

63-Prep school students' perceptions of native and non-native teachers and effect of proficiency level on their perceptions

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APA: Ulu, B. (2020). Prep school students' perceptions of native and non-native teachers and effect of proficiency level on their perceptions. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (Ö8), 808-817. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.824569.

Abstract

Many questions have been raised about the role of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) in language education, and the issue has been investigated in various aspects. The aims of this study are to shed new light on the issue through an examination of preparatory school students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs and to find out the effect of their English proficiency level on learner's perceptions. The participants were 60 prep-school students from lower-intermediate (30) and upper-intermediate (30) levels. Quantitative data for the study were collected using a 30-items questionnaire that was designed by Üstünlüoğlu (2007), adapted, and modified by Demir (2011). It was developed with respect to four aspects: in-class teaching roles, in-class management roles, in-class communication skills, and individual qualities. In terms of the reliability of the items in the questionnaire, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated as .75, which was acceptable. Referring the general results, the findings showed no significant difference between the students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs in the four aspects evaluated. However, when the perceptions of lower and upper intermediate students were compared, their perceptions were found to be affected by their English proficiency level, and significant differences were found between perceptions of those students. The results revealed that upper-intermediate level students held more positive perceptions towards both NESTs and NNESTs in all categories.

Keywords: Students' perceptions, Native English- teachers (NEST), Non- native English-speaking teachers (NNEST)

Hazırlık öğrencilerinin anadil konuşuru olan ve anadil konuşuru olmayan öğretmenlere ilişkin algıları ve İngilizce yeterlilik seviyelerinin algıları üzerindeki etkisi

Öz

Ana dili İngilizce olan ve anadili İngilizce olmayan öğretmenlerin dil eğitimindeki rolü hakkında birçok soru ortaya atılmıştır ve bu konu birçok açıdan ele alınmıştır. Bu çalışmanın amaçları ise hazırlık öğrencilerinin anadil konuşuru olan ve anadil konuşuru olmayan öğretmenler hakkındaki algılarını saptamak ve öğrencilerin İngilizce seviyelerinin fikirleri üzerinde bir etkisinin olup olmadığını incelemektir. Katılımcılar, orta altı (30) ve orta üstü (30) İngilizce seviyesine sahip 60 hazırlık öğrencisidir. Nicel veriler, Üstünlüoğlu (2007) tarafından tasarlanan ve Demir (2011) tarafından uyarlanan 30 maddelik bir anket kullanılarak toplanmıştır. Anket, dört açı göz önüne alınarak geliştirilmiştir: sınıf içerisindeki öğretme, sınıf yönetimi, iletişim becerileri ve bireysel

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özellikler. Güvenilirlik yönünden, Cronbach Alpha 0.75'tir ve bu kabul edilebilirdir. Genel sonuçlar ele alındığında, incelenen dört kategoride de öğrencilerin anadil konuşuru olan ve anadil konuşuru olmayan İngilizce öğretmen algıları arasında anlamlı bir farklılık olmadığını göstermiştir. Ancak, orta altı ve orta üstü seviyedeki öğrencilerin verileri incelendiğinde, sonuçlar, öğrencilerin İngilizce seviyesinin düşüncelerini etkilediğini göstermiştir ve farklı seviyelerdeki öğrencilerin algıları arasında anlamlı farklılıklar bulunmuştur. Sonuçlar, ileri seviyedeki öğrencilerin hem anadil konuşuru olan ve hem de anadil konuşuru olmayan öğretmenler hakkında daha pozitif algılara sahip olduklarını göstermiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Öğrenci algısı, anadili İngilizce olan öğretmenler, anadili İngilizce olmayan öğretmenler

Introduction

In today's world, English has been spoken globally and it has turned into a lingua franca. It is estimated that approximately two billion people all over the world speak English in different proficiency degrees (Braine, 2010). The number of people speaking English is still increasing in Outer and Expanding circles (Tajeddin & Pakzadian, 2020), and the surprising thing is that the non-native speakers of English have outnumbered native speakers (Meşingiller & Akcan, 2015). Hence, the number of nonnative English teachers in the field has increased significantly with global language status and demand for English. This has resulted in discussions about whether English should be taught by native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) or non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), and whether NESTs or NNESTs are better in teaching the language (Alseweed, 2012; Díaz, 2015; Mahboob, 2004; Meşingiller & Akcan, 2015). As a result of these debates, there have been studies aiming at providing some insights into differences between these groups of teachers in terms of teaching the language. Many studies investigating the issue have found out that NESTs and NNESTs have their advantages and disadvantages, and they can be both helpful to language learners (Inbar-Lourie, 2005; Moussu & Lurda, 2008; Lurda, 2005).

In the light of the previous studies on the issue, this study aims to find out preparatory school students' perceptions of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs) and also how student's proficiency levels influence their own perceptions.

Review of previous studies

English has become an international language and its rapid spread has aroused many interest areas related to English learning and teaching. There has been long-standing discussion about perceptions of non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs), those held by themselves, by their students, or by native English-speaking teachers (NESTs). The pioneering studies were done on the topic by Medyges in 1992 and 1994, but it is in the last decade that many researchers have conducted studies related to issues of NNESTs and NESTs.

As can be understood from the labels attributed to these two groups of teachers, there are different definitions of them related to nativeness. Davies (1991) states that a native speaker of the language is a person who is born in the native country of the target language. Similar to this, Cook (1999) characterizes native speaker who has acquired the language in his or her childhood. However, several researchers argue that native and non-native speaker dichotomy is problematic (Medges, 1992). There

are different ideas about whether English should be taught by native or nonnative English-speaking teachers. As stated above, Medgyes (1992) and his works take the lead in the discussions about differences between NESTs and NNESTs. In his article, he argues that native and nonnative-speaking English teachers differ in terms of their teaching and the differences between them are mostly related to language. NESTs appear to have more competence in the language, but NNESTs are beneficial to students as a second language learner themselves. For example, they can teach learning strategies more effectively and anticipate problems students encounter during the language learning process. Supportively, findings of the survey in the book of Medgyes (1994) indicate that NESTs surpass in terms of vocabulary, oral fluency, and pronunciation. Also, NNESTs are stated to be better in predicting students' difficulties and estimating their potential. Hence, he describes NESTs as a good model for language itself while NNESTs are seen as good models as language learners because of their experiences.

Several studies investigating perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs have been conducted in English learning contexts focusing on a different aspect of language teaching. Some investigate how the native and non-native teachers think about their status as a NEST or NNEST (Ezberci, 2005; Tajeddin & Adeh, 2016) while some take learners as a focus and study their perceptions of those teachers (Diaz, 2015; Mahoob, 2004; Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014). As an example of the former studies, Tajeddin and Adeh (2016) found out that the majority of nonnative teachers believe that native teachers are more proficient in speaking, pronunciation, and self-confidence while they think themselves to lack self-confidence. The study also revealed that native teachers do not agree with the idea of the inferiority of nonnative teachers.

Furthermore, a great majority of studies focus on how learners perceive native and non-native teachers. A study was conducted with 78 university students in France. Results showed that students tended to prefer NEST in some items such as oral activities and pronunciation while NNEST or both teachers were chosen in terms of grammar and vocabulary teaching. Even though students acknowledged an interest in NEST, the detailed analysis of the findings was found not to be certain (Diaz, 2015). In addition, the findings of the study by Mahoob (2004) indicated both positive and negative views of NESTs and NNESTs. Regarding NESTs, positive comments were about modeling pronunciation, transferring cultural knowledge, and teaching vocabulary. Negative opinions were related to grammar, inefficient teaching methodology and being an inexperienced teacher. In the case of NNESTs, their advantageous qualities were their experiences as a second language learner, their relationship with students and their literacy skills. Another study (Walkinshaw & Oanh, 2014) investigating ideas of Vietnamese and Japanese university students' perceptions about NESTs and NNESTs yielded the same results. Similarly, the differences between the two groups of teachers were related to oral skills, their experiences, and interaction between students. In some other studies in different contexts, learners' reports about NESTs and NNESTs indicated similar findings regarding their preferences and teachers' specific characteristics (Alseweed, 2012; Rao, 2010; Wu & Ke, 2009).

In Turkey, there is a growing number of studies investigating students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs. In their research with high school students in a private school, Devrim and Bayyurt (2010) found that most of the participants perceived NESTs to teach English and transfer target language culture better than Turkish speaking English teachers. Üstünlüoğlu (2007) found that native English teachers were perceived to be good at in-class oral skills and had positive characteristics while non-native English teachers were thought to surpass in terms of in-class teaching and management roles. Demir (2011) and Kemaloğlu-Er (2017) conducted studies with learners in different universities using

the questionnaire developed by Üstünlüoğlu (2007). Demir's findings (2011) revealed that NESTs were perceived to be superior only in terms of teaching roles. However, Kemalöğlü-Er's study (2017) had contradictory results. There was no significant difference between NESTs and NNESTs regarding their pedagogical teaching skills and management skills. NESTs were thought to surpass in terms of communication skills and individual characteristics. Additionally, in the study of Karakas, Uysal, Bilgin, and Bulut (2016), participants reported positive perceptions of NESTs in terms of linguistic and professional dimensions whereas NNESTs received higher ratings for pedagogical measures. Similar to other studies, a study conducted by Aslan and Thompson (2016) indicated that Turkish EFL learners favored native English teachers over non-native ones.

Considering all the studies mentioned, findings of the research have revealed different perceptions about NESTs and NNESTs in language teaching. They have described those teachers with some distinctive characteristics. However, far too little attention has been paid to the effect of student's English proficiency level on their perceptions of native and non-native teachers. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the area and cover this gap investigating the issue at the preparatory school of a foundational university in Istanbul, where both teachers work in collaboration.

This paper revisits the issue of native and non-native teachers and aims to explore the upper-intermediate and lower-intermediate level university students' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs in terms of four aspects: in class-teaching roles, in class-management roles, in-class communication skills, and individual qualities. To meet the study's purpose, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are the learners' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs in terms of in-class- teaching roles, in-class management roles, in-class communication skills, and individual qualities?
2. Is there a difference between perceptions of lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level learners about NESTs and NNESTs?

Methodology

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to select participants. It is a type of nonrandom sampling that in which the participants are selected among the target population based on their easy accessibility and availability (Dörnyei,2007). This quantitative sampling method was used as this study was quantitative and As Dörnyei (2007) states, the participants had to have certain characteristics such as lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level English proficiency. The data were collected from 60 university students studying English in the preparatory classes of a foundational university in Istanbul, Turkey. Their ages ranged between 18- 24. 30 students were from upper-intermediate level classes and the rest of the students were from lower-intermediate level classes. Students were placed in these levels in English Preparatory Program according to the result of the placement test given at the beginning of the semester. The exam consists of 3 sections: use of language (30 multiple choice questions), reading (20 multiple choice questions) and writing (two short paragraph writing).

The students expressed their ideas about NESTs and NNESTs who give intensive English instruction on different subjects and skills throughout the academic year. At this foundational university, each class has two teachers. Students participating in the study have one native English teacher and one

Turkish speaking English teacher assigned to them. Thus, each student rated one NEST and one NNEST.

Those native and non-native teachers give either main course classes or reading/writing classes. Each semester they are asked for their preferences and assigned to teach one of the courses. Upper-intermediate level students receive 5 hours of English instruction per day that include 3 hours of main course and 2 hours of reading/writing classes. Similarly, lower-intermediate level students receive a 5-hour English class per day that includes 3 hours of main course and 2 hours of reading/writing classes.

Instruments

The questionnaire originally developed by Üstünlüoğlu (2007), adapted, and modified by Demir (2011) was used to collect quantitative data about learners' perceptions. It consists of 30 items focusing on four aspects: in class-teaching roles (items 1-10), in class management roles (items 11-17), in class communication skills (items 18-22) and individual qualities of the teachers (items 23-30). Instead of the three-point scale, in order to give students more choices and understand their opinions better, it was designed as a 5 points Likert Scale; 1-strongly disagree, 2- disagree, 3- no idea, 4- agree, and 5-strongly agree (Demir, 2011) and this version was used.

As an instrument, the questionnaire of Üstünlüoğlu (2007) was chosen as it was developed after the discussion with the expert in the field to ensure face validity. Besides, reliability of the questionnaire was 0.75, and it was acceptable. In addition, to eliminate possible comprehension problems, especially with lower-intermediate level students the questionnaire to be used was given in Turkish to students. It was translated into Turkish by Demir (2011). When piloted, it was found that the Cronbach's Alpha was 0.96.

Data collection/procedure

Data was collected in second semester. The questionnaire was given to students and they were asked to fill it. It was on voluntary basis and students was able to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted.

Data analysis

To analyze quantitative data gathered with the questionnaire, some statistical procedures were carried out on the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 18.0). To compare the results of two levels, inferential statistical analysis was conducted. Specifically, an independent sample t-test was used to analyze the differences between perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs by upper-intermediate and lower-intermediate level students' level.

Results

To address the first research question that was about all students' perceptions about native and non-native teachers, an independent sample t-test was carried out. The results showed no significant differences in the categories ;in-class teaching roles, in-class management roles, in-class communication skills and individual qualities of the teachers.

Table 1. Independent sample t-test results for in-class teaching roles

| | group | N | Mean | Std | Sig. |
|----------------------|-------|----|------|------|------|
| Individual qualities | NEST | 60 | 3.74 | 1.06 | .508 |
| | NNEST | 60 | 3.60 | 1.18 | |

NEST= 3.74 NNEST =3.60, sig=, 505> p=. 05

In terms of in- class teaching roles, native teachers' mean was 3.74 while non-native teachers' mean was 3.60. However, the difference between the two groups was not significant.

Table 2. Independent sample t-test results for in-class management roles

| | Group | N | Mean | Std | Sig. |
|---------------------------|-------|----|------|------|------|
| In class-management roles | NEST | 60 | 3.84 | 1.09 | .595 |
| | NNEST | 60 | 3.73 | 1.21 | |

NEST= 3.84 NNEST =3.73, sig=, 595> p=. 05

Table 2 shows the means of NESTs and NNESTs for in-class management roles and the means were 3.84 and 3.73, respectively. This difference was the lowest one compared two other three categories, and it was not significant.

Table 3. Independent sample t-test results for in-class communication skills

| | Group | N | Mean | std. | Sig. |
|-------------------------------|-------|----|------|-------|------|
| In-class communication skills | NEST | 60 | 3.78 | 1.25, | .473 |
| | NNEST | 60 | 3.62 | 1.17 | |

NEST= 3.78 NNEST =3.62, sig=, 473> p=, 05

Concerning in- class communication skills, NESTs were found to be perceived better with 3.78 mean. However, there was not a significant difference between the two groups.

Table 4. Independent sample t-test results for individual qualities

| | Group | N | Mean | std. | Sig. |
|----------------------|-------|----|------|------|------|
| Individual qualities | NEST | 60 | 3.93 | 1.58 | .463 |
| | NNEST | 60 | 3.74 | 1.19 | |

NEST= 3.93 NNEST =3.74, sig= 463> p=. 05

About individual qualities, the means for NESTs and NNESTs were 3.93 and 3.74, successively. It can be seen that this difference between the two groups of teachers was the highest among the other three categories. However, it was not a significant one.

To assess the influence of English proficiency level on students' perceptions of teachers, the responses of lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level students were compared using independent sample t-test. T-test results for level differences in perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs are illustrated in Table 5, Table 6, Table 7, and Table 8. They show how perceptions vary depending upon learners' proficiency level.

Table 5. Independent sample t-test results for proficiency level and in-class teaching roles

| | Teacher | Student | N | mean | std. | sig. |
|-------------------------|---------|--------------------|----|------|------|------|
| In class-teaching roles | NEST | lower-intermediate | 30 | 3.25 | 1.15 | .000 |
| | | upper-intermediate | 30 | 4.23 | .69 | |
| | NNEST | lower-intermediate | 30 | 3.36 | 1.33 | .108 |
| | | upper-intermediate | 30 | 3.86 | 1.02 | |

Table 5 shows the perception differences between two levels in terms of in-class teaching roles. Significance value for NESTs is .0000 which entails that there is a significant difference between perceptions of lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level students about NESTs. Regarding NNESTs, upper-intermediate level students also perceived NNESTs better more than lower-intermediate ones, however; there was not a significant difference.

Table 6. Independent sample t-test results for proficiency level and in-class management roles

| | Teacher | Student | N | mean | std. | sig. |
|---------------------------|---------|--------------------|----|------|------|------|
| In class-management roles | NEST | lower-intermediate | 30 | 3.26 | 1.20 | .000 |
| | | upper-intermediate | 30 | 4.42 | .54 | |
| | NNEST | lower-intermediate | 30 | 3.48 | 1.33 | .110 |
| | | upper-intermediate | 30 | 3.98 | 1.02 | |

Table 6 gives the results for in-class management roles and similarly, significance value for NESTs is lower than .005 which means that the difference between lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level students about NESTs for in class-management roles was significant. However, it was not found to be significant. Results for NNESTs as .110 is higher than .005.

Table 7. Independent sample t-test results for proficiency level and in-class communication skills

| | Teacher | Student | N | mean | std | sig. |
|-------------------------------|---------|--------------------|----|------|------|------|
| In class-communication skills | NEST | lower-intermediate | 30 | 3.23 | 1.42 | .000 |
| | | upper-intermediate | 30 | 4.32 | .76 | |
| | NNEST | lower-intermediate | 30 | 3.40 | 1.34 | .160 |
| | | upper-intermediate | 30 | 3.83 | .95 | |

Regarding in class communication skills, there is a significant difference between perceptions of lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level learners about NESTs with .000 significance value. Nevertheless, difference found for non-native teachers was not significant.

Table 8. Independent sample t-test results for proficiency level and individual qualities

| | Teacher | Student | N | mean | std | sig. |
|----------------------|---------|--------------------|--------------------|------|------|------|
| individual qualities | NEST | lower-intermediate | 30 | 3.32 | 1.26 | .002 |
| | | upper-intermediate | 30 | 4.50 | 1.50 | |
| | | | lower-intermediate | 30 | 3.55 | 1.38 |

| | | | | |
|-------|--------------------|----|------|-----|
| NNEST | upper-intermediate | 30 | 3.94 | ,95 |
|-------|--------------------|----|------|-----|

Similar to the other three categories, NESTs and NNESTs have same results regarding individual qualities. While the difference was significant for NESTs, it was not for NNESTs.

Discussion

In this study, the aims were to assess students' perceptions about native and non-native English teachers; and to determine how their English proficiency level affects their ideas about two groups of teachers. Regarding students' perceptions of native and non-native teachers, the findings of the study demonstrated that NEST had slightly higher means. However, as revealed by the analyses, these mean differences between NESTs and NNESTs were not significant. Thus, both groups of teachers were seen as successful in all aspects; namely in-class teaching roles, in-class management roles, in-class communication skills and individual qualities of the teachers. This finding of the present study did not match those observed in earlier studies. It contradicted with the results of studies that showed students' preference for NESTs (Devrim & Bayyurt, 2010; Aslan & Thompson, 2016; Kemaloğlu- Er, 2017) or with the findings of studies where NNESTs were perceived as superior (Demir, 2011; Karakas, Uysal, Bilgin & Bulut 2016; Üstünlüoğlu, 2007). Nevertheless, the finding of the current study confirmed the statement of Medgyes (1994) that both NESTs and NNESTs can be successful English teachers.

The second research question in this study was whether there is a difference between perceptions of lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level learners about NESTs and NNESTs or not. It was found out that there were differences between these two groups of students in their perceptions of teachers. Considering the influence of English proficiency level on perceptions of teachers in the analysis showed that upper-intermediate level students held more positive attitudes towards both NESTs and NNESTs in all categories that teachers were evaluated. Concerning perceptions of non-native teachers, the differences found between lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level students were not statistically significant.

However, the analysis revealed significant differences between lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate level students' perceptions of NESTs in all categories of students. According to results, upper-intermediate level learners perceived NESTs better than NNESTs; and the means for NESTs were substantially higher in all aspects. The mean differences can be presented from lowest to highest: in-class teaching roles, in-class communication skills, in-class management roles and individual qualities, respectively. As it is seen, the biggest mean difference between two levels for NESTs was in the aspect of individual qualities.

Furthermore, for lower-intermediate level students there was not a big difference between NESTs and NNESTs in all four aspects and they were both considered competent. Contrarily, for upper-intermediate level students, NESTs surpassed NNESTs in all categories and ratings of NESTs were remarkably higher than those of NNESTs.

Conclusion

In this study, the aims were to assess students' perceptions about native and non-native English teachers; and to determine how their English proficiency level affects their ideas about two groups of

teachers. In contrary to studies in the literature about this issue, the results showed no significant difference between students' perceptions about NESTs and NNESTs in aspects of in-class teaching roles, in class-management roles, in class-communication skills and individual qualities. This finding suggests that in general NESTs and NNESTs are seen as equally successful English teachers.

Based on the findings of the study, it was seen that both native and non-native English teachers are perceived to be good despite some differences. As both teachers can be beneficial to learners of English and the schools can appreciate not only native but also non-native ones. However, it was shown that upper-intermediate level students had more favorable beliefs about native English teachers and so, for those students especially native teachers can be assigned to teach. This does not mean that they cannot teach lower-level learners, but it is better that lower level students have fewer native teachers as they can display more inhibition due to their unfavorable beliefs which generally has a negative effect on learning.

Taken together, the current findings add to a growing body of literature on native and nonnative English teachers and they enhance our understanding of the issue. An important contribution of this study to the existing literature is that it provides evidence for the effect of English proficiency level on perceptions of students about their teachers.

Finally, a number of important limitations need to be considered in this study. The sample size was not large enough in comparison to previous studies, so a large group of participants might yield different and more consistent findings on students' opinions and the influence of proficiency level. In addition, to get a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of native and non-native teachers, qualitative data measures such as interviews can be used in future studies along with quantitative data.

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