

Still Matters! Kurdish EFL Learners' Perceptions towards Non-Native English Teachers' Pronunciation Skills

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EN Abstract: Pronunciation is the fundamental aspect of a spoken message. Although there are at least four non-native speakers of English for every native speaker, and this rate is still increasing, the issue of non-native speaking teachers (NNSTs) has not been resolved. This paper reports on a study carried out in Iraqi Kurdistan which explored the perceptions of undergraduate university students towards their non-native English teachers. The students were asked to complete an online questionnaire. After the data analysis process, although the results show that the students have shown positive perceptions towards NNSTs, third-year students had less favorable perceptions than second-year students. The reasons for the students' different perceptions are discussed. Overall, most of the participants believed that NNSTs, including Kurdish EFL teachers, can teach pronunciation courses, but they need to be trained before teaching this skill. The findings suggest pedagogical implications for ESL/EFL teachers and learners during teaching and learning pronunciation skills.

Keywords: Kurdish EFL learners, NNSTs, pronunciation, speaking skills, teaching L2.

Summary of the Research: It is obvious that nowadays the English language has become one of the most common languages in the world and it is considered a lingua franca. Most people attempt to learn English and not everyone has the chance to study or take English courses in English-spoken countries. Therefore, most learners learn English under non-native English speaker teachers. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how EFL learners perceive non-native English teachers' pronunciation skills. In this regard, this article has attempted to investigate how Kurdish EFL learners perceive Kurdish non-native English teachers at the university level. The results and outcomes can be applied in similar contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. It also provides some pedagogical implications for teaching English more effectively when it comes to teaching pronunciation by non-native English speaker teachers.

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1. Introduction

As English has become a lingua franca and gained the status of an international language, learning it has become a necessity (Crystal, 2002; Mahmood, 2021; Rao, 2019). It is vital to give adequate value and attention to the major language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing), including the target language subskills (i.e., pronunciation, spelling, grammar structures...etc.). Nowadays, most English language learners are in an EFL context, and these learners learn English from non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST). Thus, a learner is looking for an English teacher who can teach all of the language skills and

subskills, especially, pronunciation effectively (Crystal, 2012). Pronunciation is considered one of the most challenging skills to master by both teachers and learners, and they have to practice a lot and spend much of their time improving their pronunciation (Aliaga-García, 2007). When teachers have a clear pronunciation, and they can pronounce the words accurately, learners take those teachers as role models, and they acquire the pronunciation correctly. Although pronunciation has always been a debatable topic among researchers, teachers, and learners, it has been researched less than other skills. In addition to that, whenever the topic of pronunciation comes into discussion, the issues of native English-speaking teachers (NEST) and non-native English-speaking teachers (NNEST) surface up.

Calculating the number of NEST with NNEST is difficult because Braine (2010) has stated that there are at least four non-native speakers of English for every native speaker, and up to 80% of English teachers globally are non-native speakers of English (Canagarajah, 2005; Freeman, Katz, Garcia Gomez, and Burns, 2015). In a recent study by Braine and Selvi (2018), it has been calculated that English is spoken as a second language by 375 million speakers and as a foreign language by 750 million. Thus, one can notice that the number of foreign-language speakers of English is higher than native speakers (NSs), and the majority of English teachers are non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. As it can be seen, the NEST and NNEST issue has become one of the major topics in the field of SLA. But who is a NES? And who is NNEST?

Medgyes (2001) described a NNEST as “one for whom English is a second or foreign language, works in an EFL environment and speaks the same native language as his or her students” (p.21). Therefore, it is crucial to analyze the perceptions of ESL/EFL learners towards their non-native teachers’ pronunciation skills. The results of studies like the current one help non-native teachers to work on their pronunciation skills. Although much research has been conducted on examining ESL/EFL learners’ perceptions towards non-native English teachers, the researcher could not identify any studies been done with Kurdish EFL learners’ perceptions towards NNESTs. Hence, to investigate Kurdish EFL learners’ perceptions, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What are Kurdish EFL university students’ general perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs?
2. What are Kurdish EFL university students’ perceptions of teaching pronunciation by NNESTs?
3. How do Kurdish EFL university students perceive Kurdish EFL teachers at Salahaddin University of their ability to teach pronunciation skills?

2. Literature Review

Teaching pronunciation is usually considered as one of the difficult skills to teach by both native and non-native English teachers. Levis, Sonsaat, Link, and Barriuso (2016) think that the lack of enough training among ESL/EFL teachers causes pronunciation a more difficult skill to teach. Therefore, this section is dedicated to reviewing the existing literature on teaching pronunciation, native English-speaking teachers’ (NEST) and non-native English-speaking teachers’ (NNEST) abilities in teaching pronunciation, and learners’ perceptions towards NNESTs in teaching pronunciation.

2.1. Importance of Teaching Pronunciation

Compared to other areas of a target language (TL), pronunciation has been less studied (Asher & Garcia, 1969; Çakır & Baytar, 2014). Burns, Claire, and Hilton (2003) stated that “pronunciation refers to the phonology of the language – or the meaningful perception and production of the sounds of that language and how they impact on the listener” (p.5).

Many researchers (e.g., Levis & Grant, 2003) believed that “pronunciation is an important part of learning to speak, and therefore, more time has to be devoted to teaching pronunciation” (p.15). Thus, it is crucial to provide even some minutes of the class time to give some direct or indirect instructions to enhance the learners’ pronunciation skills because even though the teachers of other classes (e.g., Grammar, phonology, morphology, research writing...etc.). Furthermore, Scarcella and Oxford (1994) strongly believe that “pronunciation should be taught in all second language classes through a variety of activities” (p. 5). Thus, integrating teaching pronunciation with communication courses makes learning pronunciation more desirable (Murphy, 1991).

Due to the importance of pronunciation, study (e.g., Derwing, 2009; Derwing & Munro, 2005; Levis, 2005) showed that 75% of the instructors wished to have professional training before teaching pronunciation. Hence, pronunciation teachers understand that it is one of the essential skills to teach in ESL/EFL classes.

Although pronunciation is believed to be a complicated skill to teach, teachers and researchers have emphasized the importance of teaching it (Gilakjani, 2016), but can all ESL/EFL language teachers; native and non-native teachers teach pronunciation properly?

2.2. NEST and NNEST and Teaching Pronunciation

Nativeness and non-nativeness have been a hot topic in SLA, when it is discussed; it eventually relates to the teachers’ ability to teach pronunciation. For instance, the results of a study by Mahboob (2004) showed that the participants believed that native speaker teachers can provide an ideal model for pronunciation. On the other hand, research shows that teaching pronunciation is not only a difficult task to be taught by NNESTs, but it is also a challenging skill to teach by NEST, and the reason is due to the lack of adequate teaching training. Some researchers think that NNESTs are not an ideal model for teaching pronunciation (Golombek & Jordan,

2005; Levis et al, 2016), but through instructions and training courses, NNESTs also can teach pronunciation effectively (Saito, 2012).

Freudenstein (1991) (as cited in Phillipson, 1992) stated that “the native speaker should become the standard foreign-language teacher within the countries of the European Community. They know the best in the language teaching of tomorrow: the active and creative language use in everyday communication” (p.3). On the contrary, Braine (1999) says that “NNESTs should not be considered inferior to NESTs” (p. 3). Hence, two views can be drawn on NESTs and NNESTs: 1) NESTs can be better language instructors, 2) NNESTs as NESTs are successful and able to teach a target language, and NNESTs can be a practical model for the learners, as the teachers have been gone through the same learning process during learning the target language (Medgyes, 1992).

After reviewing the literature, the question arises: 'Should NNESTs teach pronunciation? The researcher would bring up an argument that in a place as Iraqi Kurdistan where most English language teachers have never studied under the supervision of a native English teacher, and even those who have, are very few in service. Then, who teaches pronunciation when a native English teacher is hardly available in this foreign context? In addition to that, Rajadurai (2006) asked a very crucial question which the researcher also would ask the same as an EFL teacher who has been teaching English for more than twelve years in the Kurdish EFL context: “Where does this leave the learner and the teacher?” (p.5).

In his study, Timmis (2002) stated that “the native speaker can be an interesting point of reference without being an object of deference” (p.124). Regarding the ability of NEST and NNEST to teach pronunciation, the results of an interesting study by Couper (2020) show that NNESTs were concerned about their self-confidence not the lack of pedagogical knowledge of teaching pronunciation.

2.3. Learner's Perceptions towards NESTs and NNESTs Teaching Pronunciation

As ESL/EFL learners spend much of their time and money only to learn English as perfectly as possible. In this regard, from a learner perspective, a native English-speaking teacher is the perfect model to teach the language because English is their native language, and NESTs have grown with that language since they were born. Lipovsky and Mahboob (2007) investigated learners' attitudes towards NESTs and NNESTs, and the results show that “the trends in student responses did not change over time: e.g., NESTs were still considered strong in teaching oral skills and NNESTs were considered strong teachers of literacy skills” (p. 3). In his study, Mahboob (2004), the participants have commented differently on NESTs and NNESTs. One participant commented, “the best part of having native speakers as teachers is that you can learn natural pronunciation from them, and it is very effective to your listening and speaking” (p.8). In addition to that, another participant commented that from NESTs, learners learn the right pronunciation.

Based on the literature, learners think that NESTs have better commands to teach pronunciation, and NNESTs lack this natural ability to teach that vital skill. Another reason is that learners want to acquire the standard pronunciation which most NNESTs lack this quality. This perception even is confirmed by NNESTs themselves. For instance, in the study by Árva and Medgyes (2000), NNESTs think that their oral communication skills are not very good.

3. Methods

To achieve the purpose of the current study, the researcher administered a survey questionnaire to collect data. The primary reason for adopting this method was to understand and investigate Kurdish EFL learners' perceptions of non-native teachers.

3.1. Context and Participants

The participants in the current study were 108 second and third-year undergraduate (i.e., undergraduate lasts for four years) Kurdish ESL learners in Iraqi Kurdistan. The students were enrolled in the English Department, College of Education at Salahaddin University-Erbil. The second-year student participants have been studying English for two years and the third-year student participants for three years. The data were collected among second and third-year students (Second-year: N = 54; Third-year: N = 54). Males and females participated in answering the questionnaire regardless of their genders. The reason for collecting data among second and third-year students was, in 2021, first-year students were not able to take most of their courses due to COVID-19, and they did not study pronunciation with Kurdish EFL learners in detail.

3.2. Materials and Procedures

A quantitative method approach was used to explore learners' perceptions towards non-native Kurdish EFL language teachers, and to what extent this may affect Kurdish EFL learners' pronunciation learning skills. The researcher gathered quantitative data using an online survey questionnaire to determine students' perceptions and attitudes. To collect data, this study employed an online survey questionnaire (see the Appendix).

3.2.1. Questionnaire

To collect data, A questionnaire was administered through an online survey tool using Google Form (see the Appendix). The questionnaire items were developed and adapted based on previous studies (Ballard 2013; Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009; Foote, Holtby, and Derwing, 2012; Levis et al., 2016; Uchida & Sugimoto, 2019). The participants were asked to answer 5-point Likert items, and all the items of the scale are labeled (1= Strongly

Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree). The main reason for using the Likert-scale method was to obtain high reliability and validity of the measurement of perceptions and attitudes (Krosnick & Judd, 2005). To evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire items, Cronbach's alpha reliability test has been run using IBM SPSS Statistics version 25. The value for Cronbach's Alpha was ($\alpha = .826$) and ($\alpha = .812$) for the questionnaire items. Hence, the reliability value for the items was "good".

Note. when the Cronbach's alpha reliability value is ($0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.9$), the reliability test and Internal consistency are considered "good".

3.2.2. The Constructs

The questionnaire items were designed and arranged in a way to create three main constructs: 1) learners' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs, 2) learners' perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs in teaching pronunciation, and 3) learners' perceptions towards Kurdish EFL teachers' pronunciation skills at Salahaddin University, College of Education.

3.3. Data Collection

An online questionnaire has been designed for the data collection process. The questionnaire direct link was distributed among both second-and third-year Kurdish EFL learners at the College of Education, the English Department. The students were given freedom either to participate or not. Participants were given a recorded video guide explaining how to answer the questionnaire, as Kurdish EFL learners were not very familiar with using online surveys. After completing the data collection, for the coding process, IBM SPSS Statistics version 25 was used as the tool for data analysis.

4. Findings

To analyze the collected data, descriptive statistics are explained. First, the researcher analyzed the data for the second and third-year participants of the study.

Descriptive and Frequency Tests with Second and Third-year Participants

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the three constructs

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Second Stage	54		
Second-Year Learners' Perceptions of NNESTs in Teaching Pronunciation		3.282	.534
Second-Year Learners' Perceptions towards NNESTs		3.277	.850
Second-Year Learners' Perceptions Towards Kurdish EFL Teachers' Pronunciation Skills		3.194	1.033
Third Stage	54		
Third-Year Learners' Perceptions towards NNESTs		3.273	.639
Third-Year Learners' Perceptions of NNESTs in Teaching Pronunciation		3.232	.393
Third Year Learners' Perceptions towards Kurdish EFL teachers' pronunciation skills		3.356	.561
Valid N (listwise)	54		

4.1. Kurdish EFL Learners' Perceptions towards NNESTs

Table one consists of the mean and standard deviation values of the three main constructs that were extracted from the questionnaire survey items which the participants rated from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. For each given construct, (54) participants answered the questionnaire. First of all, the first construct is analyzed thoroughly based on the mean and the standard deviation values for the second-year students ($M = 3.282$; $SD = .534$). According to the provided mean and standard deviation values, there is a general consistency among the participants for the items that the first construct was extracted. In contrast, the consistency is less among third-year students as the mean and standard deviation values are ($M = 3.273$; $SD = .639$). Although there is some inconsistency among the participants of both groups, still, second-year and third-year participants have positive perceptions towards NNESTs. For instance, for the item "*I can learn just as well from a non-native English instructor as I can from a native English instructor*", (23.3%) of the participants were "Neutral" and (48.9%) of them were "Agree" in their responses; whereas, (27.8%) were "Disagree" in their responses. Additionally, participants (60%) of the participants agreed with a statement that many non-native English teachers can speak Standard English and have effective communication skills.

4.2. Kurdish EFL Learners' Perceptions towards NNESTs in Teaching Pronunciation

The second research question examines Kurdish EFL university students' perceptions of NNESTs teaching pronunciation. For the second-year participants, the mean ($M = 3.277$) and the standard deviation ($SD = .850$)

show that the participants also have a consistent rating for the items from which the second construct was extracted. Most of the participants rated the items either as “Neutral” or “Agree”. The participants think that NNESTs also can be good models of English pronunciation; thus, (38.9%) rated “Agree”. Furthermore, (40.7%) of the learners showed that they can learn and improve their pronunciation even if their teacher is a non-native English speaker. Although 38.9% of participants agreed that NNESTs can correct learners' pronunciation errors, 51.9% indicated that native speakers are a better model for English pronunciation. In contrast, third-year participants are much more consistent in their responses based on the value of (SD = .393) in regards to teaching pronunciation. In general, the participants believed that NNESTs can teach pronunciation. However, they also stated that if they had a non-native English teacher with poor pronunciation and accent, the learners' pronunciation would be negatively affected. For this item (38.9%) of the participants agreed.

Interestingly, approximately (78.8%) of both second-year and third-year participants stated that they would prefer native English speakers to teach pronunciation rather than NNESTs, and English pronunciation should be taught by native speakers. On the other hand, The mean value and standard deviation for the third-year students (M= 3.232; SD= .393) show that third-year participants believed that NNESTs can teach pronunciation, but they also stated that if they had a non-native English teacher with poor pronunciation and accent, the learners' pronunciation would be negatively affected. For this item (38.9%) of the participants agreed.

4.3. Kurdish EFL Learners' Perceptions towards Kurdish EFL teachers' pronunciation skills at Salahaddin University, College of Education, the English Department

The last construct which was investigated was “Kurdish EFL Learners' Perceptions towards Kurdish EFL teachers' pronunciation skills at Salahaddin University, College of Education, the English Department”. Based on the mean and SD values of the second-year students (M= 3.194; SD= 1.033), they were less consistent because the greater value of SD shows less consistency among the participants. They were asked to rate this item “*EFL teachers at Salahaddin University should not be allowed to teach pronunciation due to their lack of pronunciation skills*”, (67.9%) agreed with this statement.

Regarding third-year participants' perceptions towards Kurdish EFL teachers at Salahaddin University and their ability in teaching pronunciation, the mean (M= 3.356) and the standard deviation (SD= .561) values (see Table 2) indicate that the participants' consistent rating to the questionnaire items. The frequency tests show that (43.3%) of the participants believed that Kurdish EFL teachers at Salahaddin University can teach pronunciation effectively, whereas, (56.7%) of the participants answered: “Agree” to the statement that “*EFL teachers at Salahaddin University should not be allowed to teach pronunciation due their lack of pronunciation skills*”. 76.7% of participants stated that Kurdish EFL teachers need pronunciation training before teaching the skill.

5. Discussion

First, this study explored the perceptions of Kurdish EFL learners towards the ability of non-native Kurdish EFL teachers in teaching pronunciation courses.

For the first research question, the study found that both second-year and third-year Kurdish EFL participants have potentially positive perceptions of NESTs and NNESTs (40.7% and 48.9%) indicated that they can learn just as well from a non-native English instructor as they can from a native English instructor.

The second research question is on the perceptions of Kurdish EFL university students of teaching pronunciation by NNESTs. This question is also the main focus of the current study. For this research question, the statistical tests show that the participants in both stages have close perceptions towards NNESTs teaching pronunciation, but the consistency is greater among third-year participants.

Regarding the third research question, the results show that students had more negative perceptions and expressed greater doubt about the ability of Kurdish EFL teachers to teach pronunciation. Still, a greater consistency can be detected among third-year participants towards the third construct. The participants were asked if Kurdish EFL teachers should be allowed to teach pronunciation, second-year participants (47.9%) and third-year participants (56.7%) answered that NNESTs should not be allowed to teach. In addition to that, the participants were asked either Kurdish EFL teachers need pronunciation training courses before teaching any pronunciation classes. Most of the participants believed that Kurdish EFL teachers at Salahaddin University-Erbil need to take pronunciation courses before teaching any actual classes.

The findings on Kurdish EFL participants' perceptions of NNESTs are similar to those of Ling and Braine (2007), which showed that university students in Hong Kong had positive attitudes towards NNESTs, although they acknowledged some shortcomings. For instance, non-native teachers rely more on textbooks.

Another noteworthy result is that second-year students had more positive attitudes towards NNESTs, while third-year Kurdish EFL learners were less positive. This observation requires more investigations and research because there might be many factors that affect the perceptions of the participants such as the period that a student has studied with a non-native English teacher, or there might be some participants who have never had learning experiences with native English teachers. This result is opposite to what Moussu and Braine (2006) found in their study that third-year students have more positive attitudes than second-year students.

As the second and the last research questions were investigating the ability of NNESTs in teaching pronunciation, the participants believed that NNESTs are less confident in teaching pronunciation, and they need to be trained professionally before teaching pronunciation, and this is aligned with the result by Lasagabaster and Sierra (2002), which is most of the participants showed a preference to have NESTs to teach pronunciation.

6. Conclusion

This study explored Kurdish EFL learners' perceptions towards Non-Native English Teacher Pronunciation Skills at Salahaddin University. The study was undertaken in an EFL context; in Iraqi Kurdistan. The findings show that the issue of native or non-native English teachers still matters for EFL learners. Despite having more preferences towards native English teachers, the participants also showed that there are non-native English teachers who can teach English courses effectively including teaching pronunciation. Also, it can be concluded that those students who have less experience (i.e., second-year participants) have more positive perceptions towards non-native English teachers. Finally, one of the most noticeable findings of this study is that EFL learners indicated that non-native English teachers need to be trained and given pronunciation courses before they teach pronunciation skills.

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APPENDIX

Still Matters! Kurdish EFL Learners' Perceptions towards Non-Native English Teacher's Pronunciation Skills at Salahaddin University

This questionnaire has been designed about "Learners' Perceptions towards Non-Native English Teacher's Pronunciation Skills" to get a better understanding of the mentioned issue. Please give your answers sincerely by circling (1) to (5) as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation.

This survey questionnaire is designed for Kurdish EFL learners at Salahaddin University- Erbil- Iraq.

Scale of Preference

(1) Strongly Disagree (2) Disagree (3) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly Agree

No	The Constructs	Scale				
1) Kurdish EFL Learners' Perceptions towards NESTs and NNESTs						
	Items	Scale				
1.	I can learn just as well from a non-native English instructor as I can from a native English instructor.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	Many non-native English instructors teach just as effectively as native English instructors do.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Many non-native English instructors usually communicate effectively in the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Non-native speakers can also speak Standard English.	1	2	3	4	5
2) Kurdish EFL Learners' towards NESTs and NNESTs in teaching pronunciation						
1.	Non-native English instructors can be good models of English pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	As a student, I can improve my pronunciation with non-native English instructors.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	Non-native English instructors have accurate pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	Non-native English instructors are able to correct EFL/ESL learners' pronunciation errors.	1	2	3	4	5

No	The Constructs					
5.	If I got a non-native English instructor with a weak foreign accent, my pronunciation would be negatively affected.	1	2	3	4	5
6.	It would be better if non-native English instructors were not allowed to teach in ESL/EFL programs.	1	2	3	4	5
7.	English pronunciation should be taught by a native English-speaking teacher.	1	2	3	4	5
8.	Native English speakers are a better model of English pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5
9.	Nonnative English teachers make me less confident about learning pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5
10.	All native English speakers are good models of English pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5
11.	Non-native English instructors always have poor pronunciation skills.	1	2	3	4	5
12.	Non-native English instructors cannot teach pronunciation effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
3) Kurdish EFL Learners' Perceptions towards Kurdish EFL Teachers' Pronunciation skills						
1.	EFL teachers at Salahaddin University (SU) are able to teach pronunciation effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
2.	I am confident that I can/ have improve (ed) my pronunciation skills with EFL teachers at Salahaddin University.	1	2	3	4	5
3.	EFL teachers at Salahaddin University should not be allowed to teach pronunciation due to their lack of pronunciation skills.	1	2	3	4	5
4.	EFL Teachers at Salahaddin University need pronunciation training courses before teaching pronunciation skills.	1	2	3	4	5