

A Glance at English Language and its Impact on Learners and Teachers

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Abstract

This research note attempts to give an overview of the global spread of the English language and its influence on socio-economic circumstances and its resulting impact on English language education from around the world. The paper also sheds light on students' perception of ideal language teachers, while emphasizing that language teaching requires cultural and linguistic competence, yet it does not require being a native speaker. Finally, the paper also offers insights into what it takes to become an effective language teacher and emphasizes the role of teacher autonomy in promoting learner autonomy and draws attention to the facilitative role of language teachers during the development of language learner autonomy.

Keywords: Autonomy, learner autonomy, native speaker, the English language, the global spread

The Global Spread of the English Language and Learner Perceptions

During the medieval and early modern periods, the influence of English was felt throughout the British Isles, and from the early seventeenth century onwards, its influence began to be felt throughout the world (Burnley, 2000; Hogg & Denison, 2008; Northrup, 2013). The British Empire was one of the largest states that had colonies in practically all parts of the world, from America to Asia. Basically, the British colonization had a tremendous effect on the life of people both socially and economically and was seemingly the main cause of the spread of the British culture and the English language across the globe. By the late nineteenth century, its reach was truly global.

Following the British colonization of North America, the English language became the dominant language in the United States and in Canada. The growing economic and cultural influence of the United States and its status as a global superpower since World War II have significantly accelerated the language's spread across the planet (Northrup, 2013). By the 19th century, the hegemony of the English language had not been felt in Europe and the Middle East yet. Other languages such as French, Latin, and Turkish were spoken widely in those parts of the world. Up until the end of the 19th century, language learning was the privilege of elites, and foreign language teaching was predominantly under the control of minority and foreign groups (Burnley, 2000; Hogg & Denison, 2008; Northrup, 2013). English as a dominant language worldwide is forcing an unfamiliar pedagogical and social culture on its learners, socio-psychologically, linguistically, and politically, putting them in danger of losing their first languages, cultures and identities, and contributing to the devaluation of the local knowledge and cultures (Canagarajah, 2005).

A great number of loanwords of English origin have entered the Turkish language within the last 40 years. English loanwords are used in everyday conversation, on TV and radio programs, and in political speeches. It is now a common tendency among young people to use English words and

expressions in their everyday conversation. Phillipson (1992) asserted that “Globally, what we are experiencing is that English is both replacing other languages and displacing them” (p. 27).

Communicative Language Teaching and Native Speaker Phenomenon

Since language proficiency occupies a primary role in the knowledge of language teaching, the background of teachers as native or non-native speakers of the language they teach has become the major topic of interest for language institutes in the world (Egitim, 2021). Language schools are now striving to make their programs more appealing and attractive to learners to acquire a better standing in the fiercely competitive market. The demand for native English-speaking teachers is seemingly higher than non-native English-speaking teachers as most students believe that they can learn authentic English and obtain deeper cultural knowledge along with the language if their teacher is from one of the native English-speaking countries. This native English speaker supremacy has raised concerns over teaching effectiveness (Egitim & Garcia, 2021). As a result, educational institutes and language schools from around the world started to create their own teacher assessment systems through student feedback. The goal was to make improvements to teaching and indicate the value institutions place on students’ perspectives of their learning process (Entwistle, 2018).

A case study of University students’ perceptions of native and non-native teachers is carried out by Evrim Üstünlüoğlu (2007) at Izmir University of Economics in Turkey. The study was conducted on 311 university students who were asked to evaluate 38 native and non-native English speakers to identify students’ perceptions of the two groups of teachers and also the deficiencies and needs to improve the overall teaching and learning process. A questionnaire was used as an instrument and it consisted of 30 items to compare the two teacher groups’ in-class teaching roles, in-class management roles, in-class communication roles, and individual features. The results suggested that non-native teachers fulfill in-class teaching and in-class management roles better than native teachers do, while native teachers fulfill in-class communication roles better than non-native teachers and present more favorable qualities. In other words, native English speaker teachers presented the communicative aspects of the language better than non-native speaker teachers. In order to reach a better conclusion on this, we should take a closer look at students’ perceptions of communication and how they assess the communicative aspects of language teaching and learning (Üstünlüoğlu, 2007).

The primary reason to learn a language is the need to communicate with others, even though reasons may differ considerably (Egitim, 2020). Thus, it is essential to put enough emphasis on the primary role of communication in language learning. We may also agree that since language is the verbal expression of culture, learning the culture associated with the language is essential during the language acquisition process. As English is continuing to spread to various comers of the world, the demand for native English-speaker teachers from the major English-speaking countries such as Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States has increased considerably over the past few decades.

At present, English is the most dominant global language of communication, business, aviation, entertainment, diplomacy, and the Internet, and therefore, Native speakers of the language have gained enormous supremacy in the eyes of learners. They have been assumed to know the language better regardless of their educational background or experience, speak it flawlessly, and represent authentic language and pronunciation, including the use of slang and accent. These factors directly influence students’ motivation for language learning.

The Impact of Imperialism on Language Education

Tollefson (1995) noted linguistic imperialism can occur when English becomes a gateway to education, employment, business opportunities, and popular culture and where indigenous languages and cultures are marginalized. The existing hierarchy in languages can be attributed to power relationships and political and economic dynamics in the world. The economic power of the United States is matched by no other country around the world, which also makes the English language the lingua franca of the sciences, business, technology, and aviation (Philipson, 2013). The dominant country imposes its cultural and linguistic values on other countries. Philipson (1992) emphasized the linkages between English linguistic imperialism and inequality in the political and economic spheres. His definition of linguistic imperialism is that “the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages” (p. 47).

Are Native Speaker Teachers the Ideal Language Teachers?

Significant economic developments have accelerated the globalization process and eased certain conditions for humans. The Internet and interactive mass media have facilitated knowledge acquisition and knowledge exchange and, the ease of travel has made it possible to access even the most isolated parts of the world. Teachers are now able to obtain the necessary knowledge and understanding of different languages and cultures through limitless resources which help them deal with cross-cultural problems they may face in the classroom environment. In addition, most language schools in the world provide their newly hired teachers with intensive training programs to ease the process of acquiring cultural awareness. Therefore, qualified language teachers, regardless of being native or non-native, can respond to their students’ needs and expectations.

It is true that having the experience of learning English as a second language gives non-native English teachers insight into the process of learning the language, and makes them aware of the pitfalls and potentially effective ways of mastering the language. Although this pre-awareness might bring them certain advantages, it could also lead to a more controlled teaching style due to being less competent in the language than their native peers. Some non-native English teachers may lack confidence in their language ability and suffer an unnecessary level of emotional stress caused by language issues (Selvi, 2018). This controlled and authoritative style of teaching and class-management approach may disrupt the process of self-directed learning and language learner autonomy (Benson & Voller, 2014; Dörnyei, 2013; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Egitim, 2017). Learner autonomy is bound up not only with the learners but also teachers’ own learning and teaching experiences and their beliefs about autonomy (Lamb & Reinders, 2008). Thus, language teacher autonomy plays an essential role in promoting language learner autonomy (Egitim, 2015).

The Role of Learner Autonomy in Learning and Teaching

Learner Autonomy can be broadly defined as the capacity to control over one’s own learning. Autonomy is not a method of learning, but an attribute of the learner’s approach to the learning process. (Benson, 2011). Autonomy does not imply learning in isolation, learning without a teacher or learning outside the classroom. Nor does autonomy imply particular skills and behaviors and particular methods

of organizing the teaching and learning process. It is defined as readiness and capacity to take charge of one's own learning. Learners take responsibility for their own learning. Autonomy requires tutors to trust students' abilities and to promote the use of student-directed learning.

Acceptance of responsibility is a conscious intention which entails the development of explicit skills of reflection, analysis, and evaluation. Teachers need to communicate openly and emphatically with their students and vice versa. (Brown 2014; Egitim, 2020). However, accepting responsibility for our own learning is not only a matter of gradually developing cognitive functions throughout the learning process. It has an equally important dimension which lies in learners' commitment to self-management and their generally proactive approach. Autonomous learners are motivated learners. Although they may not always feel entirely positive about all aspects of their learning, they develop the reflective and attitudinal resources to overcome temporary motivational setbacks (Benson, 2011; Benson & Voller, 2014; Egitim, 2017). Fostering students' motivation towards learning is key to establish a positive classroom climate. Deci et al. (1992) described learner autonomy as, "A basic human need that is as relevant to learning as to any other aspect of life. Autonomy is nourished by, but in turn nourishes, our intrinsic motivation, our proactive interest in the world around us. Learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation" (p2).

However, it is also important to emphasize the complexity of the process of learning and teaching. Knowledge, understanding, and skills differ significantly on each learner. Thus, not all learners obtain an equal level of knowledge and understanding to build their independent learning skills. Learners may sometimes fail to determine the directions of their own learning (Benson, 2011). Learning involves risk-taking and therefore, presents numerous challenges for teachers and learners. It is mostly the teacher's job to ascertain each learner's preferred learning style and adapt it to their needs and expectations. For instance, a senior would presumably have a different learning style than a teenager, while a business person would have different learning goals and expectations. Thus, it is important to emphasize that learners focus on different goals while the teacher takes on the role of a facilitator and guides learners through the process (Egitim, 2015).

Conclusion

In this paper, I've made a critical assessment of the key factors underlying learners' perceptions of native and non-native speaking English teachers. To provide a more precise look into the issues, I've also tried to highlight some of the political and social factors which influence those perceptions. One of the issues I have addressed was the global spread of the English language, and its direct and indirect effects on learners' perceptions. The spread of English is rife with politics and power relationships and has led to the current socio-economic inequalities by empowering the already powerful and leaving the disadvantaged behind. English has become the dominant global language of communication, business, aviation, entertainment, diplomacy, and the Internet which has also put the native speakers of the language in a more advantageous position than their non-native peers. English language schools all over the world gave their employment preferences to native English speakers regardless of their qualifications and experience to accommodate the widespread demand for Native English-speaking teachers. This was also considered influential on students' perceptions of their teachers (Egitim & Garcia, 2021).

However, Being communicatively less competent as an English teacher does not necessarily mean non-native English teachers cannot teach the language as effectively as their native peers. In fact, qualified language teachers regardless of being native or non-native can respond to students' needs and expectations. Understanding the process of language learning, and having the necessary spoken communicative competence is essential to create a suitable classroom environment for students to take more control over their own learning. A communicative teacher is the teacher who is aware of the need to communicate to foster the growth in their students, while their insight into the learning process would help them empathize with their students. This could lead to genuine communicative interactions, and thus, learners taking more responsibility for their learning.

I also believe that certain emphasis needs to be placed on teacher autonomy. Teachers cannot be expected to foster growth in their learners if they do not know themselves what is to be autonomous learners (Egitim, 2015). An autonomous teacher, regardless of being a native or non-native speaker, is able to create an ideal classroom environment that will foster growth in learners and urge them to take responsibility of their own learning. If learners are proactively committed to their learning, the problem of motivation is by definition solved.

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