves, they have a better grasp of the factors involved in the teaching/learning process than the native speaker teachers who, although might study it formally later, have acquired the language naturally.

Medgyes (1992) draws attention to the following advantages enjoyed by non-native speakers with regard to this particular issue:

- a) can serve as imitable models of the successful learner of English;
- b) can teach learning strategies more effectively;
- c) can provide learners with more information about the English language;
- d) are more able to anticipate language difficulties;
- e) can be more empathetic to the needs and problems of their learners; and
- f) can benefit from sharing the learners' mother tongue" (p. 346-347).

Although all these points can be well generalized to English teachers in Turkey, the fourth (d) and the sixth (f) are of crucial importance and worth discussing further here. First, as is apparent in my observations and experience in the field in Turkey, Turkish teachers of English foresee the problematic areas in their students' learning easily, and most of the time they are better-prepared to build the related remedies into their materials, course outlines and tests. On the other hand, native speaker teachers may find it quite troubling to help the same or similar students with even the simplest analogies and problems caused by mother tongue interference. Next, sharing and using students' first language in teaching a foreign language may be an invaluable tool in terms of explaining abstract notions and managing the classroom. In addition, students tend to identify better with a teacher who speaks to them in their own language.

3. Teaching Style

Turkish teachers of English differ in many aspects than native speaker teachers in Turkey in relation to their teaching style, which can include the organization and running of the classroom, attitudes to accuracy, fluency and errors and the use of resources. Native speaker teachers, who are not familiar with common traits of Turkish students, often fail to realize their goals as they instantly start with the concept of 'student-centered classroom.' Although this is what is needed in today's communicative classes, language teachers should take a 'step-by-step' model, especially when they teach Turkish students of a typical educational and cultural background, who expect to be taught grammar explicitly, and to be controlled and corrected strictly.

Additionally, the interviews I have made conducted with Turkish teachers of English and my own observation and teaching of English classes in Turkey reveal the fact that non-native speaker teachers, unlike their native speaker counterparts, barely make use of the computer, overhead projector or similar technological devices in their classes. In this sense, using such resources might be an advantage for native speaker teachers over their non-native colleagues to facilitate teaching.

4. Cultural Background

Apparently, native speaker teachers are steeped in cultural background knowledge of English and have an advantage over Turkish teachers of English in this regard. Non-native teachers, who, most of the time, have no opportunity to go to an English-speaking country and be exposed to the target culture, are less successful in integrating the 'culture' of the target language community into their courses, and in their confidence to teach about it. This might have a negative effect on the students' language development given that students reach high levels of proficiency in linguistic skills, but still need to acquire the sociolinguistic rules to communicate successfully in English. Conversely, Turkish teachers of English have knowledge of the local (L1) culture that might guide them to better teach in accordance with the cultural expectations of the students, parents and schools. Native speakers, consciously or unconsciously, sometimes might not be sensitive to the students' culture, and this might make the students feel that their identities are threatened. It would not be surprising that this will then lead to an elevated affective filter in students and will eventually cause a barrier to their learning effectively.

In short, native and non-native teachers of English in Turkey's context, as everywhere else, show a great variation in their knowledge, use and teaching of the English language. There are certainly many more differences than discussed in this study. Yet, these are differences that do not make any one group of teachers better than the other. It is our responsibility, as language teachers and teacher educators, to create an atmosphere of peace, respect and collaboration between native and non-native speaker teachers, not a battle, for the present and future of English language teaching in Turkey.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Unlike what many people believe, the ideal ESL/EFL teacher is not necessarily a native speaker, neither in the context of Turkey, nor anywhere else. In addition to the qualities a good language teacher should possess, non-native English-speaking teachers enjoy several benefits. Being of the same culture, they often have an enhanced understanding of the students' needs and an ability to predict language problems. Understanding and sharing

students' linguistic and cultural background contributes to a positive learning environment. Furthermore, non-native English-speaking teachers often function as models of successful language learning and can empathize with their students' experiences as language learners.

None of the studies identifying the qualities of a credible teacher talks about 'being a native speaker.' For that reason, qualifications such as ESL/EFL pedagogy, a profound understanding of the English language, comprehension of the second/foreign language acquisition process, an enthusiasm and thriving practice of teaching English should be the basic criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of a language teacher. Accordingly, non-native speaker teachers should stop comparing themselves unfavorably with native speaker teachers and should take the responsibility to educate people by presenting them the benefits non-native English-speaking teachers may bring to the classroom. If they act with confidence to show they are well-trained and exceptional teachers, others will have no opportunity, but to accept that it does not matter where they come from or where they are teaching.

Consequently, administrators must take active roles as well. They should listen to the students' comments about native and non-native teachers, and evaluate the success rate of native and non-native speaker teachers. Wherever possible, they should encourage 'team-work' of native and non-native teachers in course design and implementation, material development, assessment, and teacher training. Instead of discussing who is 'better' or 'worth more' based on the differences that exist, which creates an atmosphere filled with stress and anxiety for both native and non-native teachers of English, everyone should search for ways of how native and non-native speaker teachers can cooperate to complement each other in order to improve the success of the English language teaching profession in the world. A final suggestion is that international organizations in the field (i.e., TESOL) address the issue and make sure that discrimination based on being a native or non-native teacher of English should come to an end and that all language teachers are recognized as equal with respect to that matter.

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