Mismatches between Teacher Intention and Learner Interpretation; Significance of Non-Native Speaker Teacher of English

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Abstract

There has always been a contradiction between the learner and teacher perceptions of classroom. The reason is that teachers and learners do not look at the same classroom event as a potential learning event. Some of the difficulties learners may encounter in understanding the aims and activities of the classroom are as a result of potential mismatches between their interpretation and their teacher's intention. At the moment the teacher intention equally matches the learner interpretation of a given task, successful learning is likely to promote. Kumaravadivelu (2003) identifies ten potential sources of perceptual mismatches that ELT teachers should be aware of: cognitive, communicative, linguistic, pedagogic, strategic, cultural, evaluative, procedural, instructional, and attitudinal mismatches. It is thus important to discover potential sources contributing to the mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation. In the present study, an attempt was made to identify potential sources of mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation by observing and analyzing classroom events. During the observation period, the interaction between the teacher and the learners were closely considered. In general, the mismatches found between the non-native teacher intention and learner interpretation are in the following order, from top to down: communicative (37 %), strategic (26%), instructional (18.5 %), and linguistic (11.1 %), and procedural mismatch (7.4 %). However, during the observation, no cases of cognitive, pedagogic, cultural, evaluative, and attitudinal mismatches were encountered. Finally, the advantages of non-native speaker teacher of English to identify and minimize possible mismatches will be discussed.

Keywords: Perceptual Mismatches, Native Speaker Teacher, Non-Native Speaker

1. Introduction

Human interaction has the potential to contain ambiguities and mismatches. Language classroom communication is not exception and mismatches are a part of the practice of everyday teaching. Teachers and learners do not look at the same classroom event as a potential learning event. In other words, mismatches are likely to happen between teacher and learner perceptions of what is available to learn. Even meticulously-planned and well-performed language classes are likely to result in some kinds of mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation. In sum, it would be surprising if perceptual mismatches do not occur at all. Hence, it is necessary to be aware of the potential sources of mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). Nunan (1995) similarly acknowledges the gap that exists between learning and instruction, he points out that there will always be a certain mismatch. Nevertheless, it is the teacher's responsibility to try to find ways to reduce it.

Kumaravadivelu (1991) emphasizes that in order to be able to intervene the possible mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretations, teachers should be aware of the learner's personal approaches and personal concepts. An important initial step toward knowing more about the learners' personal perspectives on classroom aims and events is to understand the possible reasons that could contribute to potential mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation (Kumaravadivelu, 2003). He adds that when the gap between teacher intention and learner interpretation is narrower, the chances of achieving desired learning outcomes become greater. It is thus essential that we understand potential sources contributing to the mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation. When the teacher intention equally matches the learner interpretation of a given task, successful learning is likely to promote.

2. Perceptual Mismatches

In order to examine sources of potential mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation, nearly twenty years ago, Kumaravadivelu (1991) carried out a research study. In doing so, he explored learners' and teachers' perceptions of the nature, the goals, and the demands of a selected language learning task. The learners participating in his research were low intermediate level ESL learners in the United States. Based on the study, Kumaravadivelu identified ten sources that have the potential to contribute to the mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation. They are as follows:

1. *Cognitive mismatch*: This source refers to the incapability of the learner to understand or recognize a particular item in a foreign language. In fact, it "refers to the general, cognitive knowledge of the world that adult language learners bring with them to the classroom. It pertains to mental processes such as remembering, perceiving, recognizing, and inferencing" (p. 81).

2. *Communicative mismatch*: This mismatch is likely to occur when the learner is able to understand but not being confident of talking. He/she is unable to express his/her ideas or give an answer in the class. This source "refers to the communicative skills necessary for the learners to exchange messages or express personal views. Because the learners have only a limited command of the target language, they struggle to convey their message" (p. 82). For example, learner might be unable to communicate his/her ideas clearly because of his/her limited communicative ability. Hence, he/she might try to employ the familiar communication strategy of circumlocution to get his/her message across. However, the teacher may fail to get the learner's intended message and end the interaction by saying "OK." as in Kumaravadivelu's study.

3. *Linguistic mismatch*: It refers to a situation in which the learner is able to understand but not having enough knowledge of the language. "This source refers to the linguistic repertoire— syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic knowledge of the target language—that is minimally required to do a task, and to talk about it" (p. 83). Teacher may not expect that a very familiar linguistic item might be a source of problem for the learner.

4. *Pedagogic mismatch*: This mismatch refers to a situation in which learner is not clear about the main purpose of a lesson in the class. Therefore, he/she might be confused about what is going on in the classroom. It "refers to the teacher and learner perceptions of stated or unstated short- or long-term instructional objective(s) of language learning tasks" (p. 83). The perception of the learners' in terms of the purpose of the lesson may not match each other's or that of the teacher.

5. *Strategic mismatch*: This mismatch refers to a situation in which the learner is not clear about the overall approach he/she needs to take in order to work on an intended subject. It "refers to learning strategies: operations, steps, plans, and routines used by the learner to facilitate the obtaining, storage, retrieval, and use of information, that is, what learners do to learn and to regulate learning" (p. 84). The mismatch might happen between the strategies the teacher expected the learners to use and ones they actually use. The learners might prefer to use the simplest possible strategy of elimination and solve the problem within a few minutes and without much negotiation. It is noteworthy that when strategic mismatches occur, they do not necessarily involve all the students in the classroom. While some students have been observed to be performing an activity differently from the teacher's expectations, simultaneously other students have been observed to be performing the activity as intended (Bennett and Dunne, 1992).

6. *Cultural mismatch*: This mismatch is likely to occur when the learner has not enough cultural knowledge about a particular subject in a foreign language. "This source refers to the prior knowledge of the cultural norms of the target language community minimally required for the learners to understand and solve a problem-oriented task" (p. 85). Students come from different cultural backgrounds and due to the fact that the native speaker teacher comes from different cultural background, he/she might not be clearly aware of the cultural nuances that exist.

7. *Evaluative mismatch*: This mismatch points to the attempt made by learner to find out whether what he/she already knows about something is correct or not. "This source refers to articulated or unarticulated types of self-evaluation measures used by learners to monitor their ongoing progress in their language-learning activities" (p. 86). What the learner tries to learn might influence and conflict with his/her prior knowledge learned in previous classes and the teacher might be unaware of this self-evaluation. This can consequently lead to mismatches between the teacher and the learner.

8. *Procedural mismatch*: This mismatch refers to a situation in which learner is not clear about specific steps he/she needs to follow in order to fulfill a particular task or obtain a specific result in the class.

The teacher may not be aware of the path chosen by the learner to achieve an immediate goal. "This source refers to stated or unstated paths chosen by the learners to do a task. The procedural source pertains to locally specified, currently identified, bottom-up tactics that seek an immediate resolution to a specific problem whereas the strategic source, discussed earlier, pertains to any broad-based, higher-level, top-down strategy that seeks an overall solution in a general language learning situation" (p. 87). A learner, for instance, might attempt a fairly detailed, bottom-up explanation of how to go about solving a problem. This procedural thinking on the part of the learner might not be fit what the teacher expects to hear, although it might be correct.

9. *Instructional mismatch*: This mismatch occurs when the learner is unable to understand the direction given by the teacher about a particular task or piece of work in the class. Hence, teacher's directions are not clear to the students. "This source refers to instructional guidance given by the teacher or indicated by the textbook writer to help learners carry out the task successfully" (p. 88). Even straightforward instructional guidance can produce unintended effects. In some cases, as Tragant (1997) clarifies, when teachers ask learners to work on language activities in groups or on their own, they are often concerned with giving explicit instructions. This concern comes from the fact that it is impossible for teachers to be present when students actually perform the assigned activity. Thus, at times, the process that students follow may not match the teacher's expectations.

10. *Attitudinal mismatch*: It refers to a situation in which the learner is not happy or satisfied with the way the teacher did or discussed something in the class. "This source refers to participants' attitudes toward the nature of L2 learning and teaching, the nature of classroom culture, and teacher-learner role relationships. Adult learners, by virtue of their prior experience, have fairly well-established attitudes toward classroom management, and these preconceived notions can easily contribute to the mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation" (p. 88). In addition, there can be various types of attitudinal mismatches arising out of preconceived notions about factors such as participant expectations, classroom management, learning strategies and cultural stereotypes.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) believes that these mismatches are not exhaustive and further research might reveal more of them. At the same time, these mismatches do not have any distinct boundaries. He puts emphasis on the fact that mismatches are 'unavoidable' but they are identifiable' and 'manageable'. He declares that if mismatches are identified in time and correctly addressed, "a mismatch can be converted into a learning opportunity in class. The mere recognition of the source of a mismatch could help both the learners and the teachers understand that there is an underlying reason for the difficulties the learners may have encountered in making sense of a classroom event" (p. 90). In fact, in order to maintain a considerable degree of understanding between teachers and learners about the aims and activities, staying vigilant about perceptual mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation carries a paramount importance in the classroom.

Tragant (1997) carried out a study to present, classify and interpret the instances where mismatch occurs. According to the results, there were times where what the teacher told students to do turned out to be different from what they were asked to do in their groups or individually. Accordingly, there often exists a mismatch between teachers' expectations and students' performance. Slimani (1989, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2003) investigated the students' report of their perception of what they learned after each of six lessons she observed and recorded. The learners participating in her study were freshman university students of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Algeria. According to the results obtained in her study, in some cases, the teacher focused on various important instructional features however the students did not see them as important. Conversely, the learners reported to have learned several items that were different from what the teacher had planned for them. Thus, Slimani's research indicated that there might be perceptual mismatches between prepared teaching lesson plans and learning outcome.

Similarly, Barkhuizen (1998) conducted a study to investigate the students' perceptions of learning and teaching activities they encountered in their classes. The participants were high school students learning English as a second language (ESL) in South Africa. He found that students' perception of classroom aims and events did not match those of their teachers. The teachers involved in the study were frequently surprised to learn about the thoughts and feelings of their students which were very different from theirs.

In another study, Block (1994, 1996, as cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006) investigated the ways in which learners describe and attribute purpose to the activities that teachers ask them to do in EFL class. His research focused on the similarities and differences between learner and teacher perceptions of learning purpose. Block found that the learners talked most highly of the news reviewing task that was not important from the teacher's perspective. The study showed that the learners were not aware of the main purpose of the lessons in the class. On the other hand, there was a gap between the way teachers and learners 'see' the classroom events.

3. Priority of Non-Native Teachers of English as a Foreign Language

Using a native or nonnative speaker of language in the classroom has always been a controversial issue in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. For instance, Phillipson (1997) questions 'why should the native speaker be intrinsically better qualified than the non-native?' He says that teachers are made rather than born. Many of them doubtless self-made whether they are natives or non natives. However, the dominant idea of 'native-speaker teacher is the best' has remained as a central part of the conventional wisdom of the ELT profession. Accordingly, Anglo-American monolingual experts are necessarily considered to be better qualified than their counterparts in countries where English is successfully learned as a second or foreign language.

Phillipson (1997) believes that the idea of 'native-speaker teacher is the best' has a tremendous influence upon the linguistic norms of the Center, Inner Circle. This linguistic influence creates a situation in which all non-native speakers of English to be ideological dependent on the native-speaker norms. This attitude is echoed in Seidlhofer (1999) as she puts emphasis on how non-Inner-Circle English teachers are likely to find themselves in the context of pedagogical theories, methods and institutions in which the main attention is being paid to the *native speaker* as the ultimate teaching resource. In many teaching contexts, native speaker teachers has been regarded to have priority over the non-natives and native speaker teachers are preferred to non native speaker teachers, irrespective of the training or experience.

Phillipson (1997) argues that the native speaker fallacy dates from a time when language teaching was indistinguishable from culture teaching, and when all learners of English were expected to be familiarizing themselves with the culture that English originates from. He adds that, at the onset, it was the native speaker who was considered as the automatic best teacher, and all other teachers admired the native speaker. Now that is no longer the case. Seidlhofer (2000, as cited in Jessner, 2008), similarly, argues for a redefinition of the ideal nonnative teacher of English. This need is as a result of the significant increase of English as lingua franca in recent years. She argues that although English nowadays mainly serves as a medium of communication between speakers with different primary languages, the norms of the language is still being controlled by the monolingual minority of its speakers, that is what Phillipson (1997) calls *Linguistic Imperialism*.

In spite of all the priority given to native-speaker teachers of English, there are some significant advantages that non-native speaker teachers of English have in EFL classrooms. The advantages of the non-native teacher of English over the native speaker teachers of English could be categorized into eight features. These advantages of non-native speaker teachers of English are most likely to give priority to them over their native-speaker colleagues in EFL context. They are as follow:

1. sharing similar languages (Seidlhofer, 1999; Tarnopolsky, 2008)

2. sharing similar cultures (Seidlhofer, 1999; Widdowson, 2003)

3. being formerly non-native EFL learners (Medgyes, 1983; Ellis, 2005 as cited in Jessner, 2008; and Tarnopolsky, 2008; Widdowson, 2003)

4. having experience gained over the years as a foreign language teacher (Medgyes, 1983)

5. being able to find linguistic problems (Ellis, 2005, as cited in Jessner, 2008)

6. being able to develop students' interlingual awareness (Tarnopolsky, 2008)

7. being able to develop students' intercultural awareness (Tarnopolsky, 2008)

8. psychological advantage (Cook, 1999)

In sum, non-native speaker (NNS) EFL teachers should be regarded as 'double agents' (Seidlhofer, 1999). They are members of their own communities, hence; *they share similar languages or cultures with their students* and they are familiar with 'terrain inhabited by the target language'. So, it is possible for NNS EFL teachers to utilize their students' mother tongue whenever and wherever it can facilitate and accelerate the process of learning English. In addition, *the NNS EFL teachers have themselves been non-native EFL learners*. They have passed through the process of learning the same language and they know the dilemmas involved it. Non-native EFL teachers who share the mother tongue of their students and who may have worked through similar problems in learning English, are better prepared to deal appropriately with those specific learners' problems. Hence, they are most likely to better understand the essence of students' difficulties while a NS EFL teacher might be unable to observe these problems.

Through his own experience as a persistent learner of English on the one hand, and through the *experience gained over the years as a foreign language teacher* on the other hand, NNS EFL teacher should know best where the two cultures and, consequently, the two languages converge and diverge. More than any native speaker, NNS EFL teacher is aware of the difficulties his/her students are likely to encounter and the possible

errors they are likely to make. *The NNS EFL teacher is also able to find linguistic problems* and offer metacognitive learning strategies that the native-speaker teacher without foreign language experience is unable to notice. As aforementioned, NNS EFL teachers have moved through the process of learning the language and they are familiar with the difficulties that the learners are mostly likely to encounter.

At the same time, NNS EFL teachers can pave the way for developing their *students' interlingual awareness* by making comparisons and making them aware of the similarities and differences that exist between the structures of their first language and target language. *NNS EFL teachers are better prepared for developing their students' intercultural awareness* by comparing similarities and differences between the first language culture and target culture, which is considered to be the only way of developing the learners' target culture sociolinguistic behaviors in the conditions where students have no or very little direct contact with target culture communities. Of course, this advantage of NNS EFL teacher is apparent when he/she is well aware of the target speech communities' cultural characteristics.

Finally, students may prefer the fallible nonnative-speaker teacher who presents a more achievable model because students may feel overwhelmed by native-speaker teachers who have achieved a perfection that is out of students' reach. This refers to the *psychological advantage* of the NNS teachers of English (Cook, 1999).

Despite the amount of studies carried out all in different countries on the perceptual mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation in the classroom, to our best knowledge, no research has been conducted to investigate the role of the non-native speaker teacher of English in EFL class and his/her significance role to facilitate the mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation. The importance attached to the perceptual mismatches as a debilitating factor in the process of language learning and the effective role of non-native speaker teacher of English language interested the researchers to investigate the possible mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation in the EFL classroom.

4. Method of the Study

In order to explore possible mismatches between learner and teacher perceptions of class aims and activities, a research study was conducted to investigate the perceptual mismatches between the NNS teacher intention and learner interpretation in English as a Foreign Language context. Two intermediate level EFL classes, taught by one female teacher and one male teacher, participated in this study. The project was conducted in two difference language institutes in Ardabil, a city in northwest of Iran. Both of the teachers had a master's degree in ELT and they were NNS teachers of English language. There were approximately fifteen to twenty students in the classes that were being observed by one of the researchers, Mehdi Solhi Andarab. The students were learning English six hours a week. First language of the all learners was Azerbaijani Turkish. English was the main language in the classrooms. However, the teachers in some cases switched to the first language of the learners as a facilitating device to hasten the learning process. Majority of the learners were active in classroom participation, and that most of the students were highly motivated to learn English. A substantial number of questions asked by the teachers were referential, that is, they were meant to elicit new information from the learners.

The observer was not allowed to audiotape the classroom interaction. So, it was not possible to transcribe all the turns done between the teacher and the learners in the class. The data collected for the study were observational. However, some notes were taken at the moment the mismatches were likely to happen between teacher intention and learner interpretation. The interactions between the teachers and their learners were being observed for one month, nearly 24 hours for each classroom. In order to comprehensively understand the classroom events, the observer tried to critically analyze the possible mismatches in the classroom.

5. Results of the Study

A combination of the interactional analysis of data of classroom events revealed insights into the mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation. For example, in one case, the male teacher assigned a speaking task for the students. They were asked to work in pairs and discuss the topic for two minutes. However, one group stopped speaking after nearly forty seconds. The teacher looked thoughtful and asked the reason for not following his assignment. The students replied that they had already finished the task in half a minute. In fact, they had completed the activity with minimal effort. They had gone on using simple sentence without any efforts to use complicated statements. Consequently, the strategic mismatch occurred between the strategies the teacher expected the learners to follow and the ones they actually applied while performing the activity. In another case, the students were supposed to talk about leisure time activity. Having a limited proficiency in English, one of the students was unable to express his idea clearly. The male teacher did not understand what he said, nevertheless;

he terminated the conversation by saying 'all right' and asked the other student to talk about the topic. In fact, this case was a communicative mismatch between teacher understanding and learner's intended message.

In the classroom, taught by the female teacher, the teacher asked the students to write down some sentences by using the past and past continuous tenses they had already learned. However, instruction given by the teacher was unclear to some of the learners who used only past tense in the sentences. So, instructional mismatch happened between what the teacher expected the learners to do and what they actually did in the classroom. The female teacher, in a different case, kept using 'co-educational school' motto in the classroom and asked the learners to write pros and cons of this kind of school. She was at first unaware that this word was unfamiliar to the most of the learners. Teacher did not expect that a very familiar linguistic item might be a source of problem for some learners. This kind of mismatch is regarded as a linguistic mismatch. As analyses of extended data showed, the mismatches found between the non-native teacher intention and learner interpretation are as the table shows:

Table 1: **Descriptive Statistics of the mismatches**

Mismatches	Percentage
Communicative mismatch	37 %
Strategic mismatch	26%
Instructional mismatch	18.5 %
Linguistic mismatch	11.1 %
Procedural mismatch	7.4 %

During the observation, no cases of cognitive, pedagogic, cultural, evaluative, and attitudinal mismatches were encountered. Needless to say, *cognitive* and *cultural mismatches* are most likely to happen in the presence of NS teacher of English. Because, as it was mentioned before, both NNS teacher and learners come from same cultural and cognitive backgrounds, and in this case cultural and cognitive mismatches are less likely to be encountered between NNS teacher intension and learner interpretation in EFL context. Therefore, in the presence of NNS teacher of English who shares a similar language and culture with the learners, eight out of ten mismatches found by Kumaravadivelu (1991) could be object of study.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Allwright (1986) points out that teachers and learners may not look at the same classroom event as a potential learning event. Some researchers have also found mismatches between what teachers say they believe and what their classroom practices actually seem to demonstrate (e.g., Phipps and Borg, 2009). In fact, learner beliefs raise a number of issues for teachers. Such beliefs, according to Lightbown and Spada (2006), influence how learners experience the L2 classroom and can lead to mismatches between learners' and teachers' perspectives of what is desirable in the L2 classroom. For example, if a teacher emphasizes learner-centered communicative group work with learners who believe a teacher-led focus on forms is a more effective way of learning, classroom difficulties are likely to arise. Additionally, learners tend to have different and possibly diverse beliefs about classroom life, adding further complexity to the L2 classroom. This mismatch is similar to what Kumaravadivelu (2003) calls attitudinal mismatches.

Hawkey (2006) found the same kind of perception mismatch when he asked his students to rate the importance of 13 activity categories, such as listening to the teacher talking to the whole class and pair discussions. Students saw things very differently so that whereas, for example, the teacher thought that pair discussions were the second most common activity type, for students they came in at number eight. This situation refers to what Kumaravadivelu (2003) calls 'pedagogic mismatch'. Hosenfeld (1976) describes a case where a foreign language teacher of French thinks that students are reading for meaning in doing a grammar exercise. Through a talk-aloud procedure, one of her students reports not to perform the activity the way the teacher anticipates. She is completing the activity with the minimum possible information, that is, without reading for meaning. Ashcroft (2009) examined teacher and learners' perceptions. He focused on four of the potential sources of mismatches suggested by Kumaravadivelu; pedagogic, strategic, procedural and instructional. The findings indicated that two mismatches between teacher intention and learners' interpretation were evident, namely instructional and pedagogic. There was no clear evidence of a strategic or procedural mismatch.

These experimental studies confirm that there are perceptual mismatches between teaching objectives and learning outcomes and between the instruction that makes sense to teachers and instruction that makes sense to learners. From the review of the literature, it can be seen that teachers and learners may have very different

perceptions about what a successful learning opportunity is. It is noteworthy that learning more about the learner's personal perspective on classroom aims and investigating the possible sources could contribute to reducing potential mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation.

The main objective of the present study was to investigate the possible mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation in EFL context. Based on the results of this study, the significance of NNS EFL teachers to *prevent possible mismatches* in general and *decrease cognitive and cultural mismatches* in particular between teacher intention and learner interpretations should be taken into close account. The results of the present research indicated that the presence of NNS EFL in the classroom is likely to lessen the perceptual mismatches in the classroom. Considering the study conducted by Kumaravadivelu (1991), the present research shows that the amount of mismatches between native speaker teacher and non-native learners of English is likely to be more than that of mismatches between non-native speaker teacher and non-native learners of English. Coming from a different cultural background and not being familiar with the first language of the learners, native speaker teachers of English might face a myriad of challenges in general and possible mismatches in particular. The very existence of this effect sheds light on the importance of NNS teacher of English in EFL context as an important factor in minimizing the perceptual mismatches in the classroom. As consequence, being able to prevent the possible mismatches between teacher intention and learner interpretation should be regarded as another advantage of the non-native speaker teacher of English which could be added to the above-mentioned categories and considered as the ninth advantage of NNS EFL teacher.

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