

CONTRIBUTIONS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING ASSISTANTS TO UNIVERSITIES IN TURKEY: A CASE STUDY*

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Abstract: As a result of globalization and internationalization of universities, English language has become the dominant language taught and learnt almost all over the world. This dominance of English language has caused universities, schools, private institutions and various language teaching centres to hire native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) in order to offer quality language education for their students especially in English as a foreign language context (EFL). So as to meet this need, the Turkish Fullbright Commission and the Turkish Higher Education Council have initiated a cooperative program called The English Teaching Assistantship. Thanks to this program, English Teaching Assistants (ETA) have been placed to various Turkish universities in recent years. This case study investigates the contributions of ETAs to a state university from both the students and ETAs' point of views. Within this context, semi-structured interviews were administered to both ETAs and their students by the researcher. The results reveal that ETAs contribute to students' language development in that they provide authentic language, increase intercultural competence of the students, and constitute a good source and opportunity for a real communication in the class. In addition, most of the students stated that ETAs really helped them improve their speaking and pronunciation to a great extent, however; they complained about being too nervous while communicating with NESTs.

Keywords: English Language Assistants, intercultural competence, native English-speaking teachers

INTRODUCTION

The number of people learning English has been increasing day by day in the world. Schools and other private institutions provide opportunities for students to learn English and other languages. According to recent statistics on primary and secondary schools in the EU Member States and candidate countries, a great majority of students choose to study English as a foreign or second language. In primary education, learning English is mandatory in several countries. Almost 100 % of students in the EU Member States learn English in primary schools. Foreign language learning statistics in 2013 revealed that 93,8 % of all EU students were studying English as a foreign language. Luxembourg and the Czech Republic were the countries with the highest proportion (100 %) of secondary education students learning two or more languages in 2011. When it comes to Turkey where English is taught as a foreign language, contrary to the situation in most of the EU countries, a dramatic increase can be noticed in the percentage of students learning English in general programmes between the years 2006 and 2011. In 2006, the proportion of students learning English was 67,3 %, but it increased to 99,4 % in secondary education level. This increase indicates the change in foreign language teaching and learning philosophy of the Ministry of National Education of Turkey. This change can also be observed in the tertiary level foreign language education. Most of the state and private universities in Turkey offer one year elective or compulsory language education for undergraduate students. The main objective of this language education, usually called preparatory class, prior to bachelor's degree is to present opportunities to the students for improving four language skills; reading, writing, listening and speaking. In addition, almost all of the departments of English Language Teaching (ELT), English Language and Literature, Translation and Interpreting Studies in English, and Linguistics offer one-year compulsory language education as well. Considering the number of students learning English in Preparatory classes and language-related departments in Turkish universities, the demand for qualified teachers has been increasing each passing day for enhancing the quality of language education. For this reason, proficiency of English Language Teachers is of great importance for the maintenance of the quality. In such a challenging process aiming at success, native English speaking teachers (NESTs) have been available on the stage in order to help non-native English speaking teachers (non-NESTs) cope with the difficulties they face in the English as a foreign language classrooms. With this aim in mind, Turkish Higher Education Council and Turkish Fullbright Commission have initiated a cooperative program called The English Teaching Assistantship. This program enables English Language Teaching Assistants (ETAs) to teach in various Turkish Universities for one or two years. It is estimated that ETAs contributions to language learning process are worth stating, but no research has been reported about them so far in the literature. Especially ETAs' opinions about language learning

* This study was presented at International Conference on Quality in Higher Education (ICQH 2014) on December 3-5, 2014.

and teaching process in Turkish universities and how they are perceived from the students' point of views need to be explained in order for identifying their contribution to the improvement of language skills of Turkish EFL learners. To this end, it is thought that the answers of the following research questions will highlight the remarkable contributions of ETAs to a specific state university in Turkey in terms of identifying their weak and strong aspects. The research questions to clarify these points are as in the followings:

1. What are ETAs' educational and occupational backgrounds?
2. What are ETAs' opinions about language learning process in EFL context?
3. What are the potential contributions of ETAs to language learning process in the university?
4. What are the perceptions of students about ETAs and their contributions to their foreign language development?

The English Teaching Assistantship

The English Teaching Assistantship is a program which places newly graduates as English teaching assistants in primary, secondary schools, and universities all over the world. The main objective of the program is to help foreign students improve their English language skills together with the knowledge about the United States of America with the help of native speakers. The program also provides U.S. students with the opportunity of improving their language skills and cultural competence of the host countries. The program is sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, U.S. Department of State. Most of Fullbright ETAs are sent to outside of the capital cities in order to make them integrate with the host community much which has limited interaction with Americans. The candidates can apply through a U. S. institution or At-large in which the candidates must submit their applications through the Embark online application system. The components of the ETA application consist of biographical data, statement of grant purpose, personal statement, foreign language forms, references, transcripts, and critical language enhancement award statement for select countries. The English Teaching Assistantship Program in Turkey has been administered since the 2010 - 2011 academic year with the cooperation of The Turkish Higher Education Council and the Turkish Fulbright Commission. The number of grantees and number of participating host universities have been increasing over the years. In the 2014-2015 academic year, seventy-two U.S. English Teaching Assistantship Grants have been awarded to teach at 36 different universities all around Turkey.

Relevant Studies on NESTs

Native and non-native dichotomy and main characteristic differences between two have remained on the agenda of English Language Teaching (ELT) Methodologists, linguists, and language researchers. However, it can not be said that they have reached a consensus on which one is more advantageous, better teachers, and more or less accomplished. Medgyes (2001:430) defines a native speakers as '... someone who speaks English as his or her native language, also called mother tongue, first language, or L1.' He also scrutinizes native and non-native dichotomy from the linguistic and educational perspectives. He maintains the discussion with the questions 'What are the criteria for native proficiency? What is the cut-off point between native proficiency and various levels of non non-native proficiency' (p.431). In the light of the potential answers to aforementioned questions, Medgyes carries out a survey including 325 teachers from 11 countries in order to validate his assumptions: 1. NESTs and non-Nests differ in terms of their language proficiency, 2. They differ in terms of their teaching behaviour, 3. The discrepancy in language proficiency accounts for most of the differences found in their teaching behaviour, and 4. They can be equally good teachers on their own terms (p.434). According to the results of the survey, Medgyes states that non-NESTs are more or less handicapped with regards to their command of English. NESTs and non-NESTs can be considered as equally effective teachers in terms of their balance in their strengths and weaknesses. He also suggests that language teachers must be evaluated on the basis of their professional qualities rather than their language backgrounds.

The similar results have been reported in several research (e.g. Liu 1999; Kramsch 1997; Nemtchinova 2005; Canagrajah 1999) as well. As for the perceptions of students' about NESTs, most of the research focuses on opinions of students in English as a second language context (ESL). However, Rao's study (2010) highlights Chinese students' perceptions of NESTs in EFL teaching. The study reports the views of 20 Chinese EFL students on the strengths and weaknesses of NESTs in EFL context. According to the results of the study, the strong characteristics of NESTs were listed as: native language authenticity, cultural familiarity, and new methodological insights. As for the weak points, some students thought that NESTs were insensitive to students' linguistic problems and their learning styles. In addition, they were perceived as unfamiliar with local educational and cultural system. The writer suggests that NESTs are qualified as teachers, but they should improve their knowledge about the local cultures and some pedagogic issues related to learners. Another study

conducted in an EFL context is by Chun (2014). The researcher administered a questionnaire to 125 Korean EFL university students. Results of the study revealed that Korean students perceived NESTs and non-NESTs as having both strengths and weaknesses. NESTs were judged more effective in linguistic competence while non-NESTs were more effective in understanding students' needs better and help them with linguistic difficulties they faced thanks to mother tongue use. The study suggests that students can benefit from both NESTs and non-NESTs from different aspects. Although there are numerous studies on NESTs and non-NESTs dichotomy both in ESL and EFL context, research on ETAs and their contributions to language learning and teaching process in periphery countries is very rare. Trent (2012) reports a qualitative study examining the identity construction experiences of six ETAs in an English medium university in Hong Kong. The contribution of ETAs to the internalization of the university was searched and the findings revealed that ETAs confronted important challenges in constructing their identities as teachers and that endangered ETAs' contributions to the internalization goals of the university.

METHOD

The current study is a case study which was conducted in a state university in Turkey. Data collection instrument, procedure, participants, and data analysis parts are presented below.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

For the current study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews which were carried out by the researcher. Semi-structures interview type, by its very nature, is commonly conducted in applied linguistic research. Dörnyei (2007:136) points out that 'Although there is a set of pre-prepared guiding questions and prompts, the format is open-ended and the interviewee is encouraged to elaborate on the issues raised in an exploratory manner.' For this reason, we preferred applying semi-structured interview in order not to limit ETAs and their students' opinions. The interview was administered in the fall term of 2014-2015 academic year in a state university in Turkey. The interview with ETAs was recorded and transcribed. As for the interviews with the students, we conducted focus group interviews which enable researchers to collect data from large number of participants.

Participants

Participants of the study consist of two ETAs and sixty undergraduate prep class students. ETAs had been teaching in the university for nearly one semester when the study was initiated. They were teaching *Speaking Skills* course from two to four hours a week to prep class students with various English proficiency. Sixty undergraduate prep class students were chosen randomly and they were interviewed with groups of ten in six sessions. All of the students were attending elective or compulsory prep classes offered by the university. They were taught English from 22 to 26 hours a week by both ETAs and non-NESTs.

Data Analysis

Data obtained with semi-structured interviews were transcribed first, and then they were analysed through pre-coding and coding processes. In the pre-coding process, the transcriptions were read several times by the researcher and some key words related to the topic were highlighted. In the coding process, multi-level procedure which contained open, axial, and selective coding was applied. Categorization was the last step followed in analysing the data.

RESULTS

Results based on the Data from ETAs' Point of Views

ETAs' educational and occupational experiences

One of the ETAs stated that she majored in Political Science. The other one had a BA in English and Theatre. As for their occupational experiences and teaching career, one stated that she had several internships relating to Political science. She maintained as:

"One was at a US non-profit as a fundraising coordinator, two internships abroad (one in Sarajevo and one in London) with development organizations; I have also had one internship with a Turkish think tank, the SETA Foundation. The only teaching experience that I have had was teaching private violin lessons in high school and college as well as some volunteering at summer teaching program for disadvantaged youth."

The other ETA stated that she tutored students in English and Maths in College. She taught theatre to children, and assisted in homeschooling of her siblings. She also added that she worked as a waitress, costume designer, a hostess, and a stage manager.

ETAs' opinions about teaching English to non-natives

Each ETA had different perspectives about teaching English to non-natives. One stated that teaching English to non-native speakers allowed her to better understand her native language, English, offering her a fresh perspective for the students. On the other hand, the other ETA emphasized the importance of cultural immersion and learning a language within a country around the world, and she added:

"I think that it is really important to build relationships and understanding between Turks and Americans. I think that teaching English in the Universities is a great way to build this kind of understanding with young people. My motivation for specifically teaching English is honestly secondary; I have no future plans to teach."

ETAs' opinions about their contributions to the university and prep-class students' proficiency

Both ETAs agreed that the most important contribution they made was about improving students' use of idioms and colloquial phrases. They both complained about low-level students since it was difficult, they stated, to get to any kinds of conversation. One of them stated that:

"I think that the contributions that we can provide as native English speakers are with practical application (what native speakers really say versus what the textbooks teach), pronunciation and colloquial phrases. I think that these skills are best learned from a native speaker no matter which language you are teaching. However, it is difficult to use these skills in the low-level preparatory classes. Many of my students have such a low level of English that I can barely get to any kind of conversation because I must spend the class reviewing what they have learned in their main course or teaching them new vocabulary."

As it can be inferred from the excerpt, practical applications and improvement of pronunciation are accepted as the contributions of ETAs to speaking proficiency of the students. In addition, the other ETA focuses on making students' speech more natural by using the advantage of being native.

ETAs' opinions about their contributions to language skills

Helping the students with pronunciation, fluency, colloquial usages of English and target cultural issues was among the ones both ETAs agreed on. This means that ETAs contribute a lot to the improvement of students' speaking skills and sub-skills like pronunciation together with target culture-related problems. One of the ETAs pointed out that:

"I think fluency and pronunciation are the biggest areas I can help the students in. Because they always are encouraged in the classroom to try to speak, even if they do not know the exact words or grammar. Their fluency is already increasing."

ETAs' opinions about their contributions to students' intercultural competence

One of the ETAs stated that most of the students were uninterested in American culture. However, she said that she would do her best to incorporate cultural issues into her classes. The other ETA was not so pessimist. She focused on the activities such as dialogues based on traditions and practices of another culture in the classroom. This main difference between ETAs' two different point of views can be attributed to the activities and dominance of American culture-specific issues in the classroom. For example, one of the ETAs stated that students were not interested in Halloween so much in one of her classes. That sounds quite natural when we think about Turkish traditions and culture. Instead, native teachers can try to balance Turkish and American culture teaching in classes in the form of exchanging information with their students. One of the ETAs' complaints were like that:

".....whether or not they are willing to learn about another culture is hard to say. It is already clear to me that the vast majority of my students do not know much at all about other cultures. However, when I have tried to teach a lesson centered on certain American holidays (Halloween) the majority of my students have seemed very uninterested. I have and will continue to try to incorporate cultural aspects into my lessons for my students."

ETAs' opinions about potential increase in students' proficiency level

Both ETAs were in the opinion that their students' reading and writing skills are poor. When it came to speaking skill, it was almost non-existent. One of the ETAs was quite optimistic about a gradual increase in students' speaking skill till the end of the academic year while the other one did not think so because of low motivation of students to communicate. One stated that:

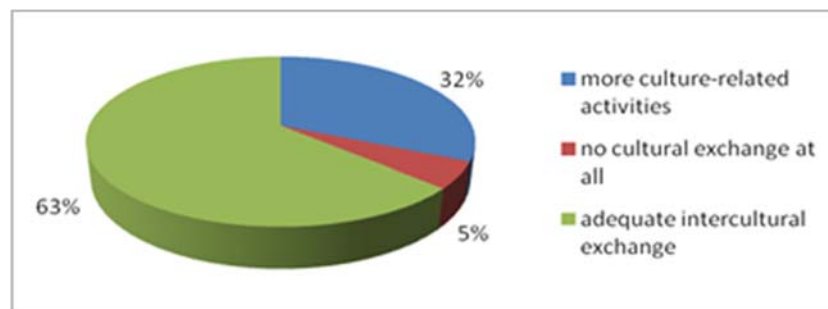
"The students' speaking skills are quite low, but they understand a lot about grammar. I can see the students' speaking skills growing with practice, trial and error. I think they can improve by the end of the year. The ELT classes are great listeners and are slowly gaining courage to try to speak in class."

Results based on the Data from Students' Point of Views

Results based on the data from students' point of views can be divided into five main categories with regard to the in-depth analysis of the students' responses. These categories are issues related to intercultural competence, ETAs' use of authentic language, ETAs as good language models and sources, opportunity for a real communication for the students, and nervousness appearing in the course of communication with native speakers.

Intercultural Competence

Thirty-eight out of sixty students stated that they were content with the intercultural exchange in the lessons. They pointed out that ETAs taught them about American culture and they taught them Turkish one. However, some students stated that culture related activities were not enough, and they needed more about American culture. Few students stated their speaking class did not contain any cultural exchange activities.



Graph 1. Percentage of the students' responses in relation with intercultural exchange

Graph 1 illustrates percentage of the students' responses about intercultural exchange in the speaking classes offered by ETAs. It is obvious that more than half of the students satisfy with the cultural issues taught in the class, but the percentage of the students demanding more culture-related activities cannot be underestimated. Therefore, it is suggested that ETAs include more culture-based activities in the classrooms.

Authentic Language

The vast majority of students thought that one of the advantages of participating in ETAs' speaking class is to be exposed to the authentic language. Fifty-six students stated that they liked listening to ETAs in the class as they were producing authentic language of their own. They maintained that that was a great opportunity for them to get the message at first hand without having to refer to any materials since authenticity was always in their classes. Some of the excerpts from students are presented below;

Student A: "It was a great chance for us to be attending ETAs' class. Being exposed to real English in every speaking class was splendid."

Student B: "People we saw in the videos of our coursebooks were in our class. Their natural speech motivated us to use English more authentically."

Only four students stated that the language ETAs speak was complicated, and they had difficulty in understanding them properly. An example for this is as follows;

Student C: "I could barely understand what ETAs said in the class. That demotivated me and I did not want to attend their classes."

Good Sources and Models

Thirty-five out of sixty students pointed out that ETAs were really good language sources for them. They stated that they could ask them every tiny detail about complex structures and some phrases that they had difficulty in comprehending their meaning by looking up the dictionaries. The rest of the students focused on ETAs' qualifications as Models. They stated that they took ETAs as good language user models in speaking classes. Some excerpts are as follows:

Student D: "I was trying to imitate ETAs after each speaking class, and I was trying to pronounce the words like them."

Student E: "They were real models for us. I would love to be like them."

Few students stated that they could not be like them even if they wanted, since they were native speakers of English. They also added that they did not want to be like them because of their accents and speed of speech. An example for this is as follows:

Student F: "I had difficulty in understanding ETAs due to their thick accents. That turned the lessons into a disaster for me"

Opportunity for a Real Communication

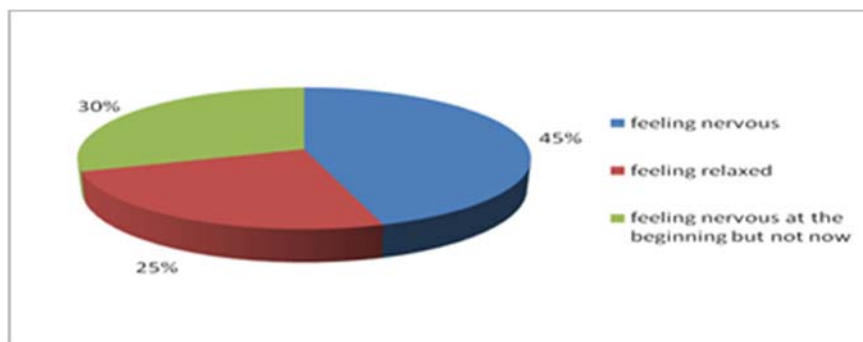
Fifty-one students stated that ETAs' presence in that school was really an opportunity for a real communication. They also pointed out that they felt as if they were communicating for nothing when they were dealing with the tasks in the coursebook. Non-native teachers' courses, they added, were also quite artificial as both the teachers and students could speak Turkish, but they had to communicate in English just for the sake of speaking activities in the coursebook. However, in the speaking courses conducted by ETAs, they needed to say something in English just for the sake of communication. Some excerpts are as follows:

Student G: "Why are we speaking in English in the class where we and the teacher are both Turkish? I think it is just because of course requirements."

Student H: "We had to speak in English in order to communicate with ETAs. Otherwise, they do not understand what we want to say"

Nervousness

Almost half of the students thought that they felt nervous while communicating with ETAs. Some complained about unfamiliar pronunciation, some about speed of their speech, and some about complexity of their speech. Some students stated that they felt nervous at the beginning since it was the first time they were communicating with a native speaker, but their nervousness gradually disappeared. Some other students stated that they felt quite relaxed in the course of communication with ETAs contrary to other students. Percentage of the students in relation with nervousness is illustrated in the graph below:



Graph 2. Percentage of the students' responses in relation with feeling nervous

As it can be illustrated in the graph above, 45 % of the students stated their nervousness in communicating with ETAs. 30 % of the students pointed out that they felt nervous, but it was temporary. They got used to speaking English with ETAs in the course of time. However, 25 % of the students felt relaxed while talking to ETAs. All in all, it can be inferred from these results that nervousness is a great problem in speaking classes of ETAs. Therefore, it is suggested that ETAs should do their best in order to cope with this emotional barrier in their classes.

CONCLUSIONS

This case study was conducted to investigate the perceptions of Turkish EFL students about speaking classes offered by ETAs. The other aim of the study was to uncover the contributions of ETAs to a state university in Turkey. According to the data obtained from semi-structured interviews, ETAs contribute much to students' oral proficiency skills, their use of idioms and colloquial phrases, pronunciation skills, and intercultural competence. In addition, the students participating in the study regard ETAs as good language models and source and authentic language users. They also think that ETAs' availability in their school is really a good opportunity for a real communication. Nervousness in the course of communication is another focus of the students. In the light of all results, it can be concluded that ETAs help Turkish EFL learners improve their communication skills in English to a great extent. It is believed that universities in Turkey should try to find the ways of employing more ETAs in order to provide their students with a quality language education specifically focusing on improving oral communication skills. In this way, speaking which is accepted as a challenging skill in language learning process in Turkey can be improved to a great extent.

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