Evaluating the contributions of native and non-native teachers to an English Language Teaching program

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Abstract

This study examines the contributions of native and nonnative teachers to an English Language Teaching (ELT) program. 72 students from different classes of the program evaluated the contributions of three native and seven nonnative instructors. A questionnaire and four interviews were utilized to illustrate the contributions of the instructors from different perspectives including their knowledge of English language, teachings skills and attitudes towards target culture. The study also included the evaluation of the instructors’ ability to teach some language skills and areas.

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1. Introduction

English language has become an international language for a long time, and throughout the world it has been taught in many countries either as a second language or as a foreign language. Due to its prevalence all over the world, the number of non-native speaker teachers of English (NNTs) has outnumbered the number of native speaker teachers of English (NTs). According to Kachru (1996), for each NT there are four NTTs. This phenomenon has prompted researchers to investigate the effectiveness of these NTs and NNTs in the field of English language teaching. Despite the fact that the results continue to give insights in language teaching and shed light on our way, most people are not interested in the results and have prejudices about NT and NNTs. Generally, there have been positive attitudes towards NTs and beliefs regarding their superiority especially in speaking and pronunciation teaching over their nonnative counterparts. In this study, we examined how students in an English language teaching (ELT) program in a Turkish public university perceived their NTs and NNTs.

2. Native vs. non-native controversy

Among many definitions of who a native speaker is, Cook’s (1999) definition appears to be one of the most popular. Cook describes a native speaker as the one who acquires his/her first language in their childhood. This suggests that adult language learners can never be native speakers of a language other than their first. Yet there are some adult learners who aim to achieve native-like speaking and high level of proficiency in the target language.
Recent studies indicate that such learners have very positive perceptions of native speakers and prefer to learn a language under their tuition to reach their own goals. However, it is suggested that non-native speakers, generally, have the same features that native speakers do have (Cook, 1999). That is, except from the concept of nativeness, many other characteristics of native speakers are also shared by non-native speakers (Adamson & Regan, 1991).

Lewier and Bilmona (2010) argue that although many people prefer NTs as the best ones, NNTs may also have some superiority over the NTs, and students may benefit from NNTs more than NTs in some cases. Supportively, six features of a NNT are stated by Medgyes (1994). According to him, a NNT can predict and prevent students’ possible problems with the language, (s)he can talk to students in their first language, (s)he can teach language learning strategies more successfully since (s)he can be a better and more realistic learner model of English. (S)he can be more sensitive to students. In another work, Medgyes (1992) states that NNTs generally feel unsafe while speaking the language which they are teaching. As a consequence of this feeling, they become more pessimistic and more aggressive. It is understood from Medgyes’s (1992) belief that pessimistic NNTs spare much less time for pronunciation and vocabulary than they do for grammar.

While some scholars maintain that NNTs might be more effective in some situations, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) argue that NTs are more aware of learners’ needs, they speak English more confidently, and they are potentially more accomplished users of English. They also claim that NTs use authentic oral language and provide students with more cultural information. Supportively, Modiano (1999) states that especially young learners have positive attitudes towards their NTs as they display a good model of the target language. In a similar vein, Lasagabaster and Sierra (2005), in their study, have come to the conclusion that students’ perceptions towards NTs are quite positive in terms of developing language skills such as speaking, writing, reading, etc. Parallely, Falk (1978) stress the idea that target language students who admire the culture, like the people that speak the language, have a desire to become familiar with or even are eager to integrate into the society in which the language is used are the most successful ones. Additionally, Rubrecht (2006) argue that for most cases students are in favor of NTs, claiming that students are willing to learn from native speaker in a way that they have a desire to enter into the target language and interact with the native speakers.

Another aspect that can play a determining role in perceptions of students towards NTs in education field is motivation. Shimizu (1995) emphasizes that motivation of the students could be detrimentally affected by the negative attitudes of students towards their teacher. Unfortunately, such an influence is not limited to the classroom context; it can sustain its adverse effect throughout the learning experiences of students. Dornyei (2001) suggests that whoever the teacher is, native or non-native, he or she should promote integrative values by encouraging a positive and open-minded disposition towards the target language and its speakers in such a way that language learners can develop a positive attitude towards native speakers. It is suggested that only in this way students can best benefit from native speakers.

Among the many other reasons, one important factor that plays a determining role in shaping students’ perceptions is their assumption that NTs are more self-confident than NNTs (Mahboob, 2004). In parallel with the previous view, Butler (2007) has studied the differential effects of NTs and NNTs’ accents on students’ performance and has found that NTs tend to have more self confidence in use of English. Accordingly, this is regarded as another factor that causes learners to form positive attitudes towards target language and culture. On the other hand, Barratt and Contra (2000), conversely, accuse native speakers of discouraging learners since they have no capacity or willingness to make comparisons and contrasts to the students’ native language. Although NTs have such disadvantages, they are still regarded to be more popular and preferable in the English language teaching profession (Clark & Paran, 2007).

As it is clear from the controversial views, the perceptions of students towards NTs or NNTs may change according to many aspects. With this in mind the present study, with the help of the background literature, aims to reveal how EFL learners perceive NTs and NNTs in their learning experiences.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. Is there a significant difference between the perceptions of the participants towards NTs and NNTs in terms of (a) teaching English (generally), (b) grammar and vocabulary teaching, (c) pronunciation teaching, (d) skills teaching, (e) culture and attitude to target language, (f) assessment?

2. Do the perceptions of the preparatory students and regular students towards NTs and NNTs differ in terms of (a) teaching English (generally), (b) grammar and vocabulary teaching, (c) pronunciation teaching, (d) skills teaching, (e) culture and attitude to target language, (f) assessment?
3. Methodology

3.1. Setting and participants

The study took place in an English Language Teaching program, which has the objective of training on an average 120 NNTs of English language each year following the quality standards of professional training set by Council of Higher Education of Turkey (YOK). In order to achieve this objective, the students are offered courses by both NTS and NNTS for the main purposes of having practical language skills, knowledge on language-related general topics and a range of integrated skills to use in real life.

The data demonstrating the participants’ perceptions toward these teachers come from two different groups, i.e., those who attend preparatory classes and regular students. Both groups are taught by both types of teachers. Yet, the lengths of the period they have been in the department differ. Table 1 displays the distribution of the participant according to levels and gender. Gender difference is not concerned as a determining factor in this evaluation. Instead, the second research question deals with whether the perceptions of the participants towards NTs and NNTs differ between preparatory and regular classes. To summarize, 26 preparatory and 46 regular students participated in the study. The mean age of the participants was 19.2.

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3.2. Data collection procedure and tools

The current study examined the perceptions of the students towards the NTs and NNTs working in an ELT program with the help of a questionnaire and four subsequent interviews. It utilized the results of the likert scale measures and open-ended questions to reveal how the students view the instruction offered by NTs and NNTs.

3.2.1. The questionnaire

The questionnaire had two parts. The first part asked about demographic information of the participants and also included their comments regarding the advantages and disadvantages of NTs and NNTs. The second part of the questionnaire included six sections. In each section, the participants were asked to share their perceptions about both NTs and NNTs in terms of different features that teachers were assumed to have. Respectively, Section I, including only one item, was designed to collect data for the students’ perceptions of how they view NTs and NNTs in terms of teaching English from a general perspective. In this section students were expected to evaluate their teachers without dissecting their features such as teaching reading or teaching pronunciation. Section II, included two items that were designed to collect data about how the participants perceived both types of teachers in terms of teaching grammar and vocabulary. While Section III was related with teaching pronunciation, Section IV was about teaching listening, reading, speaking and teaching language learning strategies. Section V stood for providing positive attitude towards target language, Section VI, with one item, was designed to collect perceptions of students on how they were assessed by both types of teachers. 11 items, in six sections, in the form of 5-point scale were directed to students and they were asked to code their perceptions towards NT and NNTs ranging from 1 to 5, from negative to positive. For the analysis of the data 5-point scale was reduced to 3-point scale, symbolizing different levels of satisfaction from both types of teachers (1=Not Satisfactory, 2=Neutral, 3=Satisfactory).
3.2.1.1. Reliability of the questionnaire

The reliability of the questionnaire was measured through statistics of Cronbach’s alpha. It was found that the questionnaire had high Cronbach’s alpha (.79). This finding indicated that the questionnaire was reliable enough to proceed for further analyses of the data. Considering the perceptions of the students, the grand mean for NT was found 2.63 and for NNTs 2.58, revealing that general perception of the students was ‘Satisfactory’.

3.2.2. Interviews

The qualitative data of the study were collected through four semi-structured interviews. Four participants from preparatory and regular classes, two female and two male, were interviewed about their perceptions regarding NTs and NNTs in the program from diverse aspects. Each interview lasted 20 minutes. The interviews were video-taped and transcribed, and then analyzed through pattern-coding.

3.3. Data analysis

For the data obtained from the first part of the questionnaire, where the students supplied comments on the advantages and disadvantages of NTs and NNTs, the comments were analyzed. The most frequent words were detected and then were categorized. In order to remove target language barrier and let the students feel themselves free to reflect their perceptions both the questionnaire and interviews were conducted in Turkish as the mother tongue of learners.

For the data obtained from the second part of the questionnaire, where the students coded to reflect their perceptions toward both types of teachers, were analyzed through SPSS.16. In accordance with the research questions, two types of analyses were used. In order to find out whether there is a significant difference between the perceptions of the students towards NTs and NNTs in terms of teaching English (generally), teaching grammar and vocabulary, teaching pronunciation, teaching skills, culture and providing positive attitude to target language, and assessment Wilcoxon test was used. For the second research question which seeks to find out whether the perceptions of the preparatory students and regular students towards NTs and NNTs differ in terms of the same aspects above Mann Whiney-U test was used.

Finally, the recorded videos were transcribed and analyzed by means of Conversation Analysis Methodology as it helps researchers to focus on the interaction patterns emerging from the data (Walsh, 2002). Pattern coding was used to analyze the interview data as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

4. Findings

4.1. Findings based on the questionnaire data

In order to find out whether the test scores were distributed or not, Kolmogrov-Smirnov statistics was applied. The results revealed that normal distribution was not obtained in both groups of NT and NNTs as well as in total scores. Therefore, Wilcoxon test, a non-parametric test, was applied as alternative to paired sample t test and another non-parametric test Mann Whitney U test was applied as alternative to independent sample t test in accordance with the two research questions respectively. Wilcoxon test was used so as to find out whether there is a significant difference between the perceptions of the participants towards NTs and NNTs in terms of teaching English (generally), teaching grammar and vocabulary, teaching pronunciation, teaching skills, culture and providing positive attitude to target language, and assessment.

Wilcoxon test results indicated that the perceptions of the participants towards NTs (M=2.65) and NNTs (M=2.81) were different in terms of teaching English (generally), however this difference was not statistically significant (Z= -1.76, p>.01). Another analysis was done to figure out whether the perceptions of the participants towards NTs and NNTs would differ in terms of teaching grammar and vocabulary, it was found that there was no significant difference (Z= -.39, p>.01). Although it was found that there was a significant difference between the perceptions of the students towards NTs and NNTs in terms of pronunciation teaching (Z= -4.39, p<.01), perceptions of the students towards NTs and NNTs did not differ significantly in terms of skills teaching which includes teaching reading, listening, speaking and strategy (Z= -.87, p>.01). Finally, while a significant difference
was found between the perceptions of students towards NTs and NNTs in terms of teaching culture and providing positive attitudes to target language ($Z = -3.48$, $p < .01$), a difference was found in terms of assessment of NTs ($M = 2.48$) and NNTs ($M = 2.80$). Yet this difference was not found to be significant ($Z = -3.88$, $p < .01$). In the light of the findings above it would be reasonable to comment that students perceived that NTs in the program were better in teaching pronunciation (Section III), teaching culture and in providing positive attitudes to target language (Section V) in comparison to NNTs. Although NNTs were perceived more successful in terms of English teaching (generally) and assessment, the differences were not found to be significant. No difference was found in other sections related with teaching skills and language areas.

As noted earlier, another non-parametric test, Mann Whitney-U test was applied to find out whether the perceptions of the preparatory and regular students towards NTs and NNTs differ in terms of teaching English (generally), teaching grammar and vocabulary, teaching pronunciation, teaching skills, culture and providing positive attitude to target language, and assessment. The results of the Mann Whitney-U test revealed that no significant difference was found between the perceptions of participants towards NTs ($U = 544.00$, $p > .01$) and NNTs ($U = 490.00$, $p > .01$) in terms of teaching English (generally). According to the results of Mann Whitney-U test related with Section II, it was found that perceptions of the participants towards NTs and NNTs in terms of teaching grammar and vocabulary did not differ significantly ($U = 577.00$, $p > .01$), ($U = 591.00$, $p > .01$), respectively). Furthermore, in terms of pronunciation teaching, the perceptions of the participants towards NTs and NNTs did not differ significantly ($U = 589.50$, $p > .01$), ($U = 551.50$, $p > .01$), respectively). Similarly, no significant difference was found between the perceptions of participants towards NTs ($U = 583.50$, $p > .01$) and NNTs ($U = 534.50$, $p > .01$) in terms of teaching reading, listening, speaking and strategy teaching. Moreover, the perceptions of participants towards NTs ($U = 549.00$, $p > .01$) and NNTs ($U = 564.00$, $p > .01$) did not differ significantly in terms of culture and providing positive attitudes to target language. Finally, it was found that there was no significant difference between the participants’ perceptions towards NTs ($U = 493.00$, $p > .01$) and NNTs ($U = 464.50$, $p > .01$) in terms of how the both types of teachers do assess the students’ work. With the findings in mind it would not be wrong to assume that the perceptions of both groups towards NTs and NNTs did not differ significantly in any of the sections.

4.2. Findings based on students written comments and interviews

In our study, we also conducted interviews with four participants. We pattern-coded and analyzed the interviews together with the other qualitative data. Main source of data was thought to be written comments since the number of students who wrote comments was 72 and interview data, another source of evidence with only four participants, was used to support and triangulate the main source data as well as quantitative data. Therefore the findings of both lines of evidence are provided below in harmony. The student excerpts used below came from different sources, therefore letters (e.g., Student –Int-A) were used to label the comments from interviews, and numbers (e.g., Student 12) stand for the comments driven from main source data.

4.2.1. Use of L1

When the participants were asked about the comparison between NTs and NNTs, the most commonly stated distinction between them was the opportunity of using the mother tongue of the learners. Most of the participants (68%) claimed that the ability to communicate in their first language was an advantage for teachers. The following excerpts support this view:

“Sometimes we need teachers to make explanations in our mother tongue for the topics which are hard to understand in the target language. We should interact with our mother tongue when we need it” (Student -Int-A, prep-class).

“It is necessary to use mother tongue when students have difficulty in understanding subject. As we speak a mutual language, the complexity of any subject can be made simpler by the teacher” (Student 18, sophomore).

4.2.2. Comprehensibility

More than half of the students commented that it was easier to catch up with the speech of a NNT than the speech of a NT. 58% of the participants stated that understanding a NT was harder for them which might result in an ineffective communication atmosphere. The following excerpts support this view:
“NNTs do not speak English with a native accent. This makes us understand them more easily” (Student-Int-B, prep-class).
“With a nonnative speaker, there are fewer breakdowns in communication” (Student 24, sophomore).

4.2.3. Analyzing the needs of the students
Considering the fact that NNTs possibly had grown in the same country with similar educational background, they would know the process of learning from their own experiences. 64% of the participants argued that this feature helped them better understand their students, their possible reasons for making mistakes, their abilities and disabilities and thus they could teach students the necessary language learning strategies. The following excerpts support these view:

“NNTs can adapt their teaching techniques according to our needs in language learning” (Student-Int-A, prep-class).
“NNTs know our needs better, analyze our pros and cons. Therefore, they know how to teach to us better” (Student 25, prep-class).
“NNTs knows the difficulties that the students may face with, because s/he had experienced the same process while learning L2” (Student 36, sophomore).

4.2.4. Pronunciation
Expectedly, having the native accent was found to be the most distinguishing feature between both types of teachers. 70% of the participants claimed that this feature was the one that makes NTs valuable. Two of the students commented as follows:

“Our pronunciation becomes more accurate with a NT and our speaking skills improve much better. We can speak English as if it was our mother tongue” (Student -Int-B, prep-class).
“If we learn the target language from the one who acquired this language, we can catch up the points that we may miss while studying with a NNT. At least, we begin thinking as if we were English” (Student 23, sophomore).

4.2.5. Teaching speaking and listening skills
Half of the participants commented that NTs were better at creating a positive environment in which listening and speaking skills of the learners develop better. The analysis of the data showed us that NTs were assumed to be better at teaching speaking and listening skills while there was no evidence that they were better at teaching writing and reading skills. While 65% of the participants stated that they believed in the superiority of NTs in teaching listening and speaking skills, all of the interviewees agreed that listening and speaking skills develop better with a NT. The following excerpt seemed to accord with these views:

“I think NTs are very useful for speaking skills. While we are listening to a NT during the class hours, we unconsciously develop our listening skills” (Student-Int-C, sophomore).

Interviewees were also asked whether they had spoken to a native speaker or not. Their answers revealed that they all had spoken to native speakers and had some difficulties which had caused breaks in their communication. The most apparent difficulties were that since the interviewees’ pronunciation was not good enough for them to interact with ease. They also commented that they had difficulty in retrieving the necessary vocabulary items. Further, all of the interviewees remarked that speaking to a native speaker made them nervous. Two of them stated that they were afraid of making mistakes. Moreover, three of them commented that they were not familiar with the daily use of English which caused them not to be able to comprehend some of the phrases, expressions and idioms of the NTs.

To recapitulate, it would be logical to assume that the findings driven from qualitative data partially accord with the findings of quantitative data since the perceptions of the students were in parallel with the remarks they made. Since quantitative line of evidence revealed that students perceived NTs better in terms of teaching pronunciation, and providing positive attitudes to target culture. Additionally, qualitative line of evidence indicated that in terms of teaching speaking and listening NNTs were more successful.
5. Discussion

The main aim of this paper was to evaluate the perceptions of the participants towards the contributions of NTs and NNTS to an ELT program in a public university of Turkey. The findings of the study revealed that none of the parties were found superior than the other insisting that there was not a clear cut explicitly stated border between NTs and NNTs. This finding is parallel with the notion that both parties might have some weaknesses and strengths in diverse situations, contexts, and times (Medgyes, 1992). Liu (1999) and Hertel and Sunderman (2009) argued that NNTs might have abilities similar to NTs and they may be better than NTs in some situations. Parallely, the most of the participants in the study viewed that NNTs offered better method in teaching language learning strategy, provide more information about the English language with anticipating better and preventing students’ difficulties. They were also perceived to be more sensitive to the students, use mother tongue more and help develop language competence of the students especially in grammar.

On the other hand NTs in the program were perceived as a good provider of language model. The participants also remarked that NTs were more flexible in teaching methods, more creative and informal, and superior in terms of teaching pronunciation, culture and providing positive attitudes towards target culture. The study demonstrated similar results with Andrews’s (2007) study indicating that NTs were more fluent in speech and were better representatives of the target culture, whereas NNTs displayed better explicit knowledge of grammar. Madrid and Perez (2004) also stated that NTs were more motivating because throughout the lesson there was no possibility to use their own, native language and so all the students had to speak target language which they tried to learn and which was native language of the teacher.

As it is obvious from the remarks and perceptions of the participants, it was found that the participants needed both NTs and NNTs in their classes for a set of diverse reasons. This finding supported the claims of Lasabagaster and Sierra (2005) who indicated that students preferred a combination of NTs and NNTs.

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References


