Reassessing English Studies in Turkey

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We were interested to read Don Randall’s analysis of the present state of English Studies in Turkey, particularly his comments on language acquisition and how it dictates the ways in which learners and educators alike perceive the subject as a body of knowledge rather than a field of study. We appreciated his use of Macaulay and Spivak as tools for analysis, enabling him to make some important points about colonialism and its legacy, even though Macaulay penned his “Minute on Indian Education” as long ago as 1835. We should like to take this opportunity to make some further points on the subject so that readers might understand more about the complexities involved in teaching and learning foreign literatures in a non-English speaking country with no first-hand experience of colonialism. ~~.~~

While it is certainly true that English language education in Turkey has its shortcomings (with large classes taught by overworked educators), we doubt whether translation occupies as significant a place in the learning agenda as Randall suggests (51). In an extensive report published by the British Council in November 2013, the authors foregrounded the major program of reform instituted by the Turkish government. Foreign language instruction in the Turkish school system begins at the second grade and continues throughout primary and secondary schooling, which altogether covers a period of twelve years (TEPAV 2). Although eighty per cent of educators currently employed in the state sector possess sufficient professional qualifications, their learners lack the capacity to communicate and function effectively. The problem is pedagogic: classroom practice centers on learners answering questions (to which there is normally only one “right” answer), while much of their time is spent completing written answers in text-books, or taking grammar tests (TEPAV 16). Although classrooms could be readily reshaped to accommodate communicative language teaching, many educators feel reluctant to take the opportunity due to lack of confidence in their own speaking abilities (16). Officially produced textbooks and curricula fail to take into account the pluralistic needs of learners, leading to disengagement with the subject; nor do educators have much say in the way English should be taught, as they are monitored by government-appointed inspectors demanding that the curriculum be implemented to the letter with little room for maneuver (17).

The deficiencies of this “one size fits all” system are extensive. While class-hours devoted to English increase as learners move up through the school, their self-esteem decreases as they believe they have to do nothing other than complete a series of tasks to pass examinations. Among vocational school learners this sense of disillusionment increases, as they regard themselves as inferior to their high school counterparts. The prevailing lack of confidence results in an overall reluctance to speak the language for fear of making mistakes and thereby being deemed “a failure” (18). Many younger educators share this fear, especially when they are subject to evaluation by inspectors, the majority of whom do not speak English. There is a crying need to a reform of in-service educator training based on teaching and learning English as a medium of communication rather than a set of grammatical processes (19). In this kind of educational context it is hardly surprising that language learning is dominated by notions of equivalence – in other words, the need to find the “exact” way of translating source into target languages. This process is what we would understand by “translation”: language is not perceived as a living organism but a series of structures that need to be learned parrot-fashion so as to render Turkish effectively into English.

Such constraints exert a profound influence over the way foreign literatures are studied in all tertiary institutions – not just at Randall’s university (Bilkent), but throughout the country in the private and state sectors. With learners finding it difficult to communicate in the second language it is unrealistic for educators “to activate English skills in the critical study of literature” (Randall 50). The principal objective of any literature course should be to increase self-confidence; to make learners aware that their point of view on a text matters. This can be achieved through traditional discussions as well as more kinesthetic activities such as role-plays (where learners can employ the native as well as the second language if they wish) and other group activities. Educators should reassess their roles somewhat; as well as helping learners understand the texts assigned, they should view themselves as coaches rather than pedagogues, offering encouragement and constructive feedback both inside and outside the classroom. Social media – Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram – provide valuable means of initiating educator-learner interactions; often learners find the anonymity offered by these outlets particularly congenial compared to face-to-face interactions (Wolf 49-66). It might be argued (as Randall does) that literature specialists “are not expected […] [nor] really enabled to teach English language skills in an applied manner” (56). Nonetheless what is proposed here is a transdisciplinary pedagogic model designed to encourage learners to take charge of their own education through discussion, communication, and feedback in both Turkish and English. There is still an important role for the information-loaded lecture in literature education, but learners should discover things for themselves through group-based activity and self-assessment. These strategies help them to develop an idiosyncratic perspective on the texts included in a syllabus. This serves as a basis for the “critical study” of literature. The effectiveness of learner-centered role-plays has been documented in articles by David Espey – who witnessed a performance of *Death of a Salesman* in Erzurum in Eastern Turkey in 1998 and, more recently, by Mine Ataş based on her experiences in a high school in Kozan, southern Turkey (Espey, Ataş).

In analyzing how foreign literature curricula have been constructed at the tertiary level, Randall quotes from Gayatri Spivak (“literary studies became disciplinarized concurrently with colonialism” (50), and goes on to invoke Macaulay to show how literary studies function as an instrument of “a systematized and strategic cultural imperialism” (56). He believes that the study of English in Turkey corresponds quite closely to Macaulay’s outlines (56). Laurence Raw’s article “Reconstructing Englishness” (1999), drawing on English and Turkish language sources, documents how the first departments were conceived as philology departments with curricula based on the Oxford University model. This policy was conceived as a significant contribution to the westernization program initiated by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on the creation of the Republic in 1923. Yet the wholescale importation of the Oxford model (which could be considered colonialist) was tempered by the determination among academics to develop their own approaches to literary study. The novelist and activist Halide Edip Adıvar wrote that “[the] slavish imitation of a model” was completely un-literary in focus: “This point needs special attention from late-comers to this civilization” (11). Although she does not elaborate on the term “late-comers,” we believe that she refers to those who had perhaps forgotten the spirit of nationalism and creativity that inspired the Republic’s origins. Adıvar did not advocate a single Turcocentric approach to foreign literature study; she encouraged younger professors to publish their findings in both languages – English and Turkish. A Shakespeare seminar organized at the University of İstanbul led to the production of new translations while Adıvar’s own two-volume history of English literature became a standard textbook for undergraduates in İstanbul and Ankara. Back in the 1940s the Turkish Ministry of Education instituted a practice of sending suitable candidates to complete their higher degrees in Britain and the United States, something that continues to this day under the aegis of the Council for Higher Education (YÖK). Among the first beneficiaries were Berna Moran (1921-93), who subsequently taught at the Universities of İstanbul and Erzurum; and the poet and academic Cevat Çapan (b. 1933) who has worked at several institutions in İstanbul.

English studies was less preoccupied with colonialism and more with what Akbar Ahmed terms “Muslim modernism” – where the leaders of non-European states engaged with western-inspired modes of criticism and translation and reworked them in the best interests of their local institutions (30). That notion survives to this day, as Emel Doğramacı observes: “Students of English Literature are much more understanding, much more tolerant, and open to new ideas,” based on the belief that “the [Turkish] state […] [and] nationality, is of the first importance” (15, 11). Lecturers were imported to consult with local staff and thereby develop effective pedagogical and academic strategies. It seems that the project worked: the British visitor A. R. Humphreys from the University of Leicester marveled at the way Turkish learners adapted their experiences of foreign literary texts to their “fine language – well-turned phrases and their own musical tongue” (201).

Academic standards seem to have declined now, as Randall ends his article with the suggestion that the best way to improve standards in Turkish universities is to follow Bilkent’s example and employ “Anglophone-world Ph.Ds as a basic requirement […] in their humanities faculties” (65). Turkish scholars who have been through this process will help to instigate “the more socially transformative values” characteristic of an English literary education (67). Both strategies have been employed in state and private institutions over the past seven decades. Academics such as Moran produced widely-acclaimed works of critical theory based on Turkish as well as English sources (1983, 1990, 1994), while foreign academics such as John Freely, a physicist, traveler and historian, have taught on and off at Boğaziçi University in İstanbul since 1960.

In the light of Adıvar’s optimistic comments in the mid-1940s, we might justifiably ask what subsequently happened to English studies in Turkey that prompted Randall to write such a polemical piece. Why do institutions find it difficult to “transform the purpose and meaning of English studies from a position outside the English-speaking world?” (67). The issue has already been addressed in part: learners’ and educators’ text-based strategies of education has led them to regard literary study as comprised of a body of knowledge to be learned and reproduced in examinations. Yet we would also argue that most literary educators – both non-Turkish as well as Turkish – have been reluctant to acknowledge the importance of cross-cultural difference. Randall might quote Spivak’s definition of literature as “an excellent vehicle of ideological transformation” for the implied reader (58), but we should bear in mind that this phrase originated in western-inspired postcolonial studies (mediated through Spivak’s Indian background and education). In Turkish terms we have to reconsider what “ideological transformation” signifies in an educational context whose learners have been brought up with Kemalist beliefs in westernization and individual transformation, and who continue to take courses in Atatürk’s thought in their undergraduate curricula. And should we think about that term “transformation” in pluralist terms at a time when global as well local politics are becoming more and more polarized? What does the term “postcolonialism” signify in academic cultures lacking direct experience of colonialism, and whose history has been associated with the Ottoman Empire, a regime whose authority and historical significance was deliberately challenged by Atatürk in his creation of the Republic? And what precisely constitutes an “implied reader” given the fact that the term derives from a western-inspired binary (compared to the “actual reader”)?

The importance of rethinking concepts in local terms was emphasized by Randall’s former department chair Talât Saït Halman in 1999: “We should stop applying western theory uncritically to Turkish culture and literature. That is a terrible pitfall. It is an easy approach, not a valid approach. We should rely on our own critics and scholars with their background in Western culture and languages who should now deal with Turkish realities instead of living in an ivory tower” (11). Certain initiatives have subsequently been put in place designed to implement Halman’s recommendations. Founded in 1999 by a diverse group of academics from Bilkent. Hacettepe, Ankara and Boğaziçi Universities (one private, three state institutions), the Culture Research Association (*Kültür Araştırmaları Derneği*) concentrates on disseminating local and cross-cultural research in Turkish and English through conferences and a newsletter now in its forty-sixth issue (January 2016) (“Derneğimizden Haberler”).

Nonetheless more work needs to be done in developing more proactive approaches to studying English literature. We need to set aside the stigma attached to language teaching and learning, compared to the higher purpose of an “aesthetic education” in literature (Randall 67). The language teaching profession is still attractive to a large proportion of university learners; not only does it provide secure employment (in the state and private sectors), but as the British Council researchers point out, many newly-qualified educators relish the challenge of nurturing “the youth and dynamism observed across the nation of Turkey” (TEPAV 20). Departments of literature can help them to cultivate communicative pedagogic abilities by concentrating on speaking skills through group-based activities rather than relying on lectures followed by mechanical question-and-answer sessions. Educators have to learn how to step back and *listen*, especially if they are non-Turkish, and thereby develop their inter- and cross-cultural competence as a basis for creating a more effective learning environment.

Such objectives might be difficult to accomplish in predominantly top-down learning cultures, with curricula solidly committed to knowledge acquisition and testing through examinations. To call for radical change might be unrealistic; but we should nonetheless be prepared to grasp the pedagogical nettle and ask questions such as – “Why learn foreign literatures?” and “What are their future in higher education?” There are several answers, some of which have already been addressed in this article – to obtain a secure job, to keep the Kemalist flame of westernization and innovation alive, or to develop the whole person. We believe that other answers can be discovered through negotiation involving everyone engaged in English studies – not just foreign literature educators or foreign-trained Turkish academics, but locally-trained educators and learners in state and private institutions. Social, national, curricular, and institutional differences should be cast aside – it is incumbent on everyone, language and literature specialists alike, to work as a community and thereby find effective answers to the questions frequently expressed by university administrators. They include: - what is the point of studying foreign literatures? What is the difference between “language” and “literature”? How can foreign specialists contribute positively to the development of both areas of “English” study? And what kind of careers can graduates of both subjects pursue, apart from teaching and/or academe? Where is the evidence to prove this?

Randall has raised some important questions in his article that have fueled debates continuing in both oral and written forms in Turkish institutions, both at the secondary and tertiary levels. We do not agree with his conclusions, but his comments draw attention to the future of language and literature teaching and learning, not just in Turkey, but other non-English speaking countries as well. English studies has a future in both the private and state sectors, in newly-established as well as more venerable institutions; but that future requires perpetual reassessment to as to formulate more democratic as well as culture-specific constructions of learning.

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