

Cultural responsiveness in EFL teaching: reflections from native instructors

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Abstract

In recent years, many international students from different parts of the world have been studying at Turkish universities, which creates a multicultural educational setting. Due to the multicultural educational setting, English has become the most widely used language for exchanging and sharing knowledge, therefore many international universities in Turkey put a great emphasis on English language education and offer English preparatory courses to students. In order to succeed at better language education, universities employ native English instructors to provide a richer language experience with cultural components embedded in language content. In this qualitative case study, cultural reflections of native English instructors at a Turkish university were investigated. Individual and focus group interviews were data sources for the study. Findings indicated that cultural responsiveness was considered to be constructed through time, and a necessity of orientation process was emphasized. However, the native instructors' presumptions cause intolerance and underestimation of the host culture. In addition, educational issues and students' misbehaviors, such as cheating and calling their instructors by their first name, were attributed to cultural background of the students.

Keywords: Cultural responsiveness, native instructors, EFL, and higher education

Introduction

English is becoming a dominant language (Crystal, 2003; Canagarajah, 2010), and there is a great increase on students' mobility from different parts of the world, therefore using English as a second or foreign language plays a vital role in exchanging and sharing information, culture and science. In addition, students' mobility leads higher education institutions to an internationalized educational environment. Having diverse students at higher education creates a multicultural educational setting, in which different ethnic and cultural groups are welcomed and represented.

Multicultural education has given increasing importance to cultural issues in relation with English language teaching in education (Porto, 2010). Multicultural

education stresses integration of culture and language because culture and language are inseparable (Prater & Devereaux, 2012), and language simultaneously reflects culture and is influenced and shaped by it (Jiang, 2000).

Cultural responsiveness in language teaching has been widely researched in countries where English is taught as an additional language such as United States, United Kingdom, Australia. However, it has recently gained attention of researchers in Turkey with the increased number of universities and native language teachers offering EFL instruction. Thus, it is essential for researchers to begin to explore reflections of native instructors about cultural responsiveness in different settings in terms of English language teaching.

Review of literature

In the last two decades in the United States, Canada, Australia, Europe and the other parts of the world, the ethnic and cultural structure of school communities has undergone rapid and radical changes (Leeman, 2008; Liddicoat & Diaz, 2008; Schmidt, 2010; Smyth, Darmody, McGinnity, & Byrne, 2009). These rapid changes in the ethnic and cultural make-up of school communities have called attention to the need for teacher education to prepare teachers for culturally diverse educational settings (Santoro & Major, 2012) since today's classrooms are filled with students who possess unique personalities and capabilities. Culturally responsive teaching first emerged as a set of evolving dispositions, knowledge, and practices to meet the needs of students who are often marginalized in K-12 mainstream schools in United States (Irvine, 2003). Later, in order to understand the demand to address racial/ethnic and cultural diversity in the classroom, educators and scholars tried to describe cultural responsiveness that improved education for diverse students. Gay (2002) defined cultural responsiveness as: "using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching language them more effectively. It is based on the assumption that when academic knowledge and skills are situated within the lived experiences and frames of reference of students, they are more personally meaningful, have higher interest appeal, and are learned more easily and thoroughly" (p. 106).

Additionally, cultural responsiveness is tailored to empower children and youth by using meaningful cultural connections through language to produce academic and social knowledge and attitudes (Vavrus, 1997). It is argued that the teacher's challenge in today's current education climate is "to see each student as a growing, dynamic, developing, stretching being fellow human creature with specific needs and demands and hopes and desires and potentials" (Ayers, 1995, p. 2). These differences mean that teachers need to be able to work

productively with culturally diverse students, and be culturally aware (Santoro & Major, 2012).

Culturally responsive teachers actively engage students' learning by basing the curriculum on the local context and connecting it to language knowledge students bring to the classroom (Gay, 2010; Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). They are aware of the relationship between student learning and cultural variations in communications and are apt to enhance necessary supports for language learning (Vavrus, 1997).

However, being a culturally responsive teacher is not only a matter of applying instructional techniques, or it is primarily a matter of tailoring instruction to embody assumed traditions of particular cultural groups for language learning and teaching (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Approaching diversity in schools is a challenging and time-consuming process and it requires much dedication and energy (Muschell & Roberts, 2011) because teachers should work not only with students but also with parents, administrators, and policymakers in order to promote culturally responsive teaching and create culturally sensitive language learning environment in which differences students bring with themselves are welcomed and accepted (Muschell & Roberts, 2011). Unfortunately, many of the teachers have little or no experience in culturally sensitive settings and bring limited and inaccurate knowledge of their students' cultural backgrounds (Castro, 2010; Gay, 2010; Sleeter, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2002) and it creates great challenges and problems for both instructors and students.

In conclusion, dynamics of the language classrooms are changing and cultural diversity is ubiquitous. Culturally responsive teachers, who are respectful, sensitive and open to cultural differences, are key to addressing the needs of diverse learners and critical in preparing these learners for the 21st century (Garcia, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2009) because lack of cultural responsiveness can increase challenges and problems in multicultural educational setting. Yet, cultural responsiveness has been emphasized in K-12 mainstream education and there is a lack of literature about descriptive studies of cultural responsive teaching at higher education. In addition, cultural responsiveness has been emphasized in the United States with teaching English to speakers of other languages (ESOL) setting with monolingual native instructors (Garcia et al., 2009). Theoretical aspects of cultural responsiveness have been discussed in the literature (Garcia et al., 2009; Villegas & Lucas, 2002; Santoro & Major, 2012) but applicability of cultural responsiveness in an EFL setting with monolingual native English language instructors has not been investigated. As a result, there is a

need to explore reflections of native English language instructors about cultural responsiveness in higher education

Method

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of five native English language instructors in language preparatory school at a private international university. To do so, qualitative case study was selected as a research methodology.

Qualitative research methodologies have become increasingly important modes of inquiry for social sciences and applied fields (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p.1). Qualitative research is used to understand and explain the meanings made by participants in an activity or context (Morrow & Smith, 2000). More specifically, Creswell (1998) defines qualitative research as “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p.15). Thus, using qualitative research methodology will allow me to explore the experiences of five native English instructors at a private international university. This study will help us understand, interpret, make connections with, and illuminate the voices of participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2002; Silverman, 2000).

Qualitative methods also allow the researcher to collect data through a variety of formal and informal approaches such as observation, interviews, and participant writing. Patton (1990) states that “qualitative methods permit [the researcher] to study selected issues in depth and detail and approach fieldwork without being constrained by predetermined categories of analysis that contribute to the depth, opened and detail of the qualitative inquiry” (p. 13).

Qualitative research is appropriate for the study because when the researcher seeks: to understand, rather to explain; and to assume a personal, rather than an impersonal role (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Stake, 1995). In addition, Strauss and Corbin (1998) claim that qualitative research methods are ideally suited for research that seeks to explore the nature of people's experiences

Case study approach

Stake (1994) defines case study as follows: “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). A case study is identified then, not simply by its topic or

as a particular data collection method, but rather should be seen as a comprehensive research strategy (Yin, 2003).

A case study can bring about the discovery of new meanings, extend reader's experience, or confirm what is known. "Previously unknown relationships and variables can be expected to emerge from case studies leading a rethinking of the process in which phenomenon being studied (Stake, 1994, p. 47).

In order to guide this study, following research questions have been developed.

- What is the meaning of "culturally responsive teacher" for native English language instructors in an EFL context?
- What are the reflections of native English instructors while they are teaching their culture in an EFL context with culturally diverse students?
- How do native English language instructors construct "cultural responsiveness in an EFL setting at an international university?

Setting and participants

The setting in which this research was conducted is a private university in southeast Turkey. The university is an international one and students from more than 67 countries are enrolled in undergraduate programs. All students are required to complete one year of English language preparatory program unless they pass language proficiency exam. In addition, there are 20 students in a class at the language preparatory school and 20% of the students come from different countries.

In order to provide a good quality of language education, native English language instructors have been employed. Four female instructors and one male native instructor participated in the study. The participants are all from the United States and monolingual. In addition, the participants have TESOL certificates and they have been teaching in Turkey for at least two years. They teach mainly speaking and listening courses at the language preparatory school.

Data collection procedures

After receiving approval from ethical review board of the university, and the participants' consents, the researchers conducted individual and focus group interviews with five native English language instructors. The data were collected during the 2015 Spring Semester. First, the focus group interview was conducted at the beginning of the semester. Later, the participants were interviewed individually around mid-semester and member checking was conducted to assure accuracy, credibility, validity and trustworthiness of the data collected at the end of the semester. The interviews and the focus group interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews included semi-structured questions that allowed

for more flexibility and detailed discussion of the issues during the interviews. (Please see Appendices A & B for the interview and the focus group questions.)

Data analysis

The researchers draw upon qualitative methods of coding and categorizing in order to identify common themes across the data sources. The researchers transcribed the qualitative data verbatim. Later the researchers coded the data line by line, paragraph by paragraph and common categories and themes were identified. The codes that emerged from the transcriptions included cultural responsiveness, education, international students, multiculturalism, student attitudes, culture, understanding of cultures, clash of cultures, misunderstandings. The coded data were shared with the participants for accuracy. The findings that are presented in the next section are the result of central categories that appear frequently in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings of this qualitative case study. The study explored the reflections of native English language instructors in terms of cultural responsiveness at a private international university in Turkey.

The participants specifically expressed their thoughts and concerns related to three different areas: characteristics of cultural responsiveness, educational issues in multicultural environment and students' behaviors and attitudes, and construction of cultural responsiveness.

Cultural responsiveness

The participants agreed that cultural responsiveness means "teachers should be sensitive and unprejudiced to their environment, and respectful to students' culture". They accepted students' culture is different than their culture [American culture], so they, as instructors, need to accommodate any cultural differences while they are teaching. Although literature suggest that one of the purpose of culturally responsive teaching is to empower students, the instructors does not include it in their definition of culturally responsive teacher.

Jane stated, "*not only we need to welcome their [students'] cultural differences, but also we should teach them other way around because there are students from different countries ... and we teach them language*"(Focus Group Interview transcript, 15/04/2015). As seen, the native instructors are aware of cultural differences and accept them as a part of their profession and they also expect that students accept their native instructors as culturally different. Plus, it can be inferred that the instructors assume the students are not culturally responsive,

and they need to be taught. Such an assumption refers to a prejudice perspective, which is contradictory with what they suggested for cultural responsiveness.

In addition, the participants agree that students, under influence of their culture, think in a different perspective and have their own reasoning so they need to be tolerant of students. Emily said, *"You know students have their own logic, maybe because of their culture, we can not undermine it. If we want to teach them English, we should have to know about it"* (Individual interview transcript, 24/04/2015). The way how students think should be taken into consideration while teaching is taking place but it could be deduced that students' logic require extra effort for the native instructors, and the effort to be given is seen obligatory.

Educational issues and students' behaviors toward native instructors in multicultural environment

It is interesting that the participants' reflections about the educational issues and students' behaviors are mostly negative. For example; the students can easily criticize their instructors during the class, and the participants suggested that it could be offensive for the instructors. Victoria said, *"in prep school you know students not the Turkish ones, they give comments in a polite way but Turkish students are talking about the class like it's boring and you cannot say such a thing in my culture"* (Focus Group Interview transcript, 15/04/2015). The way that students criticize refers to their culture, yet the instructors could not see it as a different way of expressing one's ideas. In addition, the instructors approach this issue with egocentric perspective because it is a kind of insult for them. To show it, they compared Turkish students with students with different nationalities.

Other issues that are considered to be problematic are classroom management and examination process. Victoria uttered: *"classroom management is very different, I gave a midterm exam, everyone is talking"* and Chuck added *"some teachers open one eye and close the other one. I guess it is cultural and it is not something we do in the United States"* (Focus Group Interview transcript, 15/04/2015). As understood, cheating is not taken seriously, and it frustrates the native instructors. Also, all the problems mentioned were attributed to Turkish culture. Comparing students' culture with their culture indicates that the instructors felt instinctively superior to students' culture.

It is unwelcoming for the participants that students call especially native instructors by their name. Even though it could be a sign of rapport, it is not sincerely welcomed by the native instructors. Emily stated, *"normally in Turkey, as far as I know, people don't use people names, whom they respect but students call us with our first names. If the students follow their culture more strictly, it would be really satisfying to teach in here"* (Focus Group Interview transcript,

15/04/2015). It is seen that the native instructors expect respect from students because they perceive themselves the ones who deserve respect, or socially and academically in a higher status.

Construction of cultural responsiveness

All participants emphasized the importance of cultural responsiveness in teaching. This awareness is not something predisposed, but constructed by time and experience. They become culturally responsive after some time of trial-and-error process. Jane suggested, *"we [the native instructors] are in need of some extra information, because what we know in theory may not be applicable for practice"* (Individual interview transcript, 24/04/2015).

Furthermore, Chuck added *"it is better to have some session of orientation so we can know what is what"* (Individual interview transcript, 24/04/2015). As understood, it is vital for the native instructors to know cultural issues before they start to teach so that they can adapt their teaching styles and strategies. In general, the native instructors try to be more sensitive about cultural issues such as politics, religious, and family in order not to offend their students.

Conclusion

The participants expressed their reflections and concerns about importance of cultural responsiveness in language teaching, educational issues in multicultural environment and construction of cultural responsiveness. The findings indicate that importance of cultural responsiveness is emphasized, and it is suggested that mutual responsiveness and understanding are essential for better language teaching, which is parallel with other studies (Prater & Devereaux, 2012; Santoro & Major, 2012). It can be concluded that native instructors see cultural diversity as a difference, which needs to be taken into consideration while developing language-teaching strategies in theory.

However, educational issues and students' behaviors could be seen problematic and offensive for the participants and the participants could become intolerant about cultural issues (Castro, 2010). Also, comparing students' culture with each other and with their culture [American culture] indicates that the instructors are not culturally responsive as they claim it, or they could not internalize the meaning of cultural responsiveness. Lastly, due to what is expected from students and how they act, construction of cultural responsiveness requires time and peer support. Necessity of orientation and cultural adaptation process is highlighted in order to construct cultural responsiveness.

In conclusion, cultural responsiveness is a recent topic in Turkey. There is a demand to investigate experiences of the instructors at educational institutions.

More descriptive studies are essential in order to have in-depth understanding of cultural responsiveness in Turkey. Also, longitudinal studies can reveal more information about the topic with the help of alternative and rich data collection procedures.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. During the course of your teaching, have you felt that you had to adapt your personal culture?
 - a. If yes, why and how?
2. What are the students' behaviors towards native instructors from your perspective?
 - a. Do you feel you have to hold back (in terms of cultural issues)?
3. How would you construct cultural responsiveness?
4. How important is it to construct cultural understanding/cultural responsiveness in the foreign language classroom?

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What does the term "culturally responsive teacher" mean to you?
2. What is the purpose of being culturally responsive?
3. What are cultural issues that you are faced with in the classrooms? How do you approach them?
4. What are the educational issues that are arising from students' culture?
5. How similar or different are the students' and the instructors' cultures?